

# Consuming Domesticity in Post-Bubble Japan

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## Abstract

Post-bubble Japan is characterized by an unprecedented diversity and proliferation of options for lifestyles for women. Paradoxically, it was the bursting of the economic bubble in the 1990s that caused the market to intensify its grip on Japanese women of all ages. This chapter focuses on one of the main social roles still available to women in Japan – that of the full-time housewife (*sengyō shufu*). I argue that as the vision of ‘good wife, wise mother’ gradually becomes obsolete, and the hold of the housewife role loosens, new images of women as homebound are emerging. Focusing on the production of seemingly new images of female domesticity, this chapter shows how the status quo has been reasserted and reproduced.

**Keywords:** female domesticity, housewives, gender policies, women’s magazines, triple disaster

## Introduction

On 11 March 2011, northern Japan was hit by a devastating earthquake, followed by an unprecedentedly large tsunami that caused a disastrous nuclear accident. Soon after the disaster, it seemed that the Japanese state, which had received warm and supportive sympathy and aid from the entire world, planned to use the crisis to urge the Japanese people to rebuild their nation, which had been facing economic and other difficulties and crises since the burst of the economic bubble in the early 1990s. In his message for the public on 13 March, Prime Minister Kan Naoto – who would resign a few months later – declared that he considered the triple disaster to be

‘the most severe crisis in the 65 years since the end of the Second World War’. The prime minister concluded his speech by addressing his people in a somewhat personal, though affirmative tone:

I believe that whether or not we Japanese are able to overcome this crisis is something now being asked of all Japanese individually. We Japanese [*watashitachi Nihonjin*] have overcome many very trying situations in the past to create our modern society of peace and prosperity [...]. Through this resolve, let us all now – each and every individual – firmly reinforce our bonds with our families, friends, and communities, overcoming this crisis to once more build an even better Japan [...].<sup>1</sup>

This plea to the Japanese people to struggle again together as a nation to overcome the bad times was captured by a major sign campaign all over Japan that read ‘Ganbarō Nippon’ (Don’t give up, Japan). I believe that the use of ‘we Japanese’ (*watashitachi Nihonjin*) in this appeal to the nation is not accidental and can be read as embodying a specific kind of nationalism that emphasizes the inner Japanese spirit and the restoration of the pride of the Japanese people.

This nationalistic spirit, which was coined ‘disaster nationalism’ (Hornung 2011), was promoted by a variety of agencies both in and outside of Japan. As March 2011 caught me in the last stages of compiling my book on Japanese housewives (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012), I was naturally especially drawn to the involvement of the idols of domesticity admired by the women I studied in this nationalistic effort to rebuild Japan, along with the pride of its people, in an alleged attempt to echo the spirit of post-war recovery.

No wonder that the great idol for housewives and domesticity, icon Kurihara Harumi, soon jumped on the nationalistic spirit bandwagon; she came as a saviour, bringing the message of sustainable, traditionally Japanese cooking to relieve the pain and reduce tension. As will be discussed below, in recent years Kurihara had gained the image and role of mentor, or domesticity sage, for many women in Japan. Naturally, her main contribution to the Ganbarō Nippon campaign was brought in the form of reviving and energy-saving recipes such as a ‘joyful salad plate’ and ‘relieving potatoes’, which were surely accompanied by a ‘mother’s smile’ (Kurihara 2011a: 14).

This chapter is, however, not about how the Japanese nation has recovered, or has aimed to recover, from the triple disaster. Instead, my aim is to show how the commercialization of the role of the housewife and of female

1 ‘Message from the Prime Minister’, 13 March 2011, [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/kan/statement/201103/13message\\_e.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/kan/statement/201103/13message_e.html), accessed 14 August 2015.

domesticity since the 1990s, and especially since the turn of the century, can be seen against the background of a certain 'reactionary rhetorical climate' (Robertson 2010), which among other things reproduces 'traditional' gender roles. This is certainly not to argue that there have not been any changes in gender roles. Undoubtedly, post-bubble Japan can be characterized by a growing diversity and proliferation of options in terms of women's lifestyles. As I further show, this proliferation of roles and images supplied a basis for a competitive market. There is no doubt that the cultural hegemony of the role of housewife, which in the 1990s 'became so strongly normative that it was practically synonymous with womanhood' (Ochiai 1996: 35), has lost some of its grip. Nevertheless, even within this process of the diversification of women's roles, it is still worthwhile looking more carefully at the social role of the housewife (*shufu*) and its cultural implications, taking into account that in modern Japan the idea of *shufu* has been regarded as the 'cardinal point' (*kiten*) with regard to which women reflect about themselves (Itō 1973; Ueno 1982).

As was clearly demonstrated by Kathleen Uno (1993), the vision of women as homebound wives and mothers, as it emerged in the Meiji period with the *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother) slogan, continued to influence state policies regarding welfare, education, employment, sexuality, and reproduction at least until the late 1980s, albeit in a somewhat transmuted version (Uno 1993: 294-5). However, as the vision of 'good wife, wise mother' has gradually become obsolete and the hold of the housewife role has been loosened, new images of women as homebound have begun to emerge periodically including, as we will see below, the charisma housewife (*karisuma shufu*), the happy, cute, and romantic housewife, and even the most recent 'hot mama'. These are obviously largely the inventions and products of the media and the market, which, as State agencies, have been highly involved in the production of images of women in post-war Japan.

