Dilemmas of Adulthood

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Minami-san’s husband was playing a game with his eight-year-old son on the shrine stairs as we climbed up on our sightseeing tour. “Three times two!” her husband said.

“Six!” their son answered, and they advanced six steps.

“Minus four!” Shouted father, adjusting his heavy sunglasses.

“Two!” said the son, and he went down two. I glanced at Minami-san, who was looking on with a smile in her eyes. When we reached the top of the hill, we rang the bell and gazed out to sea while the son swung on the railing.

Minami-san had married a professor whom she met through an arranged meeting. He was older than she, and had an eye problem that turned out to worsen quickly. He still taught at a southern regional university where I was giving a talk, but she was the chauffeur for him and the family. On the way down the shrine steps she said: “My back gets tired from all the driving. I don’t have much time for myself, but I manage to do some yoga and swimming while the child is at school.”

I had met Minami-san when she was a working woman in Tokyo in 1993—a translation coordinator and a bass player in an all-girl band who had travelled in Mexico and the United States. At thirty-three, she had lived alone in Tokyo for fifteen years and had recently broken up with a five-year boyfriend. She described herself as “curious, soft/indulgent (amai), and self-ish (wagamama)” —a negative connotation that she gave to her enthusiastic experimentation as a single. However, as a result of increasingly frequent arguments with her regional parents and her own ambivalent feelings about her late-modern self, she was having talks with prospective men. In 1994, she
reported: “I want to marry fast and have children. I can do it if there is one thing about the person I respect—as long as I don’t need to take care of his parents!” By age thirty-five she was married (Rosenberger 2001, 220).

In 2004 Minami-san was thinner and moved in a measured way. We returned to their two-floor house, curtains always drawn against the light that hurt the husband’s eyes. “Go out and play for awhile,” Minami-san told her son as she served us green tea.

“We try to encourage the child’s possibilities,” she said. Her husband continued, “We’d like him to be able to get into a good university and maybe study in the U.S.A. With the schools as they are,” he scowled, “he has to go to cram schools for math and Japanese characters.”

“My husband graduated from the University of Tokyo.” That is the top of the top in Japan, and I knew the son had something to live up to, as they asked me about SATs and university ranks in the United States.

Their son returned and collapsed on the floor. “Are you going to play your violin for Nancy?” his mother asked him. He didn’t move for a while but eventually entertained me. He was quite good.

Sitting around the table we discussed the trip to the airport the next morning and I saw how she manipulated the tensions of her marriage. “I think if we leave by eight thirty . . .,” she ventured.

“No, we have to leave by eight or we’ll be late,” he said firmly.

“Shall we leave at eight? The roads are crowded then. But if I go this back way, it would be quicker. What is best, I wonder.” We sipped tea for a moment and she told the son to get ready for bed and she would be up soon to say goodnight.

“When shall we leave, Papa? Would eight fifteen be good? What do you think?”

“Eight fifteen is good,” he decided.

Married Women with Children

The case studies in the next two chapters represent the twenty-seven women in the study who are married with children. Passing through the various dilemmas of choice of their adult life in this late-modern age, they have taken the risk of choosing to marry and have children. Having chosen, they now meet further dilemmas associated with marriage, work, and the young children who have become their life projects for the moment (Ortner 2006).
Having lived long years as relatively self-aware singles whose choices centered on themselves, they must now live in direct interaction with discourses and structures of the family shaped by children in schools, husbands in companies, and elders’ welfare.

The narratives in this chapter attest to the power of a discourse that continues to permeate the lives of Japanese women despite new discourses about working mothers: children have the best chance to become “winners” in education and jobs if their mothers stay home with them. Behind this powerful discourse lies the corporate system that still requires long hours of core salarymen with higher incomes. Statistics tell the tale: the two chief factors in women’s leaving the workforce are their having husbands with higher incomes, and young children (Shirahase 2007, 50). In most countries women with higher education tend to work after marriage more than those with less education, but the situation in Japan is different. There, higher education among women is not an important factor in leading them to work after they marry. In fact, highly educated women tend to quit work more often than lower-educated women in Japan. This particular study shows only a slightly higher level of education among nonworking mothers than among working mothers; each group includes seven university graduates, but the nonworking mothers include no high school graduates, while the working mothers include two.

Even for these women who are so fluent in the language and practices of self at work and play, a postwar discourse of motherhood seeps into their experience and lurks in their psyches, showing the workings of power in their generational debate. Socially, culturally, economically, and politically, new discourses of mothering as more self-centered women raising more independent children still meet medical and educational demands for nurturing mothers raising children who are socially adept and intellectually prepared. For the most part this is an invisible process that works in terms of peaceful relationships, harmonious family life, and dreams of success for husbands and children. But the workings of power infiltrate this, because even in late-modern Japan, the state depends on mothers as resources to mold children into people with preferred psychological traits that mark Japanese-ness and make them into culturally acceptable workers and citizens. They inhabit a role that in its limited context has power, as women become decision-makers for children, financiers for family, and community participants. Middle-class urban housewives experience little gender discrimination on a daily basis within the sex-segregated home and community—less in fact than they did at work.
The women themselves are torn, because throughout the debates on what a housewife should be in Japan since the 1950s, the housewife/mother is given ideological power as contributing to society through the successful reproduction of the next generation (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012, 46).

At some points the workings of power become visible, as when a husband demands that his wife stay at home, but more often it is the persuasive words of a well-meaning doctor, teacher, or friend who steers the mother toward better nurturance for the child (Ivry 2007, Jolivet 1997). The mechanics of power are tricky, for they can be found in the blooming of concern for morality in one’s child, the warmth of interaction with family, and the fun of volunteering with other mothers at a child’s school. It lies in the cultural importance placed on biological reproduction for family and nation. As one Tokyo woman said: “Raising kids is important. My DNA has been left to the next generation.” All of this fits with the common sense of ideas and practices these women were raised with as middle-class girls and the common sense of the institutions of school and work in which the competition is keen for children and husbands who want to be winners in a declining economy. In late modernity these women also respond as mothers who must protect their families from such global risks as unsafe food, loss of middle-class status in an economically declining Japan, and now nuclear radiation, disciplining themselves and their children to assume self-responsibility as the neoliberal state expects (Hook and Takeda 2007; Rosenberger 2009).

As Foucault (1980) has taught us, taking on an identity such as mother within the truths of an era and a place is both pleasurable and painful. It requires endurance (gaman) and self-sacrifice; but it also gives singles a place to anchor their identity for the moment and redeem their societal reputation with elders and government leaders, both of which groups have wished to call an end to the era of women’s singleness. What they do not anticipate is that, with the end of singleness, long-term dissatisfaction and ambivalent resistance do not end, both because the marks left by points of resistance in these women’s lives still affect them and because media and government influences toward individuation continue in this neoliberal era of risk. Having passed through the fractures and cleavages of resistance as singles, these women express their desires for more fully developed selves who can live as humans rather than as women. They vaguely articulate the contradictions they face collectively as women. As a Morioka teacher now raising children in Tokyo said: “In the future it would be good if we Japanese could lightly have kids without quitting work. I worked hard and my base is work.” But rather than
collective action, women in this ambiguous social movement only push lightly at the rules of society, most complaints emerging as desires for their own lives: I want a meaningful job where I can work as a human being; I want to enjoy myself as my mother never could; I want a husband who understands me.

