CHAPTER SEVEN

The Nuances of Long-Term Resistance

In this book, I have traced the paths of Japanese women who in the beginning of the 1990s were single, over the accepted marriage age, and participating in their generation’s form of resistance against the cultural code of postwar modernity. Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, these women have struggled both with external contradictions between historical and global influences in Japan and with internal contradictions between their desires to actualize an independent self in the spirit of late modernity and their wish for inclusion in the changing relations and positions of postwar family and work. This book has striven to help us understand the dilemmas of adulthood in the midst of economic decline and a shift to neoliberal ideas in Japan in the 1990s and 2000s.

Although these women have shifted and stretched the cultural rules they grew up with, and although the national statistics on marriage and childbirth and working women reflect these changes, their words and actions do not reflect a determined resistance to change the status quo, nor a feeling of agency that they are acting in a self-determined manner according to their own desires. Rather, ambiguous expressions, thoughts, and deeds fill their narratives, signaling what I call long-term resistance—a concept that catches the in-between space and time of gradual change described by the Comaroffs as ambivalent and full of tensions, developing along with accommodation, struggle, experimentation, and suffering within the contradictions of history (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991).

As opposed to a strong sense of intentional and immediate resistance, long-term resistance consists of vague movements such as tacit refusal and ambiguous perceptions of the contradictions within which people live.
Long-term resistance does not explode in protest or, usually, consciously aim to challenge the status quo, but simmers in personal dissatisfaction, stretching the limits of compatibility with the rules of the society through personal choices or non-choices (Melucci 1989, 1996).

My thinking about the nature of this long-term resistance owes a debt to anthropologists who have wrestled with the concepts of agency and resistance in ethnographic situations involving women around the world and have modified them to include ideas of conflict, limitation, contradiction, ambiguity, ambivalence, and tension. Shifting the lens slightly, I have focused on the concepts of ambivalence, tension, and ambiguity in contexts of contradiction as essential to understanding the nuances of long-term resistance. These concepts, imagined on continuums between structural norms and independent agency or stability and change, have given me the space to explore women’s lives with flexibility and remain sensitive to differences among people, movement over time, and interactions between inner and outer forces working in people’s lives.1

Indeed, ambiguous resistance that people dip in and out of over the course of their lives appears to be just the kind of social movement that women and young people enact in late modernity, where they do not feel comfortable in the cultural homes they grew up in and have new expectations and demands for self-responsibility and self-reflexivity, yet do not completely reject their past and its relationships. They wish to mold their cultural world into a new shape by simply living their personal lives differently from the postwar norms, and in many instances they succeed, yet their lives are forever marked by the points of resistance that they have experienced (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Reshaping cultural codes even just at the personal level is a difficult feat to perform at key junctures where, blind to the future, people experience anguish in dilemmas of choice, or in certain periods of life when they harbor a sense of double binds—that their habits and dispositions do not fit the game as it is being played (Melucci 1989; Bourdieu 1990). Although the loneliness of the life of self emerges, a new flexibility in the cultural code also becomes visible.

In Japan, ambiguous resistance for women of this generation revolves around the concept of self as an ideal: to have choice in their life courses and to be relatively free from the conservative demands of family, schools, and workplaces where self-discipline, self-sacrifice, and harmony with the group spell maturity. But ambiguous resistance also revolves around the question of how to be happy and emerge as a new kind of adult in Japan. Embedded in various social and economic circumstances and living in urban, regional,
and rural places, these women journey through a Japan of old ways that they both value and disdain, and new risks that open them to both creative possibilities and new problems. Neither the picture of women nimbly leaping over contradictory identities (Ueno 2005) nor the depiction of them as sinking into multilayered indecision (Miura 2005) is adequate to describe the undulating experiences of independence and dependence, self-actualization and self-cultivation, action for self, and endurance that these women experience over the long run. Yet bit by bit, they continue to attempt to shift the terms of their own lives, and unwittingly but inevitably change the conditions of other lives. Simultaneously (and in a mutual movement), political and economic shifts have occurred; what these women earlier experienced as consumer choice and self-development they now also feel as required self-responsibility against risk—an institutionalized individualism of neoliberalism that offers both self-actualization and, in Japan, moral obligation to community and family (Borovoy 2010; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

In this chapter I focus on the question of how this study contributes to our understanding of the nuances of long-term resistance, particularly of long-term resistance by women in the shift from modernity to late modernity. As I indicate general points about long-term resistance, I also summarize how this has occurred in Japan for this group of women, both to illustrate life for women in Japan of the 1990s and 2000s, and to show a local example that may reverberate with the experience of ambiguous long-term resistance for women living through similar shifts in other parts of the world.