The State (with a capital S) is regarded in this context as a shorthand for several dominant agents and agencies, including the government, the corporate sector, the media, and the market, which collectively, though not seamlessly, produce and reproduce the status quo (see Corrigan and Sayer 1985; Robertson 2007). As suggested by Corrigan and Sayer (1985: 119-200), the power of 'the State' becomes comprehensible when state forms are understood as cultural forms and cultural images are regarded as extensively state-regulated. Through this State power, which is often invisible, culturally dominated images and self-images are constructed through continuous suppression of alternatives coupled with active 'encouragement' by state activities and agencies of preferred forms, which then become recognized and taken for granted as reality.

## The *Hanako* tribe: Single women as hedonistic consumers

Data for this chapter were collected between 2003 and 2011, and in 2013 and 2014. They comprise in-depth interviews with over fifty housewives, the majority of whom reside in a typical, middle-class neighbourhood, a suburban condominium complex (*manshon*) located in the Kansai area and at a convenient commuting distance from central Osaka. Interviews were also conducted with some of these women's idols, with a focus on the most renowned 'charisma housewife', Kurihara Harumi. In addition to interviews, the data include a survey of popular women's magazines and other media platforms and Internet sites.

The women who formed the largest age and social group in the suburban neighbourhood and who made up the majority of the interviewees were born between 1966 and 1970. They were in their twenties during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the last days of the bubble economy. This generation was described as a generation that celebrated a consumer lifestyle. Cultivating so-called individualistic and hedonistic ideas unknown to former generations of women in Japan, they were dubbed the *Hanako* tribe (*Hanakozoku*), after a women's magazine titled *Hanako*, whose advice on fashion, dining, and travel was almost religiously followed by its readers, most of them young women (Pollak 1993). *Hanako* readers were expected to make a change both in women's lives and in the nature of the Japanese family. However, as lamented by the family sociologist Ochiai Emiko (2005: 161), they broke this promise of social change, as upon reaching their thirties, 'one after the other [they] married, had children and became housewives', following in the footsteps of their mothers' generation.

The *Hanako* mothers, who together with their salarymen husbands allegedly rebuilt Japan after the war, have become the epitome of 'Japan's new middle class'. During the period of high economic growth, since the 1960s, they became for the rest of Japan the symbols of the *akarui seikatsu* (bright new life) (Vogel 1991 [1963]: 71). The idea of 'bright life', which had a widespread impact and was propagated as a symbol and promise of Japan's future (Cwiertka 2006: 159), actually implied possessing a 'modern' home with a middle-class standard of living and 'a nuclear family with a housewife at its center' (Partner 1999: 137). The role of this housewife was characterized by high levels of self-sacrifice, endurance (*gaman*), hardships (*kurō*), and arduous work (*taihen*) (Lebra 1984: 35).

The discrepancy between the values of the generation of the early post-war mothers and their daughters is thus hard to ignore, and was highlighted by the public condemnation of the 'selfish' generation, which has become

*bon ton* since the 1990s. The Japanese media and public commentary on the whole have tended to emphasize the generation gap between the young, carefree, and indulgent women and their family-oriented, responsible mothers (Nakano and Wagatsuma 2004). Truly, this critical campaign, largely promoted by conservative, mainly male politicians and social critics, cannot simply be explained in terms of value disapproval only. The background to it was the almost national panic with regard to Japan's demographic problem, of which delayed marriage and non-marriage have largely been identified as the major causes (Akagawa 2004; Nemoto 2008).

Marriage and childbearing are usually considered as the final, crucial steps for Japanese women to become full social persons (*shakajin*) and wholly mature (*ichinin mae*) (Matsunaga 2000: 123; Brinton 2011: 31 n19). However, it seems that in the case of the *Hanakos*, who were inherently suspected of being ill-equipped for the role of wife and mother, the change in marital status alone was not enough. Their initiation into their new social role required further symbolic acts to mark the genuineness of this transition.

During the happy days of the economic bubble, the excessive consumption of branded goods became one of the emblems of the lifestyle of the *Hanako* tribe. However, alas, what should a perfect housewife, who is expected to put the welfare of her family before her own personal needs, do with such symbols of consumerist self-fulfilment? Sakai-san, one of those women considered by her neighbours and friends as a 'model housewife' (*shufu no kagami*), who is a paragon of perfect role performance as a wife and a mother, described this dilemma when two contradictory sets of 'necessities' or 'normal' habits clash:

If I were to work and have some income, I would spend it on my family. There are so many *necessary* [her emphasis] things that I need. I don't think I would want to buy brand-name handbags as I used to do when I was an OL [office lady]. I'd rather buy my son a football or some clothing. I still have some brand-name shoes and handbags, a total of five items, but truly I have no idea how to use them now. When I was an OL I went to sales, I shopped at duty free shops when travelling overseas, just because it was the normal thing to do. In fact, I am not so sure anymore if I really liked [the brand-name items] in the first place.