Melucci (1989) reminds us that these women are in a new kind of social movement gradually attacking the cultural code, but they dip in and out of it, often remaining in a liminal stage of partial recognition of the contradictions of their situation (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Having experienced acute mental suffering from inequality and reproductive expectations, they know and recognize the uncertainties deep within themselves, yet now they allow this recognition to remain ambiguous for the sake of following the course of a “normal” middle-class life as mother and wife immersed in the challenges of care and dependence. So that kin relations can continue, they “descend into the everyday” (Das 2007), a phrase that implies that they consciously remain silent about the past and try to reconcile themselves to the present as everyday life works on them and those with whom they live.

Their long-term resistance lies in their sense of making individual choices: that it is they themselves who are scripting their life dramas to delay marriage, to work, to find the ideal husband, and to have children (Giddens 1991), and that their choices are developing relationships and selves that go beyond the self-sacrifice of their mothers. They believe in the ideology of choice, but paradoxically, some feel the weight of individual choice in their decision making (for self, husband, children, and parents) in a more competitive, globalized world. Living their everyday lives, these mothers have ambiguous perceptions of the larger contradictions they live with, but their bodies and minds know the festering irritations of the psychosocial double binds associated with these contradictions. Nonetheless, they commit themselves, improvise, justify, and plan ahead as they bring senses of individual choice and emotion into the field of self-sacrificial motherhood.

In this chapter, I ask of stay-at-home mothers who have delayed marriage: What is the nature of their experience of marriage and children, given their premarriage experience of stretching cultural codes and the increasing demands for individual responsibility to deal with the risks of the era? How does their ambivalence, born in the workshop of long-term resistance, play itself out in the relations with their children and husbands that often confront them with the very contradictions they have been avoiding by staying single?
As I analyze the differences among the women who have married and had children, I am asking both how they experience the effects of power and how they enact their will to power. I am interested in how these women actively negotiate among past, present, and future within this new situation of commitment to family, husband, and children; what tensions they experience; and what advantages and power they find in this new project. I keep in mind that they are actors at key nodes of potential shifts in cultural codes affecting couple relationships, mother–child relationships, and relationships between women and elders.

I have divided the discussion of these women into two chapters: stay-at-home and working mothers. These are key categories determined by the state in their statistics and used as important differences by women themselves, but they are far from homogeneous, as will become clear in my analysis of life processes. Of the twenty-seven mothers, all are married, and one has been divorced and remarried. Fourteen are stay-at-home mothers and thirteen are working either full-time or part-time.

Have mothers gotten what they wanted?

First, have these women gotten what their hearts most desired: a husband they chose and who understands them? It is a question that is unexpectedly hard to answer. All have chosen to take the step, and most have felt an en or special connection with their future husbands. About ten in this group were not passionately in love but married men they had known platonically over the years, and three married men whom they “did not dislike.” They were ready to stop working, marry, and have children, and thus were willing to compromise—often in ways they would not have dreamed of before—for someone to “drink tea with” and share the responsibilities of reproduction.

Second, if one of their important goals of marriage was to have children, how many have they had? Considering all the married women in this study, the rate of children per mother is 1.26, with a rate of 1.41 for women living in the regions and a rate of 1 for women living in the Tokyo area.¹ This compares with the fertility rate for Japan at 1.32 in 2006, climbing to 1.37 in 2009 (Naikakucho 2008; Statistics Bureau 2011). Statistically, the fertility rate in the Tokyo area (1.02 for Tokyo itself and 1.23 for metropolitan prefectures) is higher in Iwate (1.39), the northeast prefecture; many regional rates are over
1.5 (Naikakucho 2008, 13). Thus, the married women in this study are under the statistics except for the women living in the regions. The big difference in this study hinges on work: stay-at-home mothers have had an average of 1.8 children and working mothers have had an average of 1.36 children.

Third, how many are continuing to work after marriage, another ideal of their generation’s ambiguous resistance? Just over half of this group have forgone the dual identities of work and motherhood, acceding to “life away from society,” one of their deepest fears. Out of twenty-seven married women with children in the study, fourteen are full-time mothers and thirteen are working mothers. These “choices” contain various personal circumstances, but overall they attest to the strong ideology that mothers need to devote time and space to nurturing successful children and to the failure of government programs to support working mothers adequately. Even if maternity leaves, day-care centers, and kindergartens support working mothers, they cannot make up for late hours in the work sphere for men and women.

Full-time mothers

The focus of this chapter is the fourteen full-time mothers. As statistics, they appear as neotraditionalists (Rudd and Descartes 2008) who have accepted the postwar status quo role for women. Here I explore more deeply: What does life look like from inside their lives, bodies, minds, and emotions?

First, this group is not just like their mothers. They all insist that they have much more responsibility for decision making within the nuclear family than their mothers had and simultaneously face more risk in relation to life opportunities for their children, safety, and future expectations.

Second, they all try to enact a shift in the cultural code away from obligation to emotion as the basis for family relations, especially in their relations with husbands and parents, but also in relation to children whom they wanted rather than having been obligated to have. Their mothers have fought the fight to live apart from in-laws, the paragon of postwar obligation for women, and these women continue it.

Third, they all have had children later in life and have reconciled themselves with the limited physical strength this entails, though it sometimes constrains their abilities to participate in activities beyond the family.

Fourth, they all live within several discourses: (1) the postwar discourse of motherhood that they have been raised with, that their mothers still
represent, and that continues in Japan; (2) the more recent, globally inspired
generational discourse of self-actualization and enjoyment as they develop
their lives in a self-narrative; and (3) the late-modern discourse of risk percep-
tion and individual responsibility in Japan.

Three groups of full-time housewives have emerged from my analysis,
which are divided according to the following criteria: level of risk perception
and stress in child raising; use of the life-stage discourse for women; awareness
of self as defined individually outside of the family; and level of responsibili-
ties in the household. The first group of full-time housewives are the planners:
seven women who are using their societal skills learned as singles to raise their
children while maintaining future options for self-development in the next
stage of life. The second group is the coooners (Giddens 1991): five women
devoting themselves to their children with little tension around their own
self-development but who experience high stress about the risks their children
will have to face. The third group is the caretakers: two full-time housewives
with a high degree of anxiety caused by responsibilities to care for extended
family members.