Time

In the case of long-term resistance, time is a constant factor, and with that, change, occurring irregularly in the political-economic environment, in one’s own generation as they age, and even in the elder generation. As globalized imagination permeated these women and their generation, Japan slid from high economic growth and faith in its postwar sociocultural system into economic decline and doubts about itself. Worries about supporting the elder generation, about not being left behind in a more competitive society, or even about what is safe to eat placed the burden more completely on individuals and families to make the right choices for survival. The result has been that women in this generation who have achieved some success by making choices or non-choices for themselves have come to the realization that, because
society itself has changed, they have no choice but to make choices—risky choices—in this new world. Not only they themselves have changed irretrievably from their points of resistance, but their world has also changed, making it necessary that they put their individualized strategies to use.

The time factor in long-term resistance brings change that is irregular in how it impacts various participants’ lives, and thus the experience of societal contradictions and psychological ambivalence varies greatly among these women. For example, time has modified the actions and views of these women’s parents’ generations for some women but not for others, so some have parents as allies while others must battle and/or endure. New styles of work aid some women in their long-term bids for a different way of life but old styles of work hamper others. Often institutions such as schools and companies are in the midst of change or under pressure to change, but the change itself is uncertain, people are doubtful about it, and this ambivalence only adds to the tension of the long-term resistance that these women experience as teachers or mothers.

Time is also a factor in long-term resistance in relation to people’s own aging. As single women age beyond accepted childbearing age, attitudes toward their unmarried state soften. Extraordinary choices that seemed fine when one was young and strong, take on a different caste when bodies begin to feel tired and minds are overstressed from the task of survival. Recognizing one’s own eventual need for support when sick and old leads to new openness to interdependence with husbands, lovers, or parents. Focus also widens from one’s own existence to children and/or parents, and questions of morality or situations of simple human need emerge. In addition, women begin to see themselves in relation to the next generation, observing women ten to fifteen years younger making choices that they themselves would not have made, as, for example, marrying lightly for money. In contrast, women begin to see the characteristic hues of their own generation. This results in moral judgments of the next generation in many cases, but in other cases a feeling that maybe the choices they have made in their long-term resistance are simply typical of their generation after all, related to a certain historical period of political-economic changes, and not so special to them as individuals.

Finally, time is useful to women in the fits and starts of their long-term resistance. Time allows change and acceptance of difference to occur just through the everyday living of life. They consciously use older ideas of life stages to guide themselves through motherhood, maintaining participation in the social movement, however ambiguously. The time factor allows
for periods of relative stasis, such as occurs in an intense job when women are overwhelmed, as well as periods of self-reflection, imagination, and experimentation.

**Space**

Along with the effects of time on long-term resistance, space also makes a difference, offering actual geographies of difference and symbolic imaginaries of geographical differences. Despite the fact that the women of this generation share so much in their generational experience of growing up and coming of age into enjoyment and choices, they vary in how conflicted or ambivalent their long-term resistance is according to the geography of their lives and their use of geography, especially the rural/urban divide, to mark desires and actions.

Some of this difference is predictable. Working or studying abroad clarified women’s ideas about the kinds of individuals they wanted to be at work and the kinds of independent partners they wanted. Large urban areas like Tokyo have made long-term resistance easier because of distance from regional families, faster acceptance of change and variety, markets and entertainment to experiment with, easier access to work for women, and work opportunities that offer more independent styles of work. In this study, it was far easier to be a successful single woman in the urban environment of Tokyo than in the regional city or rural village. Long love relationships that could be lived honestly and openly in Tokyo had to be hidden from all but close friends in the northeast; marriages of long-term singles and fertility treatment were both found in the northeast, where women felt more pressure to marry and have children.

Yet space does not always work in long-term resistance in a predictable fashion. Some aspects of the northeast aided women in their ambiguous struggles. Religion as an alternative channel for exploration was a phenomenon of the northeast. For women raising children, those in the rural village were the most likely to receive ongoing help from their own parents or their in-laws, enabling them to work full-time without feelings of guilt. Elders were used to such arrangements, but in addition, because change has hit rural villages hard as young people leave and population plummets, elders realized that they had to make adjustments or lose their children. In contrast to those in the city, most women in the village and regional city trusted others to raise their children, and the cocooning mothers who hailed from the
northeast wanted to return there to raise their children in a safe and friendly environment.

