



**Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, *Housewives of Japan: An Ethnography of Real Lives and Consumerized Domesticity***

Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 300 pages.  
£22.00. ISBN 9781137523907.

GIVEN THE UBIQUITY of professional housewives (*sengyō shufu*) and their prominent role in Japanese society, it is surprising that relatively few academic works have been penned in Japanese anthropology on this topic to date. *Housewives of Japan: An Ethnography of Real Lives and Consumerized Domesticity* fills this lacuna by analyzing the social, cultural, and personal constructions of the role of the “housewife,” including recent consumerized versions such as the “charisma housewife” (*karisuma shufu*) and the “trendy mother” (*oshare mama*). The study also sheds light on “how the Japanese state, through a variety of state agents and agencies, including the corporate sector, the media, and the market, is involved in the reproduction of such roles” (xvii). The author thus presents both narratives of housewives, but also “situates their lives and ideas within ongoing cultural and social debates that shape women’s social roles, experiences, and expectations in Japan today” (xvii). Goldstein-Gidoni is known for her study of wedding parlors in Kobe published in 1997. The author draws on contacts from that time when she encountered her key informant and collaborator, Mariko. “Is it okay or not to be a ‘*sengyō shufu*’ [professional housewife]?” (xix). This seemingly casual, yet philosophical question in an email by Mariko from 2003 illustrates the doubts of the key informant about her lifestyle. Numerous emails that the author and Mariko exchanged over the years are included throughout the book and illustrate the anthropological process in the making—a feature of the book that in the reviewer’s opinion constitutes a groundbreaking deconstruction of the border between narration and science that provides important insights into the worthiness of innovative methodologies such as virtual ethnography and collaborative ethnography.

The book is divided into three parts. Chapter 1 provides the reader with insights into how this study emerged through pre-research personal e-correspondence between the author and Mariko and how the field site emerged quite naturally in this process. Chapter 2 offers a critical survey of the concept of “housewife” and discusses how it has been promoted by state and society in postwar Japan as part of the standardization of the Japanese family. Forming the ethnographic core of the monograph, chapter 3 focuses on approximately fifty women living at a mansion in a residential neighbourhood in northern Osaka and provides insights into the rigidly regulated, yet seemingly smooth structuring of female life courses in contemporary Japan. The next chapter depicts personal experiences of the gendered social structure of male breadwinners and female guardians of the house against the background of what Goldstein-Gidoni defines as the “corporate gender contract” between housewives and company employees that emerged in postwar Japan. Chapter 5 introduces new types of housewives such as the “charisma housewives” as part

of the emergence of more diversified lifestyles. The third part of the book shifts the attention from the thick description of the housewives in northern Osaka to the power of the state agencies, mainly the media and especially women's magazines. The author provides an intriguing analysis of novel ideas for "cute adult housewifery," extensively discussing reasons for and the background of the recent popularity and economic success of Kurihara Harumi, the most renowned charisma housewife in Japan whose cooking and lifestyle books and magazines have been sold worldwide. Chapter 7 sums up the findings of the study through a theoretical discussion and the role of the housewives in postwar Japan and locates the current housewife debate in Japan within the paradigms of "winners" and "losers," showing the continuing relentless pressure on implementing a certain life course in post-bubble Japan despite recent diversification.

On a critical note, given the recent stratification of Japanese society, this reviewer wonders whether the homogeneity of the field site in the typical middle-class neighborhood in north Osaka in terms of age, income, and social class is really representative of Japanese housewives altogether, not to speak of regional differences.

All in all, however, this monograph is a compelling addition to ethnographies on contemporary Japan as it not only provides a lively account of narratives of housewives in post-growth Japan, but also manages to combine a thorough analysis with cogent theoretical contextualization and applies innovative methodological approaches to fascinating empirical data. Furthermore, written in an accessible style, the book constitutes a valuable teaching source both for undergraduate and graduate students as it contains numerous images and personal narratives that help to enforce the author's point of persistent mechanisms of consumerized domesticity through the state.

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