The planners

The women in this group are aware of multiple aspects of their lives and of
their selves changing over time in the process of ambiguous but nonetheless
intense long-term questioning. Though intent on navigating the challenges
of current society for their families, they exhibit a high level of self-aware-
ness—of where they have been, where they are, and where they will go. They
have swum in single waters with intense curiosity and would be classified
as successful singles in the sense of having attained financial and emotional
stability. Although they have enjoyed active jobs, none have opted for what
they consider man-like jobs, as in the management track. They are all open
to taking the dominant norm of the life-stage discourse for women (the
M-curve), adapting to it, banking on its shifting surface, and massaging it for
their own uses. As selves, they feel they are treading water in the housewife
role, yet they realize that it requires strategizing and improvisation in rela-
tion to the members of their families, the current era, and themselves. They
are committed to entering into the power of their role, while bobbing up to
think about the future from time to time. In short, the workshop of experi-
ence as experimenting singles has irrevocably cut across their dispositions and
relationships to result in a heightened self-awareness.
I return to the ethnography of the particular with Minami-san, whom we met in the beginning of this chapter, and then describe the characteristics of this group of seven women in more detail by referring to examples of others in the group.

**SLOWLY ADJUSTING SELF**

The day before I left, Minami-san and I managed to have lunch by ourselves at a hotel high above the bay. As we spread the white linen napkins on our laps, I asked how she liked living there.

“I have come to really like this city. Things are slower here than in Tokyo.”

“I have been so impressed with how you manage your husband!” I said honestly. “You always make it look like his decision! I always end up in an argument!” We both laughed at each other across the table and I glimpsed the old, looser Minami-san.

“Oh, I get angry, too! Ka-ka-ka!” and she held her hand in a claw. “At first when we were married, I pushed Self! Self! (jibun, jibun) and cried, ‘Why don’t you understand?’ I thought it was an old Japanese idea to bolster up the husband, and I told him so. I didn’t want to be like my mother who obeyed my father.”

“So did you work?”

“I longed for work or something outside the house. He thought I should stay home, especially because I got pregnant almost right away. I felt very isolated.”

We ordered sushi, since in this city close to the sea it would be tender and soft.

“But, you know, I have realized that my mother was not weak. I don’t kill my ‘self’ by giving in. I am making a harmonious (enman) household for the child. That comes first. The woman is central. If she is energetic and bright, all goes well.”

“I suppose so.”

“I thought making a home was a light thing, but it is terrible. My thinking was wrong. It is difficult to accept the other person, but in a home I think it doesn’t go well if both people have the right to decide. So we talk a lot, but in the end, he decides.” Or at least you make it look like he decides, I thought.

“So do you feel you are very similar to your mother?”

“No, she lived with my father’s parents and didn’t decide by herself about things, even how to raise her children. Now there is a lot of information, but
you have to decide by yourself in a nuclear family. It’s a lonely feeling. That’s why people use the internet or form circles with friends. People aren’t necessarily free, but . . .”

After salad, soup, and sushi, I asked what she thought when she looked back over her life.

She threw up her hands—a sudden motion for this white tablecloth restaurant. She was pushing back against my question (Rosaldo 1989).

“Not yet! Not yet! I think ‘from here on.’ I am not looking back! I’m wondering where I will end up. When the child gets big and my husband is okay, then I can do what I want.”

“Ah, you are looking ahead, not back!”

“I want to work, but now the child is small and I have lots of work in the house. When my husband said okay, I trained twice a week to be a home helper for the elderly and I learned this is terrible work. I am not able to do it—not with my husband’s illness and my needing to drive him to work and the boy to lessons. For now, I have to be satisfied with volunteer work like at my son’s school and in the neighborhood.”

I knew Minami-san was interested in the Green Co-op, a food nonprofit that distributes organic, fair-trade food along with political messages such as antinuclear ideas. “Would you ever be able to work for the Green Co-op?”

“Maybe something small, like make organic bentō (lunches) and sell them at the university. A friend and I have talked about that. I also thought of getting training in breast massage for women after birth. After I gave birth, this helped so much to get my milk going. The training is in Tokyo and my husband said it would be fine, but I don’t think the time is right yet.”

Minami-san tasted her green-tea ice cream and stared at the blue waters below. “I’m forty-four. I don’t have so much time to work in life from now on.”

WOMEN WHO LOOK IN TWO DIRECTIONS

Minami-san’s tensions were clear, yet what I find remarkable is her ability to stand in the midst of everyday life, look in two directions, and tolerate ambivalence as part of her long-term resistance. She does not give up long-term resistance but relinquishes a certain self-centered form of it and adopts another with ingrained capabilities learned from her own mother’s ways. She keeps responsibility central, yet plans for the future that would have been impossible for her mother. She figures how best to care for her husband and son, but also how to crack open the door to the world outside the house and
life as her son grows. Although intense expressions of self and its desires seem to lessen with time, Minami-san continues to make choices to do things, such as attending Green Co-op meetings, outside of home. Minami-san’s story suggests several points that I see playing out in other women’s narratives in this group.

First, she seems sharply aware of this as a performance that does not represent her whole person—an active pose with a voice that is different (Butler 2004; Owens 1992). All the same, the performance is a serious life project within which choices must be wisely made among various foods, various schools for her son, and various medical treatments for her husband. True to what theorists claim for the late modern era, she feels the loneliness in the freedom of the nuclear family, the lack of trusted experts, and precarious dependence on her own individualized savvy (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Second, Minami-san strategizes within a form of marriage that, except for the lack of in-laws, shows patriarchal control typical of the postwar era, and perhaps greater because her husband is home so much. In many ways she uses the amae relationship of dependence, indulging and sweetening husband and son as she oversees the household operation. Her values have broadened, from intense focus on her guitar-playing self and her willingness to wrench relationships around, to self-immersion in the goals of harmony and caregiving at present; but a key point is that she is careful not to overexploit her body and spirit.

Characteristics of the planners

The planners are in the space of ambivalent “partial recognition” of life’s contradictions for Japanese women, but they show continued self-awareness and even irritation, tamed but festering. Illustrating a balance of influences from the regions and the big city, all but one have experienced metropolitan Tokyo life as singles, but also all but one grew up in regional cities and villages in middle-class homes; all have some post–high school education. Three presently live in Tokyo, two in regional cities, and two in rural villages (both having been raised nearby).

As singles, the planners were strongly invested in their careers and experienced upwards movement within the bounds of their jobs, but they also knew the joys and bitterness of daily work. For example, the nurse in the northern village thought work was her purpose in life but complained that “the men on the top don’t listen to me.” She expressed this commitment in
1993: “Work is my meaning in life. People here thank me. Men are on top and don’t listen to me, but I can work here even after I have children.” In Tokyo, Akai-san, a Toyota secretary in PR, had to choose between “being part of the tea pourers or working like men and being promoted,” with its heavy obligations (Rosenberger 2001, 195, 227–228).

These women had developed a sense of their own will to power. In 1993 Akai-san admitted to getting a boyfriend while living separately from her parents. “I have changed 180 degrees. My mother must be taken aback. I was such a beautiful, quiet girl. I just accepted things. Now I initiate things.” Like the others, she brought to marriage an attitude of long-term dissatisfaction and an urge to push for small changes—to “stay alert (harai),” and “experience society so my ‘self’ will grow.”