Women involved in long-term resistance in late modernity also look to the peripheral areas of their developed countries for values they feel modern life has lost, drawing on a nostalgic discourse of agrarian and rural village ideals as the center for morality in Japan yet adapting its meanings to an age of individualized risk. Rural areas or their values attracted some Japanese women in this study because they considered rural life closer to nature, more laid-back, friendlier, safer, simpler, and less materialistic. Rural space and its values tempt many for short trips, but only a minority interprets rural or regional life as being able to help them be persons who live with meaning beyond the postwar modern scripts by which they feel trapped. Some mothers reasoned that it was the race to compete in the cities that was the problem in rearing children who were both moral and individual. In contrast, they favored the quality of *nombiri* (relaxed, laid-back), identified with lower-class and rural people but recharacterized in terms of caring relationships, a closeness with nature, and old technologies rather than material consumption.

Disadvantages in the rural choice emerged, however. Women who made the move, like the organic farmer, found themselves lonely in their ideals, as other young people around them yearned for the dominant generational ideals of consumption, enjoyment, and choice. Although the organic farmer’s ideas about societal contradictions and ways to change the status quo in broad ways were clearer than those of other women because she participated in other social movements, ultimately she found it difficult to practice her ideas about gender equality in her rural area. The women who grew up and still live in the village are aware that the accepted views of men as authoritative leaders and of women as caretakers in multigenerational households are social realities for them, but they still hope that these will prove more flexible than they have been in the past, because in fact the rules of the game have loosened and these responsibilities may be more widely shared.

**Class**

In terms of educational level and income, class makes a difference in the experience of long-term resistance and the ability to make choices over time, but certain cultural proclivities mitigate these differences. Class intertwines
with urban-rural/regional differences, offering fewer opportunities for education and income in the regions yet less pressure, especially in rural areas, to achieve solid middle-class success.

No matter where they lived, less education clearly made a difference for single women as far as their ability to support themselves adequately, let alone travel and enjoy themselves or work and advance in a meaningful career, as their new generational values suggested. Singles used their educations to hoist themselves up in the world. Most successful singles had four-year university degrees, with the notable exception of the regional high school graduate in Chapter 2, who was nonetheless able to rise in the hierarchy at work.

Most singles educated through high school in the northeast earned low incomes and were relieved to marry, even though they married later and to men who had household responsibilities such as elder sons, and even though they had little chance of having children of their own. In short, less-educated women with lower incomes were left taking up some of the overflow of older men who had avoided marriage or had found it difficult to marry because of household circumstances.

Women with higher educations not only had better jobs, they were also able to marry men with high income-earning potential and, in the cases of regional women, move to a more urban area. This entailed mixed results for the tension of their long-term resistance, however, because these educated men and women were intent on having highly educated children, an enterprise that demanded attentive, at-home mothers. Thus, Japan’s unique situation among developed countries—that highly educated mothers actually work less than their counterparts in other nations—is a cultural situation that challenges any assumption that women of higher education and income can manipulate their attempts to change the cultural code completely as they wish. Women with young children in this study were not able to realize the generational ideal of mothering and working simultaneously, in some cases because of their own ambivalence, but also because wife and husband could not both continue to hold down good full-time jobs and nurture firmly middle-class children. Except for the few women who were artists, or those who used marriage as a way to escape country life and enjoy the city for themselves via their children, ambitions to remain middle-class or better made these well-educated women bow out of the obvious process of long-term resistance except in the areas of perceptive awareness and planning long-term for self.
Old and new ways

The old and the new work together in long-term resistance. Old ways—so-called tradition or the older cultural codes with which these women were raised—are salient over the course of long-term resistance: first, because long-term resistance occurs in the ambivalent space between old and new; and second, because long-term resisters have the capability of reinterpreting or reshaping the old for new uses. Parents with whom women have maintained fragile relations over time make continuing work possible for mothers because day cares and schools rarely give quite enough care to children. Single women assume typical male roles, working long hours at work and buying expensive apartments, but in so doing prove themselves as successful singles and mature adults.