Sakai-san still holds on to the precious objects that she now deems useless, whereas some of her friends and neighbours, with either more pressing financial needs or more entrepreneurial ideas and better access to technology, have actually sold their own such items through Amazon Japan. 'Where would I use a Chanel bag?'; 'Can I wear a brand-name blouse when going to

a PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] meeting?'; and 'I don't go out anyway', were the frequent explanations they gave for this explicit act.

Japanese women tend to follow an orderly life plan (Brinton 1992), which can be regarded as a series of transitions from one social role to the next (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). Upon marriage, the women of the *Hanako* tribe sensed that a further symbolic initiation to the next social role in their life as wives and mothers was required, and thus they got rid of the epitomes of their self-oriented, hedonistic years as office ladies. Ironically, later in life, when the women reach their forties and fifties, they are faced with new images urging them to consume in what appears to be a similar manner to that in which they did in their pre-marriage social role as hedonistic consumers.

### **The production of new consuming tribes: Women's magazines at the burst of the bubble**

As observed by Betty Friedan in her study of American housewives in the late 1950s, the market, the mass media, and especially women's magazines have a great impact on carving the 'right' female image and role (Friedan 2001 [1963]: 34). Women's magazines form a large part of the Japanese print media. From early in the twentieth century, the massive publishing industry found women of all ages a good target. Studies of these magazines have revealed their vast and varied impact on women's lives. They influence women's consumption habits and play a significant role in the formation of women's identities and the cultivation of ideas of self-fulfilment (Assmann 2003; Sato 2003; Skov and Moeran 1995).

Women in different age groups read different magazines, which allegedly reflects their transition from one life stage to the next. However, this tendency of women's magazines does not necessarily reflect an 'objective reality'. It can rather be explained against the background of the tendency of media and advertising people that developed in the hyper-consumptive bubble years to invent age and social categories for easier targeting of fairly discrete groups, whose members can be made to think of themselves in a certain way (Clammer 1997: 10-11).

The new type of women's magazines launched at the burst of the economic bubble in the mid-1990s illuminates well this same inclination of the media to create generational 'tribes', which, above all, are consuming tribes. As shown clearly by Ishizaki (2004), the magazine industry made a clever shift by demolishing the widely accepted and fixed image of the (everyday-)life information magazines aimed at housewives and replacing

them with new magazines shaped in the format of young women's fashion magazines to target housewives. The genre of young women's fashion magazines, termed 'new women's magazines', first appeared in the 1970s (Inoue and Josei Zasshi Kenkyūkai 1989; Sakamoto 1999). The then distinctly new format was characterized by a close relationship between advertising and editorial material, which meant glossy and colourful visual stimuli. Another major feature was the extensive use of titles printed in roman script that look like English but often have no meaning in English (Sakamoto 1999; Skov and Moeran 1995: 60). The clear distinction between young women's flashy magazines and the more practical housewives' magazines, maintained at least until the 1990s, was eliminated by these new, glossy fashion magazines for housewives of the late 1990s and the early 2000s.

*Very*, one of the most popular women's magazines launched in 1995, provides an excellent example of the process of image change reported by Ishizaki. From its first issue in 1995, *Very* addressed housewives using the format of *JJ*, a popular fashion magazine for young women. Unlike the disappearing practical housewives' magazines, *Very* offered its housewife readers the image of a 'maiden' (*shōjo*) and a fashionable housewife by using imaging and vocabulary previously closely identified solely with young, unmarried women, including 'cute' (*kawaii*) or 'sweet' (*amai*) clothes. *Very* also began applying the language of self-fulfilment through fashion and hobbies with regard to housewives.

By targeting housewives in a style previously aimed at unmarried women, *Very*, published by Kobunsha, the company that also publishes *JJ*, constructed its style and its popularity by creating an impression of growing up with its readers, who 'naturally' had married and had become housewives as they reached their thirties. This impression was intensified by using a model who had appeared on the covers of *JJ*: Kuroda Chieko made an 'admirable comeback' when she appeared on the first cover of *Very* in July 1995. Kuroda has become *Very*'s in-house 'poster model' and main figure, thereby establishing herself as a renowned charisma housewife.

This tendency to keep on forming new generational consuming tribes undoubtedly carried over to *Story*, a magazine for women in their forties, launched in 2002, also by Kobunsha. This magazine openly declared, in December 2002, the 'debut' of the 'Story generation' (*Story sedai*) of adult women, while clearly pointing at those generations of women who were 'raised' on the sequence of Kobunsha magazines: *JJ*, *Classy*, and *Very* (*JJ*, *Classy*, *Very de sodatta otona no josei 'Story sedai' debut!!*). The star of this debut was naturally none other than Kuroda Chieko, who herself had grown up with Kobunsha magazines and their readers.