The planners viewed their abandonment of cooperation with others as just temporary, avoiding acts that cut too sharply across their inner selves or their relationships. A Tokyo teacher had a three-year secret relationship with a fellow teacher in 1998, but constrained herself through the disciplined movements of the tea ceremony, where she “served others and controlled my emotions.” Their mother–daughter relationships were shattered in some ways, but rebuilt in other dimensions. After moving into her own apartment, a village woman said, “Instead of arguing with my mother, now we can talk about how to take care of the apartment.”

In this social movement of women seeking for personal choice within historical cultural codes, these planners had pushed the envelope yet stayed within the margins of acceptability. Having impelled their parents to give up on them, they claimed marriage as a personal decision made in a framework of choice. Although they were not ready to give up work, “When I think of children, I am getting older” was a frequently heard phrase, as if it were their own bodies and their desire for children, rather than their parents or society, that demanded their compliance. They watched friends as if surveilling them from the Panopticon tower and planned their futures. Another Tokyo teacher said: “I see that mothers being with children when they are small is good—up until kindergarten. If I work they will be lonely. So I will interrupt my work and will continue after that. A teacher can get work, though not at the same school.”

Child raising was both difficult and delightful. Constraining them from one world, it opened another—a world that at least for a time gave these late-modern “nomads” a cultural and emotional home, one that they could shape in some ways as long as they accepted some temporary ironies in their
life narratives. Their children were the emotional and material magnets or symbolic bootstraps that pulled them toward making positive efforts to cope with the constraints and responsibilities of motherhood in this era.

A woman who quit her village government job and left her single apartment to marry and have children captured the feeling well as her two small boys scrambled up and over the tables in the room while we talked. “Having a home (*katei*) is terrible! Enjoyable and terrible.” She laughed as she rescued her younger boy from the pummeling of his brother. “To be home all day with the children. . . . My mother-in-law says, ‘Be with the boys for three years, so you don’t regret it.’ ‘Yes, it’s so, for this time,’ I think. I should take responsibility and raise them.” Looking at her friend who still worked while raising her children, she asked, “Have I come to be doing everything in order (*junjo ni*), just as I ‘should’?” She shrugged. “I can’t escape. I feel I have been on a branch road for a while. I can hardly believe that I married at thirty and entered his house. I don’t believe that I am raising children. I did not really want marriage yet. But for now I have the children.” She dreamed of someday moving with her husband to Okinawa to open a coffee shop.

A nurse in the northern village echoed the difficulty of this shift. She had hoped to continue working but finally gave up the idea because her son had a bad heart and required extra care. In her head, friends’ voices echoed the values of being an individual at work: “I was really down for two to three years after quitting. I would get phone calls from nurse friends and they would say, ‘Oh, it’s a waste [for you not to work]. I like to look after the kids but fulfillment I don’t have. I feel like I am a fool after a while with the kids,” she said in 1998. But, like others in this group, she exhibits the ability to adjust and appreciate her place in life. In 2004, now a mother of three, she looked back: “After a few years of wanting to work so badly, I began to feel that kids coming to me and yelling ‘Mom, Mom!’ was also enjoyable.” However, she was scheming to resume regular, less vigorous nursing at the county office.

No one revealed the struggle more than Akai-san, the Toyota secretary who continued working until her daughter was two. She tried valiantly to work after a year’s maternity leave, but her husband, a banker, worked long hours; when her father had a stroke and thus she lost the backup of her mother, she quit. Even though her hours were shorter than her husband’s, they were too many when the child got sick, and there was no question of his quitting or limiting his hours in a managerial-level job. Watching him sleep as she got up with the baby, she realized that as a woman her long-term resistance had to become more ambiguous for a time.
In Japan, having a child younger than three significantly decreases a woman’s work participation (Shirahase 2007). I thought of my Hong Kong and Thai friends who worked full-time and came home to neat homes, warm dinners, and children cared for by maids from rural Thailand, Indonesia, or the Philippines. Although that brought its own problems of global inequality, Japanese women did not have this option, either ideologically or from the point of view of immigration, which limited foreign women to certain occupations—specifically, entertainment or health care. Japanese women have only day cares and parents to turn to, and when these fail, the woman’s bargaining power has to bow, at least temporarily.

Akai-san adjusted by reinterpreting the dominant postwar discourse of life stages for women. Along with several others, she pronounced the motherhood period as years of lessened stress rather than as her life’s work that demanded her full attention. “Ten years ago I felt I couldn’t live without work. But after a fourteen-year career, with this body and a child, I felt I couldn’t work like a man. . . . Now I am laid-back (nombiri) with no stress. It is good to have in your life. When the child lets go of my hand, I’d like to get some work.” Still, some self-discipline was required, and she took up tea ceremony again to practice “calmly serving tea to others.”

Translating the first tensions of motherhood into long-term ambivalence with vague planning for their own future is a task of survival for these successful singles in this new field. The past Tokyo teacher who followed her husband to a regional city said: “I wanted to work again and I worried. My friends in Tokyo are still working. But now, inside me, the first thing is children, second husband, and third work. I am resigned (akirameta). I think it is only now. If I only think of the things I want to do, my stress piles up.” She chose the old word used by her mother’s generation, “resigned,” but she interpreted it as a temporary and active position of not pushing back and turned her attention toward making friends with other mothers in a child-rearing circle.

This planning was slow and ambiguous. Akai-san thought she could find work after age forty-five and without question planned for lower-level work that was not as tied to the polishing of self, as had been her PR work before marriage. “Can I do the work, I wonder, but I want to link with society after the child is ten or so. I am thinking hazily. Maybe counseling young people worried about work and child raising. Maybe volunteering. Before, I was polishing my self (jibun o migaku), but now I will just give myself a boost (jibun o takameru). The point now is to go on living (ikite
“iku).” Her plans pitched her efforts for self a notch lower, but they fit well with the responsible individualism called for by the Japanese state in the form of volunteering to help local community and in the process actualizing self (Ogawa 2009).

True to the predictions of their generational discourse, having husbands who understood their stress and ambivalence helped these women to survive. Women reported their husbands bathing with children, taking out the garbage, and shopping on weekends. Akai-san appreciated her banker-husband’s unbridled delight in their daughter: she showed me a picture sitting on their dark-wood piano of her husband hugging their daughter and laughed, “He even hugs her in public.” The woman in the northeast who dreamed with her husband of running a coffee shop in Okinawa received her husband’s sympathy in the form of a shopping holiday—several nights a year by herself at a hotel in the regional city.

One of the former teachers found herself in almost the same position as middle-class mothers in the high economic growth period because her husband didn’t arrive home until eleven. “Father leaves early and comes home late. He only has weekends here. So I am in between. I tell the kids what papa said and I tell him what the kids are saying. But he makes evening meals on weekends, so that is nice!” The differences from their mothers’ experience were few—weekends with family and a few evening meals, an understanding word from husbands—but to these stay-at-home wives they spelled an important generational difference.