The opposite is also true as a characteristic of this vague impetus for change over a lifetime: the old ways can seize upon the new ones and cause difficulties for women experimenting with new ways of being. The old ways may extend their own older cultural codes through taking advantage of what has been created anew in the younger generation. An example in Japan is the way in which elder parents, and even siblings, have taken advantage of single women to be the main caretakers for parents. Single women have also been used harshly by employers, who expect unlimited work hours from them because they have no evident family to care for.

Long-term resistance takes place in the social, cultural, and psychological spaces between historical local values and newer global values, and thus will always have to come to terms with certain deeply embedded feelings and practices at the core of local life. Although there are different nuances to these concepts around the world, in the conflicted shift between modernity and late modernity, ideas such as responsibility to the group, social roles as paths to power, care for others, and prescribed differences between men and women vie with ideas popularized in the global media concerning freedom, independence, individuality with unanchored identities, consumption, and women’s equality with men.

Independence and dependence (amae)

In Japan, women in the process of long-term resistance to shift the cultural code have to cope in some manner with ideas about how women are supposed to act—as their mothers have acted in close, long-term relationships and as
they have been taught to act. In this study Japanese women faced the challenge of dealing with the well-entrenched practice of *amae*, the communication of affection and love through the indulgence of the other as a dependent being in physical and emotional terms. Women’s lives have illustrated a variety of strategies that they have employed. Successful single women claimed they had achieved a new kind of independence as individuals who are not emotionally or financially dependent on others, and on that basis are seeking mutual respect between them and their boyfriends, future husbands, and mothers. Meanwhile, struggling and crashing singles gave themselves over to a new kind of dependence on religious figures and their philosophies, or on artistic worlds that they hope will lead to an entirely different kind of independence in the nonrational realm.

Married women without children have their own interesting experience with this local value of dependence in the marriage relationship that is now, ideally, a union between two individuals who respect each others’ developing life narratives and have created a place of psychological rest for both wife and husband (Giddens 1991). Some married women without children wove elongated romances with their husbands in a satisfying mutual dependency that was not overwhelming and that allowed their relationship to meld with their generational values of conjugal love and enjoyment. Other married women without children found themselves victims of old ways, as their childless husbands claimed roles of dependence on their wives as the comfortable husband–wife relationship. The wives maintained awareness of the problem, but as yet had not figured out how to escape it and resisted only through pursuing individual activities when possible and through sickness. In one surprising example, a couple with no children and intense careers both attacked each other as being too dependent or spoiled in their lifestyles, oriented to themselves rather than others, in essence raising the question of whether people who have been able to fully follow the shifts in the cultural code called for by their generation are capable of being adequate parents! All of these examples indicate that a certain degree of ambivalence and ambiguity in women’s long-term resistance is not just a characteristic of long-term resistance, but a requirement demanded by generational counterparts in marriage and parenting.

In a similar way, the ambivalence of long-term resistance in regard to independence and dependence emerged clearly when it came to ideas and practices about raising the next generation. The narratives of mothers revealed a debate around what kind of children they should be raising and how that should happen. Working mothers in urban, regional, and rural spaces tended
to argue that their children should become individuals like them, with their own worlds; too much dependence would keep children from standing on their own two feet. Mothers who quit work and stayed home with their children tended to want to raise children who were more dependent on them because that would make the children more caring, stable people, and because children were the mothers’ projects for the time being. A small group of mothers were highly protective of their children in the face of the dangers of the late-modern world and watched their every step, employing the emotional dependency of the past to guard their children in the contemporary world.

Urban women practiced goal-driven dependence with their children in relation to education and future success in this late-modern society of winners and losers. The mothers who quit work and stayed home felt their children would succeed better because of the advantages they could give them in schooling and extracurricular activities. However, in the rural village, where most women worked full-time, mothers cherished a relaxed upbringing that did not get hung up on urban ideals of success and gave their children more independence, at least when young. Thus, the contemporary conditions of risks for urban children in terms of both success and safety called women to reenter relationships of dependence with children and challenged them in their task of raising adequately independent children, while, ironically, rural children and mothers seemed to enjoy greater independence.

**Emotional expression and endurance (gaman)**

Endurance (gaman) is another core local value, salient in the past for women sacrificing self for others in Japanese families and an inevitable center of struggle for women involved in the long-term process of ambiguous resistance. The necessity to call on old traits of endurance surfaced particularly in relation to the care of sick and aging parents wherein daughters, single and married, had to devote major parts of their lives to this endeavor. The case of the married woman whose young daughter also had to learn endurance because her mother was too busy caring for her grandfather to give her affection was particularly poignant. The mother basically stopped feeling anything, she reported, her case indicating that the opposite of endurance is feeling and acting on one’s emotions.