The change of the housewife's image brought about by *Very* in the mid-1990s, and carried over to *Story* and later also *Hers* (for women in their fifties), had two interrelating faces. On the one hand, by ascribing youth, cuteness, fashion, and self-enjoyment to housewives, *Very* seemed to have done something atypical of women's magazines in blurring age and social-role differentiation. On the other hand, this shift may be regarded as the creation of yet another new tribe, the tribe of happy and fashionable housewives.

Different from the former housewives' magazines, new-style magazines like *Very* and *Story* encourage housewives to smarten up before collecting their husbands at the train station on a rainy day<sup>2</sup> and to dress fashionably when they go out to dine with them. The *Very* generation of women in their thirties is captured by pictorial 'storyboards', such as that of a stylish, young woman pushing a baby stroller while heading for lunch with her husband with the caption: 'Stepping up from the cool OL style to a graceful and refined "madam style"<sup>3</sup>; whereas the *Story* generation is even more entitled to 'thoroughly enjoy being a woman', as in the main theme of its August 2009 issue. Apparently, the means to enjoy this new kind of womanhood is directly related to consumption. The content of the August 2009 issue focused on 'dates' with husbands in luxurious locations, such as is clear from the caption 'Means to thoroughly enjoy being a woman: Ginza date with the husband'. Another 'romantic' spot was described as 'a date at the new Armani shop in Ginza' (p. 26). In another storyboard, the smiling woman has the pleasure of reminding her husband that this fancy jewellery shop is the same one where he had bought her a present 20 years ago, while teasing him by saying: 'Don't I look nice? As I'm an adult (*otona*) now, won't you buy me something with diamonds this time?' (p. 27) Needless to say, all the 'storyboards' are accompanied by full-page pictures of the women posing with a range of fashionable items, which of course carry the details of prices and where they can be purchased.

Women's magazines, especially *Very* and *Story*, seemed to be very popular with women in the Osaka neighbourhood I studied. Some of the most enthusiastic readers went as far as to take the promise offered in those magazines as something to cherish and follow. Kudō-san, who always made an extra effort to look fashionable and stylish, even though she was not working outside the house, carried with her in her purse the embodiment of her idea of a perfect and happy housewife as a scrap from an article that appeared in *Very* a few years earlier. Being nostalgic about her life as a stewardess before becoming a full-time housewife upon her marriage,

2 *Very* (December 2007), 'Sō da, papa o mukae ni ikō', p. 27.

3 *Ibid.*, 'Kūru na ōerukei kara suteppu appu sasete, madamufū no yūga na sutairingu', p. 30.

Kudō-san remembered well all the details of this magazine item, which as always carried the picture of the woman subject in a fashionable pose. She remembered how the woman told the readers about the weekly French lessons that she took because she regularly accompanied her successful husband on his business trips to France. However, according to Kudō-san, the main point of this magazine piece was a quote from this beautiful housewife, which Kudō-san had memorized: 'Some housewives say that they have no time to paint their nails, but what if you get up at 6:00 in the morning? Then you can definitely have some time to yourself.' Kudō-san concluded, 'I agree with her, and I cherish this scrap as she was so stunning (*suteki*), and moreover she looked so totally happy preparing good food for her husband.'

Japanese women's magazines make extensive use of 'reader models' (*dokusha moderu*; Marx 2007). These amateur models, like the stunning former airline stewardess who has become a perfect fashionable housewife, provide some material for fantasy, just like professional models. In both cases, what makes these married women admirable to ordinary housewives who read those magazines is that they give the impression of women who 'have not retired, [who] are still in active service', as articulated by Kudō-san with regard to this stunning housewife.

Ogura Chikako, one of the sternest critics of women's magazines, accuses them, and *Very* in particular, of creating an image of a woman who 'never retires [from being a woman] even when she gets married' (*kekkon shitetemo gen-eki*; Ogura 2003: 57). With this phrasing, Ogura definitely does not refer to women's working lives. On the contrary, she criticizes women who, despite the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEO, Danjo Koyō Kikai Kintō Hō) enacted in 1986 (see Lam 1992), still believe that they have the privilege of not working and continue to wear 'sociable (or fashionable) clothing' even after having a baby. Unlike the earlier models for housewives, 'new' and 'happy' housewives should not 'retire' from being a 'woman' (*onna*) even after stepping into their social roles as wives and mothers.

### **The new-type housewives as a post-bubble return to 'traditional' gender roles?**

The emergence of the new magazines for women in their thirties and forties coincided with changes in women's attitudes, namely women's growing distaste for the all-too-familiar 'Mrs-ly', 'housewifely', and 'motherly' (*misesu-rashiku*, *shufu-rashiku*, *hahaoya-rashiku*) images (Ochiai 2000).