These women’s ability to move from motherhood as a stressful double bind to motherhood as relaxed ambivalence also hinged on the degree of their freedom from in-laws and help from parents. For example, Akai-san actually lived in the same house with her mother-in-law, but they inhabited separate floors, had separate kitchens, and only visited for meals when invited. A former wedding master of ceremonies worried about this issue the most, because she would be unwillingly following her husband’s job back to the regions, where his parents wanted to build a house for their son and his family next door to their own. She feared they would come in whenever they wanted to and was scheming for an apartment, and later a house at a distance away. As she fed her one-year-old daughter in Tokyo, she said she was “dying to go back to work more and more,” but she wanted the help of her own parents rather than that of her in-laws.

In sum, these planners were ambivalent stay-at-home mothers juggling multiple identities over the long term. Similarly to their mothers,
they used publicly accepted life stages for women, but unlike their mothers, they remained very aware of the next stage of their lives and intended to make the most of it. Overall, they gave the time and space that led to a close relationship with their children, ensuring them emotional security and the ability to manage their activities. Yet they did not seem to invest their identities and emotions completely in relations of dependence with their children as women in their mothers’ generation had (Rosenberger 2001, 47). Much like their mothers, they experienced a similar work structure that kept their company-employed husbands away from the house until late at night, yet less expectations of late-night drinking and weekends off for husbands seemed to keep them in closer emotional touch than their mothers had been with their spouses.

In short, these planners exhibited a tolerance for the contradictory truths that permeated their world, quelling them into tacit accommodation with subtle attitudinal and relational changes, yet they also showed an ability, gleaned from their long-term resistance, to keep their sense of double binds alive as a motivation for the future. They gave up their experimental single lives reluctantly, reinterpreted motherhood as a time of lower stress in which to recover from the tensions of work and singlehood, and looked forward to a quiet reentry into experimentation in the larger society in the future. They brought their individuality to their motherhood, even in some cases seeing their selves expanded in the process through interactions with their children, but did not exude the sense that the household was a place to develop a self of fun and fashion that others have found among housewife-mothers (Goldstein-Gidoni 2007; Bardsley and Hirakawa 2005).

Cocooners

“The world has changed in one generation. I want to raise the child in a free and easy way as I was raised in Morioka, but when you hear about the terrible things that are happening . . .”—these words of Sasaki-san, raised in the northeast and now rearing her son in the Tokyo metro area, typify the feelings of risk and devotion among this second group of singles turned housewives with children. A group of five, the cocooners shut the door to their lives of self in society more decidedly than the planners. They are on average three years older than the planners and married on average almost ten years later. Fulfilled by child raising and finding it better than work, the cocooners are not ostensibly planning ahead for another era of their lives but
instead submerging themselves in their roles as mothers and housewives even at the price of isolation. They act like women of the modern, productionist era, ensconced in the status of stay-at-home middle-class housewives, yet they are full participants in late-modern risk society, fearful of the effects of crime on children, the shift to individualistic values, and the possibility that their children will be losers in this increasingly competitive educational and employment environment of the 2000s. They employ older dominant values to cope with and shield themselves from the perceived dangers of the new, building a cocoon for themselves and their children (Giddens 1991). It is not that the planners do not protect their children and arm them to compete in this society, but they do so with neither the foreboding of danger nor the focused devotion exhibited by these women.

Along with their cocooning, these women idealize the northeast, the place where all were raised, as a place where the risks can be avoided. Five grew up in the northern city, the sixth in the northern village, and only one spent part of her single life in Tokyo. All still live in the northeast except for one who married a man from the Tokyo area and moved there. Two have moved from the Morioka area to the largest regional city of Sendai. They cherish the status of the nuclear-family housewife that in the poorer northeast has represented wealth and freedom from farm drudgery as well as overbearing in-laws. None receives or gives help to family elders.

In spite of having married with at least some sense of en or special connection with their future husbands, they receive little cooperation from them and reflect their generational ideals as they criticize their husbands for not giving their children the time they should. They tend to be isolated from friends and consult experts or acquaintances with superior knowledge about how they should proceed, but then are directive in formulas for their child raising. With one flashy exception, their poorer upbringing in the northeast and generally antimaterialistic point of view are reflected in their plain styles of living, unlike the affluent image that characterizes more new-style housewives (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012, 138).

In short, these women hark back to values idealized during the postwar period. In a sense, they are revivalists, but they are using these older values in new ways to gain control of their environment, to feel powerful in their roles as mothers, and to engender a cultural code that will save them, their children, and indeed Japan, in a new risky period. It is not surprising, then, that they are conscious of themselves as older mothers in comparison with their children’s friends’ mothers.
I sat in a hard wooden chair talking with Sasaki-san at a small table in her wood-floored living-dining room, which had little other furniture except for a TV and bookshelf for children’s books. Small and pale from anemia, her hands folded in front of her, she spoke in a quiet but steady stream of well-articulated opinions that belied her appearance. She always welcomed my visits, perhaps because she spent so much time alone, but this time her husband was upstairs entertaining her seven-year-old son. It was Sunday, but I was surprised to see her husband, because in 1998 she had described his hobbies with friends on weekends and her long hours of vigilance over the child. Even now, she told me, he coached a girls’ volleyball team on Sundays, but she was trying to get him to give up his “shallow existence” outside of the family and spend more time with their son (Rosenberger 2001, 226–227). They lived in a house built jointly for them and his widowed mother, but the mother still lived in her apartment in her old neighborhood. Sasaki-san hoped to keep it that way.

Sasaki-san’s son sneaked down from upstairs every half-hour or so to have a look at me, but she didn’t seem to mind. He would sidle up to the table to sample the snacks I’d brought and she had laid out. She was quietly pleasant to him: “You want to have some? Then say it. Wash your hands and have some.” He did as he was told, and then scooted across the wood floor with his play truck.

“I am forty now and feel far from the younger mothers around here. I am deeply colored by the Showa era [1926–1988] and they by the Heisei era [1989–present]. The young mothers’ sense of things is different from mine. I want to keep my own house and watch my own child correctly, with a sense of loyalty between parent and child (oyakōkō, or Confucian-based filial piety). But some mothers raise children differently. The children don’t give greetings and listen to others in school. They can’t put up with difficulties anymore (gaman). The mothers think, ‘Well, kids are just like that!’ and let it go. Are they coming face-to-face with their children? I wonder. Their thinking is too simple. While the children play at the park, the mothers stand around doing e-mail, talking on the telephone. At home the kids play video games while the mothers work just because they want to. I’ve talked to the teachers about the children’s inability to endure (gaman) and the need to teach them. She agrees.”

This was a conversation where I didn’t need to ask many questions. Sasaki-san had her tale to tell, and I simply nodded and sympathized as I took notes.
“Other mothers ask me ‘Aren’t you working?’” She raised her eyebrows meaningfully at me and held up her hands, palms out. “My hands are full raising him.” She looked over at her son and said calmly, “Go upstairs now and read books with father.” He scuttled up the stairs and she went on with quiet passion. “I want to tell them, ‘You are parents!’ You only have so long to send your child off [into adulthood].”