Indeed, being an individual who acts according to what one feels (one’s emotion) and also according to what one’s self desires (katte ni) are important aspects of the way in which these women wanted the cultural code of their
mothers to change. Women challenged by the need to endure combined these new values with the old value of endurance in an interesting synthesis. Most important was that in all cases they were caring for their own parents, a new tendency in kinship in Japan that itself rests on the popular idea that daughters make better caretakers because they truly do care in an emotional way for their parents (unlike daughters-in-law). Thus, endurance was already married with emotion.

In one case, a woman who claimed she found her enjoyment by traveling with her father (who helped her care for her sick mother) combined her endurance with the idea of choice. Claiming that she could have made other choices and that she had willingly chosen this route in life to remain single and care for her parents, she felt that she remained within the discourse of long-term resistance for her generation. Thus, people maintained the sense of their long-term resistance in frameworks of traditional obligations such as parental care by interpreting their actions as the playing out of individual emotional will and of individual choice.

In sum, these women show that part of the ambivalence built into the process of long-term resistance involves the process of figuring out how to integrate local values with global values in a way that allows them adequate satisfaction. It is a process of interpreting and reinterpreting the old and the new; of tacitly living out the compromises that feel acceptable within their “specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity” (Mahmood 2001, 212); of keeping perceptions of contradictions at just the right point of hazy realization; and of maintaining hope over time in what appears as the non-directional ambivalence of the “not yet” (Miyazaki 2010).

**Debates and friends**

As people in this vague social movement make life choices that make their world feel like home, intragenerational debates emerge about just how this integration of local and global, old and new values should occur. We might call the questions that confront these ambiguous resisters as they realize the limits of life and the stakes of the games they play questions of morality. How much dependence, given or taken, can independence take? How much endurance can emotional individuality afford? How much choice can live in a forest of obligations? These narratives show that the range of tolerance in this generation varies greatly—a testament to these women’s broad movement over time in their particular historical space of double binds and contradictions.
In the midst of these debates, women of this generation turn to experts such as teachers, doctors, religious leaders, and authors for help in making individual decisions, a process that is typical of the decentralization of individual governance in the neoliberal era (Dean 1999). Saturated with information, most participants in this social movement listen to experts rather than parents, often letting the experts’ claim to knowledge and their skill in dressing old ideas in new jargon (Foucault 1980) nudge them toward decisions to abide by older norms, at least for the time being. Both trust and distrust emerge in these relationships, however, as people also turn to the reflexive awareness of themselves, their friends, and siblings.

Reporting their voices and consultations with them in narratives, women name friends and siblings as all-important allies who give support but also critique as they watch each other from the Panopticon towers at the center of this scriptless life they are trying to hammer out together. The value of friends’ points of view relates to the facts that they have passed through similar disciplines, desires, and points of resistance in the past, and that they too are figuring out how to be responsible individuals in their own lives, in families, and at work. In this study, friends emerge as lending both stability and ongoing incitement toward change. The voices of their generation in both city and country sometimes urge friends to adhere to older norms to achieve certain moral ideals and obligations with the consciousness of time changing the situation. Yet, when the time is right, friends’ voices can also be depended on to encourage alternative actions that support desires for more individual autonomy. In short, friends help friends to write new scripts that fit their ambivalent long-term resistance.

The presence or absence of friends and siblings that women can confide in and trust eases long-term resistance. Single women in the large city grapple with their anomalous status in terms of old norms better than single women in the north because of available friends with whom they may talk and enjoy life. Although this social movement is vague because it works through individuals attempting in small ways to shift the cultural codes in their personal lives, the collectivity of same-age allies contributes psychological strength and increases external acceptability. Likewise, in the north, more single women married regardless of risky husbands and in-laws in part because they had few allies left, and friends kept introducing them to prospective marriage partners.

In general, the process of long-term resistance increases in loneliness as one ages because the particularities of one’s life conditions intensify and people must face the challenges of work and family on their own. However,
social media connections with friends were important for isolated mothers, and some singles held on to the hope of living with friends in old age. As the children of these interviewees grow up and move on, I expect that relationships with friends will surface once again in a more active way, as women work out scripts for their continued dilemmas of adulthood after child raising and retirement.