They also coincided with the government report on the ‘orientation to a new type of housewife’. The new orientation reported was expressed in role expectations among young women as epitomized in the expression: ‘A man [husband] works full-time and shares housework. A woman [wife] does housework and pursues hobbies (or hobby-based work).’<sup>4</sup>

In her 2003 book *Kekkon no jōken* (Preconditions for marriage), Ogura further elaborates on this ‘orientation to a new type of housewife’ (*shin sengyō shufu shikō*). Ogura, who interviewed single, urban women in their thirties and early forties, found that some women, and especially graduates of junior colleges or lower-ranked four-year universities, saw marriage as a means for continued self-actualization and pleasure, and not as a gateway to a life of constraint, as it was for their mothers. Ogura explains that those women – who grew up during the time of economic growth and observed the life led by their absent corporate-worker fathers and their hardworking mothers, who on top of their total dedication to their families’ welfare had to work as part-timers to supplement the family income – tend to reject this hardworking lifestyle and to seek a better way of living.

But what does the label ‘new-type housewife’ conceal behind the new magazines’ glossy covers and the fashionable images of middle-aged women? A very recent governmental ‘White Paper on Gender Equality’ (Cabinet Office 2014: 19) reports that ‘increasing numbers of single women find economic advantage in marriage’. Moreover, according to the same report, female college graduates born after 1963 have more traditional attitudes towards gender roles than their predecessors (2014: 20). Interestingly, an editor of a leading magazine for young women articulated the same concern with regard to the younger generation. In 2004, Harada, chief editor of *Frau*, who had been with the magazine for over two decades, made a revealing observation when comparing the women of the early 1990s, when the magazine was launched, and the women of the 2000s. Harada described the single, working women of the early 1990s as independent and stylish women who were intellectually ambitious and knew how to spend their own money. Unlike them, Harada suggested, the young women at the beginning of the twenty-first century attached too much importance to men and to the male point of view and were in general much more conservative (*konsaba*; see Shirakawa 2004).

This tendency of young women to hold more conservative views about gender role divisions and, more particularly, what appears to be the recent

4 ‘Heisei 10 ban – kōsei hakusho’, [http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei\\_hakusho/hakusho/kousei/1998/dl/03.pdf](http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei_hakusho/hakusho/kousei/1998/dl/03.pdf), accessed 9 February 2017.

inclination of single women to aspire to marry into a somewhat remodelled, but still male-breadwinner model of family life, coincides in a seemingly paradoxical manner with conflicting tendencies of especially highly educated women to postpone marriage (Nemoto 2008). So, how can this be explained?

I suggest that, at least partially, it can be understood against the background of what Jennifer Robertson (2010) has succinctly defined as a 'reactionary rhetorical climate'. This same 'climate' was recently described well by Yamaguchi Tomomi (2014a), who shows how the term 'gender free', which was initially coined by Japanese feminists to refer to freedom from imposed gender roles, has become the target of an intense wave of criticism by conservative forces. The term 'gender free' has become a buzzword and quickly spread to government projects and programmes, including the 'Vision for Gender Equality' (Osawa 2005: 162). However, at the same time it initiated a backlash against feminism and against the new ideas they tried to promote with regard to gender equality.

Yamaguchi (2014a: 559-60) suggests that the worst part of the 'gender free' discourse for conservatives is the attempt to impose such values on housewives, (heterosexual) marriage, and traditional families. Indeed, one of the sternest critics of feminism and its new ideas about gender roles and gender equality is Hayashi Michiyoshi, a leading social critic, who started a furious nationalistic campaign to restore the Japanese family. Following the success of his 1996 book *Fusei no fukken* (Restoration of fatherhood), Hayashi, who is also a practising counsellor, continued to promote his nationalistic aim of reconstructing the Japanese household or family system (*ie*) by setting out to restore the value of the 'housewife'. His 1998 book *Shufu no fukken* (Restoration of the housewife) attempts the 'rehabilitation of maternity' and, more generally, the 'restoration of the family and the household'. Hayashi's ideas about the family as 'the smallest unit of society, or the cell, the basis [...] [which] therefore must not be broken apart' strongly resonate with pre-war ideas that focused on the 'good wife, wise mother' as the cornerstone of the family.

Hayashi's book is a moral manifesto calling to restore 'traditional' values (see Tanaka and Suzuki 1999). 'We must reverse the psychology influenced by feminist thought that has spread in the air, ideas that encouraged women to leave the home and go out into society, to work or to get involved in various groups or activities,' Hayashi asserts. He continues:

There is too much to be done at home. The most important thing for a woman is to protect the home (*ie o mamoru*), to create in the home a safe place where children can be raised wholesomely, and where the family can relax.

Aware that the model of ‘men as breadwinners, women as housewives’ has actually not changed greatly, Hayashi does not see the ‘evil’ in career women, whom he hardly mentions, but in the women he dubs ‘ugly housewives’ (*mi-nikui shufu*). These are housewives who betray their role at home and become the malicious opposite of the ideal, ‘beautiful housewife’ (*utsukushii shufu*).

One of the worst evils of ‘ugly housewives’, according to Hayashi, is ‘being obsessed with maintaining a youthful appearance’. He despises housewives who ‘put on heavy makeup, wear bright red clothing, keep themselves skinny, dye their hair, all in order to look young’. Hayashi’s message for housewives seems to be the opposite from the one that has been promoted by influential women’s magazines and other media and market venues since the 1990s, which aimed at blurring the distinctions between youth, beauty, and housewives’ appearances, as shown above. Furthermore, according to this reactionary view, a housewife who devotes too much effort to cultivating her outward attractiveness does not merely lack a good sense of what constitutes proper conduct, her shocking wrongdoing is alas closely related to a dangerous lack of Japanese spirit. The strength and beauty of this spirit should derive from inner beauty (*utsukushisa*), which is inherently in conflict with outer appearance.