I remembered Sasaki-san’s criticism of other young mothers in 1993 as well—as individualistic, self-centered, and immature (Rosenberger 2001, 226–227). I had thought at the time that she was simply old-fashioned, but my opinion had changed. She represented one type of late-modern reaction to living in an information-dense, globalized society: a feeling of dizzy imbalance wrought by the chaos of the global market of things and ideas and a search for stability through criticizing others.

Her role as mother and housewife took on huge meaning in the need to defend her child in this chaotic world. Sasaki-san’s eyes smoldered. “Every day begins and ends with him and the days pile up. I feel that I am raising a living being. I am excited and nervous.” She talked at length about the risks in the immediate environment that he might have to meet. “Pick up garbage and the can might explode. . . . Children have been taken in cars that follow them slowly on the way home. . . . Someone flashes to a kid. . . . Things get stolen at school. . . . At school even the classrooms are unlocked. I do patrol every day for the kids as they cross streets walking home.” She pointed out the front window toward the school beyond the rice field that still stood at the center of her new development. “I watch and see if the kids are coming home, and if my son doesn’t come, I go over. My husband does night patrol when he can.”

“He’s concerned too?”

“Oh, yes!”

The afternoon shadows were long on the wood floor and her son was getting restless. “What are your dreams at this point?” I asked her.

“To move back up north,” she answered without hesitation. Merriment sparkled from her eyes for the first time. “I am famous among my husband’s friends for being from Morioka. My husband loves Morioka now too. We dream of moving up there someday to be close to nature and among people who can trust each other. My mother is a model of child raising for me. . . . We talk on the phone often.”

Afterwards, the four of us ate at a Chinese restaurant. The parents chuckled at their son’s loquaciousness and glanced at each other with suppressed
smiles at the overly informal approach of the waiter. Her husband ordered loudly for everyone, and then she quietly told the waiter what she wanted, changing his order to her liking.

**IN PRAISE OF ENDURANCE?**

Sasaki-san’s way of discussing the contrast between Tokyo and the northeast indicates a worldview of the cocooners that turns on the symbolic values of urban versus rural. She uses the opposition between the urban and the rural/regional to symbolize the chaotic and the stable in the changing social order that scares her (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 159; Williams 1981).

Sasaki-san emphasizes the value of endurance (gaman) in the face of hardship as the exemplar of rural/regional superiority, ignoring its political-economic inferiority. Selected from samurai history and the suffering of World War II, endurance has been idealized in postwar schools and nationalist rhetoric, and is at the fore of post-tsunami efforts as well. Sasaki-san’s foil is the city and its opposite value of self-centeredness that plagues young mothers and most of the children. If only city people would go back to the endurance of the northeast, the dangers of a hedonistic, selfish consumerist society in Japan could be averted.

Sasaki-san empowered herself by focusing on this residual value of endurance, her cultural weapon of attack from a historical, rural ideal. She claimed it as her high ground with other mothers and the expert, the teacher, whom she looked to for reinforcement. In the northeast and throughout Japan, historically it was considered the ideal gendered response by women to unreasonable patriarchal control expressed by mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, and husbands. It is the counterpart of spoiled actions coming from “soft” places (the word for spoiled, amae, relating to the word amai, or soft) and is recognized for the personal effort it requires, for the enduring female is often the one who allows others above and below her to vent their emotions as they wish.

However, Sasaki-san ignored other aspects of gaman that earned it reprobation from others of her generation who in general differentiate their situations—which in many ways are not unlike their mothers’—by the shift away from unquestioning endurance (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012, 141).

Indeed, Sasaki-san herself suffered from the negative sides of gaman just like northeastern women before her. Caring for her son day and night as essentially the sole caregiver had taken a toll on her body, and she did not feel that she could have more children, “with apologies to my husband because he
wanted a lot of kids.” Meanwhile, she wove a tight web of emotional dependence with her son.

The endurance of the cocooners exposes the dilemmas in writing a new script for self as a late-modern mother in Japan. Interpreted as spiritual strength, endurance at its best represents the ability to “kill self” (a Buddhist ideal of becoming part of the universe) and accept one’s place in life. From a spiritual and historical point of view, it can be a mark of high maturity. Mahmood (2001) would see it as an agency of cultivated, self-controlled commitment to a religio-patriarchal system, and in reference to Japan, Ivry (2007) calls it an agency of nurturance that gives women power within the national system and normalcy within the medical system. Here I am interested in the dynamics of its tensions.

The historical value of endurance is significant in Japanese women’s efforts to bring global and local values together into a Japanese version of late-modern self. Endurance (gaman) represents the fulcrum upon which the independence of the self-centered “self” comes to ideal adulthood for women in Japan and can potentially turn into a culturally idealized independence of the other-centered “non-self,” a spiritually deepened version of self-sacrifice. This shift works on social and spiritual levels for a cocooner such as Sasaki-san, who was a struggling single and has gained temporal power through motherhood and child safety. But the question for all women of this generation is how to straddle, traverse, and translate these various cultural ideals of different eras, combining the efforts of self-cultivation with self-actualization and thus create their own script for a mature woman adult of today.

CLOSING OFF CHANGE

In contrast with the planners, the cocooners show that long singlehood does not necessarily result in openness to change. After a conservative, northeastern upbringing and an unsatisfying singlehood, marriage was a step up economically and socially for them. One cocooner living in the northeast married a doctor from the medical school where she worked at a secretarial job with pay so low she could not even afford to have hobbies (Rosenberger 2001, 189). She lost her poverty and gained status, but also a life of isolation from friends and responsibility because of her husband’s schedule. She stated flatly that, because of her position as a doctor’s wife, “I will never work.” Even in Morioka, she worried about her young children getting kidnapped and hoped fervently that her husband would not take them to live
in Tokyo—even farther from her mother who lived on the northeast coast. “Scary!” she exclaimed with uncharacteristic emotion.

**COCOONING WITH AN ALLERGENIC CHILD**

The dangers of the present world increasingly intruded on mothers in the form of children’s allergies, which have increased in Japan in the last several decades. Although all mothers turned to doctors as experts to guide them, these mothers became particularly dependent on them, their lives governed by doctors’ opinions. They experienced an ironic paradox of the late-modern era: increased independence in making self-narratives and in solving problems, yet heightened dependence on experts who appeared as the bulwarks against risk (Bauman 1991). In this case, Oyama-san felt that she had no choice but to abandon the life of self because she had to give herself entirely to navigating her son through the risks of local and global pollution (Rosenberger 2001, 229).