**Family**

Family is a key institution for these women in their long-term attempts to shift the cultural codes toward independence and choice, but ambivalence is central in this arena where adaptation to family or household traditions pairs with the ongoing push to live by late-modern values. If these women can be seen as suggestive of global trends, their ambiguous long-term resistance has been fairly successful in forcing some change in the attitudes of their parents. The ambivalence of their mothers toward their own marriages and care of elders often came to these women’s rescue as their mothers negotiated with fathers to gain tolerance for what they saw as their daughters’ transgressions in the form of seeking enjoyment, boyfriends, continued work or education, and time spent abroad. Furthermore, the women’s own wills to power were most vulnerable and ambivalent toward those who first loved and recognized them—their mothers, who gave them time, unselfish love, and close physical relationships when they were young (and fathers, who were close advisers for some). Put this complex of ambivalences together and it adds up, not only to ongoing conflict between mothers and daughters, but also to mothers’ wishes to give help to daughters, daughters’ ability to accept help from mothers, and daughters’ willingness to help mothers when they grow old. They mended their fractured relationships, finding creative means for a different relationship to emerge. In fact, rather than the overdependence or parasitism of which Japanese women are accused, I found many single and married women who were in relationships of mature give-and-take with their mothers over the long term.

Women’s long-term resistance also affected their relations with parents-in-law; the divorced woman in the village lost her son to one family but managed to get separate living quarters for her nuclear family with her present in-laws. Nonetheless, these women far preferred the emotional relationship with, and even elderly care for, mothers rather than mothers-in-law. In the most dangerous position with in-laws were the women married without
children who faced household gridlocks around how to get heirs. At this point in this longitudinal study, almost all the women were able to avoid living with their mothers-in-law, but future pressure or obligations to do so loomed in both rural and urban areas.

With ideals of respect for self and expectations for love or special connections in relationships central to this ambiguous resistance of late modernity, the husband is a pivot for the ability to stay on track with the task of manipulating cultural codes in one’s life. The success of this process for this generation has to be qualified. On a personal level of interrelationship between husband and wife the majority of women in this study were not ecstatic but satisfied, conveying that their husbands understood them and supported their ability to maintain some space for self. Unlike many of their mothers, they enjoyed their husbands’ presence at home and had time to do things together on the weekends. In many cases, they reflected that their husbands did not like going on late-night drinking bouts or weekend retreats any more than the wives wanted them to, but company practices required less of this than in the past. On a structural level of actual practices in time and space, however, women had no choice but to accept work demands made on their husbands who arrived home at nine or ten p.m. at the earliest, and they seemed to tolerate these, much as their mothers had, as inevitable conditions of employment in Japanese institutions.

With men, women sometimes shared feelings and actions of long-term resistance, but such alliances with husbands or lovers could not be assured just because they were in the same generation. Women in this study put up with husbands whose consciousnesses had changed little, just as the women had feared when they were younger, and the fact that most men are the main breadwinners in this study reinforces this. Married men who were not fathers seemed to use the situation to revert to dependence on their wives. The regional male lover who tacitly refused marriage is one who himself hung on to his ambiguous resistance but never clearly communicated its nature to his girlfriend. However, the long-term resistance of women did contribute to changes in men in some cases. Some husbands loosened up and gave more time to their families over time, changed jobs, or engaged in hobbies for themselves much as their wives did. Too much time devoted to hobbies on top of work, however, could backfire on the wife.

The opposition to the cultural code lived out by most women in this generation did not include a wish never to have children, but rather objected to women’s self-sacrifice to family and the idea that their maturity would
be measured by expunging desires for independent self. Yet ambivalence
toward child raising is inevitable, because in this form of long-term resistance
between modernity and late modernity, women find themselves being judged
as mothers by teachers, doctors, and the nation even as they simultaneously
try to enjoy themselves with their children and find new, interesting selves
while raising them.

I find Japanese women experiencing child raising as both a demanding
responsibility and a satisfying joy, challenging and expanding the ideas of
self. Children deliver these women from a narrow vision of growing only
through consumption, enjoyment, and work centered on self. Women who
have been successful singles in the past and quit work tend to define their
child-rearing period as a limited time in their lives—a time of less stress, or
a time of information-gathering for self and children. Other nonworking
mothers are consumed by child raising, giving themselves to it completely to
minimize risks for their children and save Japan. They suggest that cocooning
may well carry with it insights into the risks of the late-modern era.