The reactionary and nationalistic tone here is very clear, especially when associated with similar aspirations to this same kind of unique, Japanese ‘beauty’. In his 2006 bestseller *Utsukushii kuni e* (Towards a beautiful nation), then prime minister Abe Shinzō rephrases ‘beautiful nation’ into ‘a Japan that we can be confident and proud of’ (see Tsujita 2009: 196). Abe, who was once a powerful voice of the backlash (Yamaguchi 2014a: 571), was re-elected to the position of prime minister in 2012 and has since declared his aim to promote *womenomics* and ‘a society in which women shine’.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, as suggested by Yamaguchi as well as by others, there is much evidence that Abe’s current gender policies are motivated by other concerns, such as the low fertility rate, rather than by a genuine support for gender equality or an actual discouragement of traditional gender roles.<sup>6</sup>

To summarize, post-bubble Japan seems to have produced an ultraconservative reactionary climate, which has born fruits in the form of a variety of schemes, including market-oriented ventures and media buzzes that

5 ‘Address by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo at the 68th Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations’, 26 September 2013, [http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96\\_abe/statement/201309/26generaldebate\\_e.html](http://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201309/26generaldebate_e.html), accessed 14 August 2015.

6 Yamaguchi 2014a, 2014b; ‘Abe seiken no “josei no katsuyaku” seisaku ni hanron zokushutsu’, *Nikkei Business Online*, 13 June 2013, [www.nikkeibp.co.jp/article/matome/20130612/354019/?ST=business&P=1](http://www.nikkeibp.co.jp/article/matome/20130612/354019/?ST=business&P=1), accessed 14 August 2015.

encourage and reproduce 'traditional' gender roles. These traditional roles may be masked by fresh and colourful attire, as we can see in the example of new women's magazines like *Very* and *Story*. The 'new housewife' portrayed in the pictorial pages of such new magazines seems far removed from the 'typical young housewife, clad in slip-on sandals and the loose, cotton shift called "home wear"', as described, for example, by Kondo (1990: 17) only a decade ago. However, as I will show in what follows, the designer aprons 'with a twist' bestowed on the women of the first decade of the twenty-first century to replace the cotton, full-body aprons dedicated housewives used to wear, should be viewed with a dose of scepticism, as, arguably, they simply reproduce the 'traditional' role of the Japanese wife and mother while packaging it in a new and attractive chic style.

### Female domesticity is fun: Marketing the joy of housewifery

Kurihara Harumi, largely considered as Japan's Martha Stewart, is undoubtedly the most renowned of Japan's 'charisma housewives', a rather recent media invention of female idols who are leading figures of the housekeeping world. Whereas the early versions of the 'charisma housewives' in the late 1990s and early 2000s were mainly ordinary housewives who may have had a special, unique wisdom or talent, since the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century images of such individuals have become much more intensively produced by the market, and especially the commercial media (Mori 2004; Goldstein-Gidoni 2012: 151-4). As is often the case with commodification processes, the 'product' itself constantly changes and acquires new faces. The old, ordinary images have largely been replaced by images of elegance and style. Arimoto Yōko, an expert in Italian cooking, and Fujino Makiko, a dessert queen, are revealing, prominent examples of this kind of new aura of elegance and international sense. Both learned their trade abroad, where they had lived when their husbands were sent overseas to take up high-level bureaucratic and political positions in the service of the state. Fujino became not only a media star, but also a member of the Japanese parliament; nevertheless, like Kurihara and fellow charisma housewives, she never neglects to assert that 'to me, being a charismatic housewife is about doing what you can to bring joy to your family and being a figure of stability and warmth' (Chambers 2007: 167).

More than 24 million copies of Kurihara's cooking and lifestyle books and magazines have been sold worldwide, and more than 60 shops and cafés in Japan sell her homeware, cookware, and clothing ranges. Nevertheless,

despite her immense success, Kurihara insists that she is 'only a simple housewife' (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012: 147-51; Newcomb 1997) who made a re-debut into society after dedicating the requisite years to child-raising and the home. The image of a 'simple housewife' well suits the 'life story' of the great charisma housewife, as told by her and of her. Born in 1947 to a traditional-style family, in fact, Kurihara never had the experience of working in 'society', as she put it in our conversation. She went to a junior college 'with no clear aim' and then, as a typical daughter-in-a-box (*hakoiri musume*) (Cherry 1987: 41-2), returned home to help her parents in their family business (Kurihara 2005). Kurihara married young to a man much older than her, a busy and successful anchorman of one of the leading TV channels. She recalls being happy preparing his bath (*ofuro*) and meal and waiting for his return every night. Yet, he was the one who grew tired of her pointless waiting and urged her to take advantage of her cooking talents outside the house.