Oyama-san welcomed me to her small apartment in Sendai, the largest northeastern city. The apartment was sparse; she had taken out curtains, rugs, and furniture and vacuumed morning and night, putting the futon bedding away immediately. At the behest of the doctor, the family existed with the allergic child on potatoes, rice, miso soup, and a bit of pork, although she said, “We do sneak a bit of fish now and then.” Dangers for her child lurked in every nook and cranny, not only outside her door but in every action she took as a mother responsible for his life in a world of dust and toxins. Dressed in a saggy black top and slacks, she said, “I am chased by each day. Since kids, I just wear anything. I don’t know the fashions. I just go to the park and the supermarket, though a health-food store delivers much of the food. . . . I am making no friends, none. . . . I can’t even make the cookies I used to enjoy! . . . My dreams are only that the children grow up and become mature adults. I want to live peacefully as a couple. Maybe move back to Morioka if we can. They are not big things, are they? I am full up with raising kids!”

I assured her that these were very important things, although I understood the apologetic look in her eye—a glimmer of the ambivalent awareness of the life of self she had known as a travel agent in Tokyo and later as a teacher in Morioka. Her bit of rebellion against the doctor’s orders indicates her trust in her own experience and expertise as a past home economics teacher. Like Sasaki-san, Oyama-san also dreamed of returning to Morioka and building a house there. The boys could have a stable high school experience there, as her husband had had many transfers.
This description of the process of cocooning is not complete without the case of Mori-san. She could be described as an education-crazy mother of the late-modern consumerist period or as a vestige of status-climbing village people. Although she differs from the other cocooners in her flash and sociality, she adds the insight that cocooning in the mother role can appear as a high level of competition for the child and the mother (Rosenberger 2001, 207).

Mori-san knits her motherly cocoon of safety against a late capitalist world divided between winners and losers by unabashedly striving for urban middle-class status. Married to a sushi chef who is not wealthy, she has leveraged his high-rise condo overlooking Sendai as the base for wealthy friends who can advise her and whom she can watch to discover the best opportunities for her son. Although her husband wants her to work to help pay the mortgage, she refuses, despite her years spent as a low-level manager at a ski resort near her village. At forty-six, this would be a “status-down” move because many good jobs have an age limit of thirty-five. It would also expose her true age, which to friends, teachers, and son she has represented as eight years younger than it is.

In 2004, Mori-san, dressed in heels and a flounced skirt, arranged a tour of her life so that I could see the successful framework she had built. It started with her best friend, “ten years younger than I am,” with whom she patrols the area for “strange people.” When Mori-san noticed that everyone in kindergarten had computers, this friend advised her on what to buy. We met the principal at the Christian-run kindergarten where her now seven-year-old son had gone and which he still attends for after-school English club lessons with other alums. Mori-san sang in a mama-san’s choir there. She took me to a French restaurant, where we ate in a red-velvet nook in view of other mothers, our conversation full of her son’s violin, soccer, and English prizes. Later that night, after I had returned by train to Morioka, she called me up and had her son speak to me in English, intent on making sure that I knew she was making a winner.

Is Mori-san really a cocooner? She is consumer-oriented in comparison with other cocooners and comes closest of all the mothers to the picture of Japanese housewife/mothers as marrying for money, comfort, and consumption-oriented enjoyment (Goldstein-Gidoni 2007). She invests in her son’s success much like Minami-san, the planner at the beginning of this chapter. However, I think she is a cocooner-mother who teaches us something about
cocooning in the global world today. Giddens (1991) speaks of cocooners as withdrawing into groups that oppose individualistic change and protecting themselves from risk in such groups as fundamental religions. Mori-san cocoons in her role as a normal, middle-class mother, despite her husband’s lower income and high school education, which, statistically, would make him want her to work (Shirahase 2007). Unlike other mothers in her generation who tend to be less concerned with social status than their mothers were (Nakano and Wagatsuma 2004), her village background influenced her toward status seeking. Ignoring her own self-actualization, she dives into the cultural and social capital of the consumer world to build a fortress for her and her son on the basis of her son’s achievements. In short, Mori-san reveals that cocooning against risk can spring up in consumerist forms that appear to bring independence and freedom, but that actually construct the very relationships of emotional dependence to which women of this generation object. I hoped for her sake that her son would not reject this path she laid out for him as so many other young people have, and that her cocoon would stay intact.

In sum, these cocooners seem to have lost the ambivalence of their long-term resistance as singles, directing all their energies toward children and a framework for future status. However, my observation is that this strong direction is a bulwark constructed in resistance against the wolf at the door—the sense of late-modern instability and a weakened nation beset with crime and economic decline. Thus, they construct their positions with awareness that the cultural code is changing in ways they did not predict, and that the change presents contradictions for them as mothers to reflect and act on. Cocooners assume this stance in the shape-changing course of long-term resistance. The extent to which their ambiguous long-term resistance will reemerge in personal ways will become clear in future interviews.

Caretakers

“Right around the time my baby was born, my brother was killed in an accident. I am the only daughter of my parents now. Then my father died and with all the red tape to handle, we moved near my mother because she has dementia . . . I don’t have any time or money. It’s a life in which I am always driven, chased. So I just flow with things. I don’t have energy to do anything more.”

Only two of the full-time housewives with children fall into the category of caretakers who simultaneously care for their children and their parents:
Inoue-san, forty-two in 2004 (just quoted), and Ishii-san, forty in 2004. The burden is onerous and denies to them the latitude of the planners to look in several directions, or the concentration of the cocooners whose gaze wraps their children in protection. The caretakers’ lives exhibit the contradictions of a welfare system that still depends on the family, particularly women, even though the system brings in part-time home helpers supported by taxes paid by all citizens over forty. Urban Tokyoites their whole lives, these women make it clear that the endurance demanded of women and evidenced here is not simply a rural/regional phenomenon but also a result of the political-economic system. This contradiction hit both these women early, in their mid-to-late thirties, just after they gave up single life and their fairly satisfying work in public schools and soon after finding partners that felt “right in my heart.” They each now have two children, but parental sickness has snatched away the emerging adulthood that they were fashioning.

As is typical of the late-modern era, both care for their own parents, to whom they are emotionally attached, rather than for their in-laws. In 2004 both women told me, “I feel grateful to my parents for all they did for me now that I have my own children.” Still, their relationships with their parents had been hammered out through both conflict and affection. In 1993 at twenty-nine, Ishii-san had “lots of touch with the outside world” and complained of her parents being “overprotective,” though their “understanding” was increasing as she aged. At that point she was “not thinking” about her status as an only daughter who might have to care for her parents someday.

Boom. Ishii-san’s father had a debilitating stroke from diabetes in 1996 when her first child was one year old. Even though Ishii-san had said “I want to be accepted not as a man or a woman, but just work and live straight as I am,” societal and family expectations colluded with governmental and company policies to elect her, a stay-at-home mother with small children, as her father’s caretaker. She and her husband moved in with her parents, and her mother, at sixty-eight, continued her work as a well-paid “professional secretary.”

In 2004, I met Ishii-san over coffee at a metro station mall in the Tokyo suburbs. Her hair was as long as when I first met her, her teeth were crooked in just the cute way Japanese like in their pop stars, and her striped jersey looked like a relaxed housewife’s costume. But costume it was, for her father had suffered a second worse stroke in 2002 that put him into a wheelchair, and her schedule rotated around him. They received some help from the government insurance program, so she could get out of the house and talk.
“I am busy in the morning getting the kids off and getting my father ready for the day and heating up his food. My mother leaves at 8:30 for work and he leaves for day-care service at 9:30. I didn’t even have time to eat breakfast this morning. My mother comes home from work at 8 p.m.”