Work, companies, and government

The workplace is also a key institution in the lives of these ambivalent resisters,
some of whom invested it with great potential for self-actualization. For most,
however, work for women is not the panacea that some had hoped for, not
only because of the unrelenting contradictions between work and mothering,
but also because work itself has changed in the unstable and globalized
economy of the late-modern era. Fewer jobs, fewer satisfying jobs, and more
part-time service jobs with fewer benefits and more individual responsibility
typify this period. Most successful singles either work in freelance or inde-
pendent employment or for a modern type of company that allows flexibility;
for them, the late-modern style of work has leveraged their independence. For
others, work is simply the way to hold the line financially or psychologically
against total accommodation. Work as a strong meaningful core to life or as
the lucrative basis for enjoyment on the side has failed single women in the
northern regional city as well as a few women in Tokyo working in educa-
tional institutions. In these cases, enjoyment of work and of being single is
hampered by demands for loyalty, emotional dependency, and long hours of
work from bosses who expect women to prove themselves, do the dirty work,
or overwork. Overwhelmed, the women can do little more than remain aware
of the double bind in which they find themselves.
Part of the experience of ambiguous long-term resistance is the acceptance of a certain degree of structural intransigence and the power of institutions in late-modern society. These Japanese women accept the idea that the larger structure is dominant and there will be little meaningful change, especially in companies and schools. Women must work hard in their own jobs, yet companies do not give them special help with children in order to advance, and glass ceilings remain for singles, even though some in this study have done reasonably well. Husbands must give their jobs priority rather than helping around the house. Children’s success in schools still depends on mothers’ roles as organizer and coach because schools remain ranked and competitive, with high school and university exams being major turning points in their children’s lives, and outside education necessary to succeed. To maintain their middle-class status, women’s long-term resistance must be ambivalent, because it is permeated by frameworks of institutionalized power that privilege men in the public world.

Women view the government with vague hopes for changes in policies that might help them, but generally they reflect that policy changes have not helped them in their long-term resistance and thus it is useless to put faith in the government. Ironically, the relationship with the government reinforces these women’s idea that they must be independent and figure out their own best choices. Government cannot be trusted to help the people with their real problems. Thus, they implicitly recognize the neoliberal governance that they must deal with in this era—a governance that deals out policies that depend on citizens, particularly women in Japan, to be entrepreneurial in their work and to act as the basis for child and elder care at home.

**Self**

This long-term resistance movement has centered on shifting society just enough to accommodate individuality, independence, enjoyment, and expanded opportunities for women. In Japan, self, with its development and actualization outside of daughterhood, marriage, and motherhood, is the core concept. How has the concept of self fared in the longitudinal narratives of women in this study?

The dilemmas of adulthood in Japan have molded this concept of self into various shapes in women’s lives. For singles, the aims are to normalize the anomalous identity of singles so they are no longer liminal people who
have not yet emerged as adults and to live their singlehood in ways that enable them to maintain the integrity of their generational aims. Successful Tokyo singles experience a version of self that shines with independence, a new form of middle-class identity (Muraki 2007) and the ability to move freely among multilayered identities, while up north singlehood is similar but is experienced as a manual for self that singles are still writing. Consumption was more important as a symbolic bootstrap in early years of working toward a free-floating selfhood, but appears in larger forms like apartments and recedes as an everyday concern as singles age.

In the process of the long-term resistance of this generation, the emphasis on self has mellowed—as one might expect in ambiguous, long-term resistance such as this, and especially in Japan where self is laden with meanings, including realizing self as flexible and part of the whole as the apex of maturity (Rosenberger 1992). One successful single even plays with ideas of integrating her ambitious small self with the larger self of the universe. There is no other way for the struggling, crashing singles whose identities have literally fragmented, double binds imploding inside them. Religion offers them a fresh interpretation of self-awakening, as they are reborn into a new sense of what non-self means. Art affords the opportunity for irrepressible expressions of self, and theater in particular offers the ability to try out random, marginal identities on- and offstage.