'Female domesticity is fun' is one of the main messages Kurihara delivers to the women of the twenty-first century. *Mō hitotsu no okurimono: Ie no naka ni mo tanoshii koto ippai* (One more gift: In the house, too, there are plenty of fun things [to do]) is the title of one of Kurihara's successful books, or one of the 'gifts' she has bestowed upon Japanese women (Kurihara 1999). Like her numerous other books, this one is a blend of allegedly intimate accounts of scenes from her own private domestic family life, such as a quasi-poetic description of her family's house cats (title: 'Just being with them makes us happy, our house cats') and tips about household management and the like, all interwoven with Kurihara's ideologies, or truths, about the joy of female domesticity. Kurihara is keen to deliver this message at any opportunity. The joy of polishing the living-room windows while feeling the 'warmth of the sunshine filling the room' (Kurihara 1999: 34) is one of her favourite, vivid illustrations for this joy:

I have always done my housekeeping job fully, polishing each and every window, but we shouldn't perform such duties feeling it is an obligation. When you have your window polished, you can enjoy the sunlight, or even on rainy days, you feel like looking outside through a well-polished window. [On the contrary,] if you leave the window dirty, you never feel like looking outside. I believe that if you live that way [neglecting cleaning], you cannot fully enjoy your life. You are wasting your life.<sup>7</sup>

7 Kurihara Harumi, interview, November 2007.

The message of domestic pleasure seems to be more catchy (and, in fact, usually also cheaper to achieve) than the happiness that lies in shopping for elegance offered by women's magazines, as described above. Allegedly, there is no need to take the extra step 'back into society' after years spent at home dedicated to child-rearing. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply that Kurihara is falling behind on the trends that produce and promote the new, happy (and happily consuming) housewife.

### **Tradition in fashionable wear: Designer aprons as symbols of the new femininity**

'Please have this apron that I designed as a present. I hope you enjoy it. I like creating things that make women smile,' Kurihara tells me during our long conversation. Admitting that the life of a housewife has a tendency to become 'boring and full of routine', she goes on to say how she has always tried carefully to design products that will make the life of housewives enjoyable and meaningful. Aprons are regarded as one of the leading designer wares in her product line. A full section is dedicated to aprons in her shops, just as it is on her official website, which uses a quote from the priestess herself to explain the significance of aprons:

[Kurihara] Harumi says 'When I tighten an apron, I feel that I am ready to work. I would like to enjoy cooking and housework, dressed fashionably. A nice apron does something to create an opportunity to enjoy daily life.'<sup>8</sup>

She has designed hundreds of patterns. Each has some kind of 'silly' twist, Kurihara says in our lengthy conversation. The one she gave me, for example, can be turned into a bag; others are easily transformed into tablecloths, or have mittens, and so on. Kurihara easily assumes the role of a mentor:

I know these are all unnecessary things. But once [*shufu*] try [them], it can be fun. I recommend this way of living. To live your life, you must take at least one step forward, no matter in what way. Whether you set the prepared meal nicely or not may change your life. As you only live once you should always challenge things. If you do nothing, nothing will change. This is the message I want to deliver.

8 'Products', *Yutori no kukan* (Kurihara Harumi Official Site), n.d., <http://www.yutori.co.jp/en/products/index.html>, accessed 29 March 2015.

The new housewife, as portrayed and promoted by Kurihara, and by most other comparable media and market idols, is expected to create this uniquely Japanese type of harmony (*wa*) not merely through hard work and sacrifice, like the housewives of the post-war generation, but also by her 'fashionable spirit'. As Kurihara tells the readers of her most popular books and her successful magazine, she has realized the beauty and significance of greeting her husband with a 'good morning' as her fashionable self and not as she looks when she wakes up. Even when she stays home all day she has made it a rule to put on some light lipstick and her favourite earrings soon after she awakes, before donning her (designer) apron. These are neither petty matters in her life, nor should these habits be taken merely as a kind of outward way of impression management. This vital 'fashionable spirit', Kurihara asserts, is, in fact, the genuine expression of the female's care for her family and the heart of the value she attaches to its well-being.

Through her commercial empire of feminine domesticity, Kurihara Harumi sells both material and non-material products, beautifully adorned in the latest fashionable attire, but which produce, or rather reproduce, old patriarchal family values and conservative divisions of gender roles. Using the power of 'traditional Japanese' values, Kurihara's unique promise of the joy of domesticity seems to carry with it deeper meanings; it involves the bigger promise of 'Japanese-style' harmony (*wa*), which is actually not very remote from the idea of Japanese beauty (*utsukushisa*) of spirit that a housewife should have in order to maintain the traditional family unit as carried by male reactionaries:

The expression *senjyō shufu* might give foreigners the impression that we [Japanese women] are bound by our obligations, but I believe it is in fact the opposite. The housewife holds the power to make the family stick together. Some housewives may complain that they are working so hard with no one really appreciating their great contribution. However, I keep on working hard, believing that one day they [my husband and children] will understand the value of my existence. I believe that it is the mother, and not the father, who actually creates the family's peace and harmony (*wa*).<sup>9</sup>