I responded, “My mother had a stroke and was quite agitated. Is your father?”

“No, he is quiet, though sometimes he gets depressed and wants to die. Then I get depressed. Once I put him out in the garden and some religious person came by and proselytized him.” She giggled for the first time. “I really can’t let him out of my sight! ‘Is there no good way?’ I thought.” Her hand rubbed her forehead.

I realized that children had been forgotten in the father talk. “And your children?”

“I’ve had another since we talked the last time. She is five and her brother is eight now. I am forty, so we can’t have anymore. I couldn’t with my father anyway.” My notes told me that she had wanted three children.

Ishii-san hesitated for a moment, glanced aside, and then dove into a story that marked her harsh awakening to where life had taken her.

The younger one is five, but started kindergarten at three. I was busy then and I guess she was lonely, but I didn’t realize it. She felt insecure. I feel very terrible about that time. I was centering myself on my father and she wanted to be hugged but she couldn’t say so. I didn’t have time to hug her. She couldn’t express herself and just put up with it (gaman). She bit the inside of her cheeks very badly. Then she played with her fingertips and they bled under the fingernails. I was full up with the house and Dad. My feelings had stopped.

She looked down. I murmured empathetically, but didn’t need to say much.

Last summer, I took her to the doctor for a cold, but when he saw the bites on the inside of her cheeks, he was very harsh. “If this continues, she’ll cut her wrist in the future,” he said. I had no space (yuttori) left in me, so psychologically this was really hard on me. I just drank in those words. I thought, “I’ve done this to my child!” Afterwards I told my friends, and they said it would be okay and not to worry. She would be okay as an adult. I just needed to hug her more and tell her “I like you.” Little by little she is getting stronger. I learned.
Using the doctor’s words to legitimate herself, Ishii-san asked her mother to help more so she could put her children first, and thus they started on the day service. The words of the doctor-expert, that in this era of too-few children her attention should be on her children, were thus both a boon and a form of regulation on Ishii-san as to the kind of mother she should be. The doctor ignored her hurt feelings and dismissed the squeezing pressure she felt in her chest as “stress, don’t worry,” instead reinforcing the importance of the mother–child bond and implying that it was her mother, not she, who should make sacrifices for her father. Fortunately, the voices of Ishii-san’s friends played a comforting cello to the doctor’s alarming trumpet in the orchestra of her mind, reassuring her that her motherly affection over time would be adequate. But she felt put to the test, under the gaze of the expert in the Panopticon.

Our conversation ended with a few soft, positive notes: her policeman-husband who helped cook and bathe the children when he was on day shift; and her work of sticking Disney mascots on packages late at night while watching movies. “I do it for myself, just to relax.” Her friends, sympathetic with her need for even a slender thread of self outside the family, had found her the job. She hoped to work again someday, but wondered if she would be healthy enough.

*Emotionless endurance (gaman)*

This case study of a caretaker expands the understanding of endurance in this era. The very value of endurance, already passed on to her daughter quite effectively, came back to bite her as a mother, even as her daughter literally bit herself. Endurance remains the psychosocial place to go for women enmeshed in the crises of family caretaking. However, Ishii-san’s tale indicates that in extreme exigency endurance is neither honorable nor spiritual; it results in an emotionless independence that has closed off the “fold” between the inner psyche and the world around her. In the late-modern world, endurance followed too far becomes a mature self gone awry; the ideals of individuality expressed through emotion toward one’s own parents or children are lost. Instead of forestalling risk, it invites risk.

This case study shows the process of the effects of the family’s power exploding in the life of someone who has quietly challenged the status quo as a single. What is interesting here is that the family’s power that (somewhat unwittingly) places parental care above childcare comes up against a societal
discourse of motherhood. Ishii-san is not caught between the obligation of caring for in-laws and the emotion of caring for children as might have been the case in the past, but between two sets of emotions, grounded in her deepest psyche, toward her own parents and children. As a way out, she cuts off all emotion, largely detaching herself from her project of long-term resistance, but it is individualized emotion toward her child to which she returns in her recovery of efforts to regain self, however tension-filled it is.

This case study also reveals the strength of the discourse of mother as a necessary source of security and affection for her children in late-modern Japan and the doctor as the powerful purveyor of that truth. The doctor is the legitimatized source of pressure on young women to reach back into the dispositions of their childhoods and give of their bodies and emotions (Ivry 2007; Jolivet 1997), although we also see here the saving grace of Ishii-san’s friends, who shore up her self-esteem against the doctor’s harsh words. Significantly, the doctor makes the choice to support the mother–young child relationship over the parent–adult child relationship, thus clarifying another truth of late modernity: that society must bend toward nurturing the young even though elders are increasing in number proportionately. The future of Japan depends on it, and, because it is more likely to position the mother in an emotional relationship within the nuclear family where she has some control, the ambiguous long-term resistance for the mothers discussed herein also benefits from it.

Conclusion

With each chapter of this book increased depth and complexity gather around the concepts of ambivalence and tension in a field of contradictions in the late-modern era of a non-Western, globally powerful nation. Japan offers a particularly interesting example, because it is wealthy and technologically advanced yet also has a rich non-Western history. All the imaginations of the global world lie at the fingertips of these women, yet they must work out their versions of late-modern selves within the terrain of their personal and societal histories.

In this chapter this process has resulted in a heterogeneous set of ways to meet these women’s dissatisfactions with the postwar cultural code. The planners focus on the contradiction of family versus self. They live with the tension but lighten it by seeing motherhood as easier than other work, assessing
information through their cosmopolitan experience and by staying aware of both past and future. They strategize within marriages in which husbands are busy and wives are left to care for house and children but in which husband–wife communication continues. Less dependent on experts than the cocooners or caretakers, they activate their own responsibility to gather information and make decisions. Although they form intimate relationships with their children, their own identities do not depend on them, and they try not to push their endurance too far. They find acceptance among younger mothers in the community and worry about their ages only because their life-stage formula depends on time.

The cocooners focus on the same contradiction of family versus self, or endurance and care for others versus individuality, but they redefine it morally and frame it in the regional/urban divide. Their ages as older mothers take on meaning for them, emphasizing their capacity for devotion to their children, but also their differences from the current middle-class mold. Although they know which side they are on, their critique sharpens their vision of both sides, and the tension of fear and defense weighs heavily on them, making them more dependent on experts for guidance and reinforcement.

The caretakers are almost incapable of focusing on the family-versus-self contradiction. They experience tension and ambivalence over the contradiction in the late-modern institution of family between care of elders and care of children, a tension that is magnified because in this era both claim their emotional commitment. The data suggest that in response caretakers may withdraw their emotions from both in a destructive, emotionless version of endurance, partly because the self of their early adult script has been reduced to pasting Disney mascots on packages at one in the morning.