By linking outward appearance to inner beauty (*utsukushisa*), which allegedly allows the housewife to create the uniquely Japanese harmony (*wa*) in her own family, Kurihara (or her marketing advisers) has made

9 Kurihara Harumi, interview, November 2007.

an astute commercial move. Their strategy, I believe, is very shrewd, as it appears to run counter to the familiar conservative criticism like that of Hayashi Michiyoshi mentioned earlier. Hayashi despises any attempt by new Japanese housewives to present a pleasant and young appearance, or to enjoy their lives, and regards this kind of attractiveness as wholly opposed to inner beauty, which in his view is purely Japanese. On the other hand, Kurihara and the like keep Japanese women safe within the domestic sphere while letting them feel that they are part of society by consuming fashion and by giving them 'permission' to enjoy life, or take full advantage of domesticity, which is no longer described only in terms of perseverance and hardship.

### Female beauty and domesticity as a new kind of national spirit

I opened this chapter by relating to a novel kind of nationalism following the March 2011 triple disaster that devastated Japan and the world. As suggested, my perspective on this kind of nationalist spirit, which has gained the term 'disaster nationalism' (Hornung 2011), is focused on the involvement of the agencies of femininity and domesticity – which I propose relating to as State agencies in terms of this nationalist spirit. The examples are plausible, but before focusing on the way the great 'charisma housewife' has entered into this spirit, it may be worthwhile looking briefly at other campaigns. For example, *Bi-Story*, a new beauty (*bi*) version of the *Story* magazine, sent its beauty and fashion staff to the temporary residents of evacuation shelters in the Tōhoku region on 20 April to give hair, facial, and body treatments, 'believing that fashion and beauty can give power (*chikara*) and vitality (*genki*)'. The magazine featured a piece with photographs from the spot, including pictures of the cosmetic products that the staff distributed to the survivors at the shelters, which obviously carried the trade names of the contributing companies.<sup>10</sup>

Kurihara, or her army of shrewd marketing advisers, was not slow to join the trend, with the aim of setting the tone for the feminine nationalist spirit that puts the wife and mother at the centre of the process of recovery. In the June issue of her successful *haru\_mi* magazine, Kurihara (2011b: 9) gave her readers a personal, handwritten message expressing her deep sorrow and sympathy for the victims who had suffered from the huge earthquake and tsunami. In the same issue, she also offered a few easy recipes. In some of

10 'Fasshon ya byūti ga chikara ni naru to shinjite', *Bi Story* (July 2011), pp. 25-6.

the recipes, she makes a point of using dried food specialties of the Tōhoku region. The others are mainly suggestions for ways to use ingredients that are easy to get, even in difficult times and against the background of an energy-saving environment.

The national Japanese spirit in this special issue of *haru\_mi* magazine is hard to ignore, as Kurihara uses this historic turning point in the life of her nation to rethink her own perspective. In the 'From my kitchen, with love' (*Kitchin kara kokoro o komete*) section, Kurihara writes a kind of memo containing her personal thoughts: she relates how she, who had always had a strong yearning for the West and for Western styles, only started to get the sense that 'Japan is great, Japanese people are wonderful' once she had begun working with other countries. It was not merely the greatness of traditional Japanese food that Kurihara rediscovered through her encounter with the West; it was also the Japanese mentality. Now, this unique, great virtue of the Japanese people was discovered by the whole world as people overseas watched the Japanese people's reaction to the disaster; this made Kurihara feel proud: '[T]hree months have passed since the day. I feel proud being Japanese.'

## Conclusion

In this chapter I aimed to show the involvement of the market in producing new platforms for consumption for women in post-bubble Japan. I argued that while it may seem paradoxical, it was, in fact, the burst of the economic bubble in the 1990s that caused the market to intensify its grip on Japanese women of all ages, as it gradually blurred the distinction between the hedonistic *Hanako* girls and the reserved and hardworking wives and mothers. This should firstly be understood against the background of the general comprehension that consumption still plays a pivotal position within Japanese society. Furthermore, compared with earlier periods in post-war Japan, when domesticity for women was so pervasive that other lifestyles were regarded as non-normative, it has become necessary to compete with alternative, sometimes even more attractive role models for women. One of the apparently productive ways for succeeding in this competition between a growing variety of role models is to borrow ideas and vocabularies from alternative lifestyles. The *karisuma shufu*, the classy and elegant housewife, now aggressively promoted by the consumer market and the media as an attractive role model for women, is a very good example of this process.

I suggested that the market and the media, which were the focus of this chapter, should be regarded as agents of the larger State. Certainly, they are not formally recruited by the official government of the state. Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore the role they play in reasserting and, in fact, reproducing the status quo. I hope I have successfully demonstrated here that designer aprons and flashy fashionable shopping dates with husbands for housewives should not be mistaken for a profound change in gender roles. Instead, they may provide further evidence that the Japanese State, encompassing the business sector, and the market still have a vested interest in keeping middle-class women at home.

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