Despite their renunciation of singlehood, married women without children find themselves still trying to normalize an anomalous identity. Having passed through the biggest dilemma of choice, however, their way is not as difficult as that of singles because the values of their generation have penetrated society to the extent that couples living for their own enjoyment are accepted; some enjoy themselves with a fierce determination, but if they care for elders, they gain even more acceptance. The problem is that they themselves sometimes feel stuck in a no-man’s land between friends who are married with children and friends who are single, or between freedom from children and the dependence of demanding husbands. They do not have the ideal of independent self for their generation, the ideal of a self that might grow with their children, or the ideal of a future that might leave more room for self-development once their children have grown.

Nonworking married women with children have the task of defamil iarizing this postwar role of full-time housewife as they fit it to their own generation’s values. Outside of an anomalous identity, the ambivalent mind becomes hard to hold onto and action toward self causes disharmony. At the
center of their households, these mothers use the skills that they learned as singles in their conscious performance of an identity that includes manipulation of husbands and children and care of the household in a risky, neoliberal world. Some women would say that they have taken a hiatus from self, but their narratives show that they remain aware of it, most of them planning how to take up the pursuit of self in the future. They are cautious about portraying themselves as presently capable of building self—certainly not a self independent of family, as they once imagined it, but rather one of traveling with children or building and decorating new houses. Yet they do imagine growing self through low-income jobs and volunteer activities that involve them in society beyond family, some feeling that this may allow them to do something more meaningful than they did when they were young and working in companies. In this sense, their children have served as a symbolic means to make this shift out of the male-defined world of work. Moreover, their desires fit with the increase in volunteer activities that Japanese communities offer, even demand (Ogawa 2009).

Married women with children who continue working voice the concept of self more than their nonworking counterparts. The full-timers still have a world of their own where they see their selves existing if not actively growing, but their long-term resistance fights to fashion the independence of their children as well as themselves. Perhaps the dance teacher–mother whose husband and parents support her, and the organic farmer with her strong sense of the societal importance of the work she does with her husband, have the strongest concepts of self among the mothers interviewed. Although both feel the tug between work and child raising, they have never lost sight of themselves as individuals with choices and purpose in the world. On the other end of the spectrum are the part-time family workers whose jobs are embedded in their husband’s family’s work and thus, for the present, have lost connection with their paths of self via work.

In short, self remains a viable concept in the discourse of this generation, although it decreases in importance over the years. It takes on different meanings and practices for different members of this generation as their lives assume firmer shapes through the choices they have made or not made. Gazing on these very differences keeps the question of self alive in this generation. Self has neither flown to the flexible heights that Ueno (2005) imagined nor died in the depths of conservative Japan; yet the concept continues to be salient for women as a measure of their journeys along the path of ambivalent long-term resistance.
This longitudinal study has illustrated the myriad angles of long-term resistance for women trying to shift the cultural code in the turn from modernity to late modernity. The ambivalence and tension that lie at its core frame the dilemmas of adulthood for women who feel they are writing their own manuals for life within the contradictions of the life they were raised in and the life they have discovered through both their experimental choices and the turns of history shaping their lives. In the economically unstable and culturally changing life of the 1990s and 2000s in Japan, this generation of women finds that their long-term resistance takes them places they never dreamed of, both because they are so different from how they imagined their lives would be when they were young, and because they are more similar to their mothers’ lives than they imagined as young adults. There is no turning back, however, because what they have become answers to the ongoing struggles within them as well as to the larger contestations and shifts in late-modern Japan. They feel they have choices, and yet simultaneously they have no choice but to negotiate their way with practiced ambivalence through the dilemmas of their adulthood.

Through the making of their personal life narratives, not intended to challenge the status quo in any revolutionary way, have these women brought change? Undoubtedly, the answer is yes, that their small ambiguous choices and silent refusals, practiced within a generational discourse that has spread from mouth to mouth, have been an impetus toward larger change, not least because the political and social body was depending on their bodies to make babies. This story of long-term resistance has also revealed long-term shifts in power, with change itself best imagined as a spiral of intertwining cables, some tugging toward reproduction of the old and others straining toward innovation, but always with mutual effect on each other in conflict and symbiosis. Over the course of these women’s lives in Japan, consumer choice and global information increased; women responded with ambivalence toward postwar cultural codes; the government reacted with new policies; a sense of risk grew with economic decline and globalization along with a sense of rising inequality; many men joined women in their ambivalent long-term resistance; and governance turned increasingly to dependence on experts, self-responsibility, and a continued sense of morality in families and communities. Change has undoubtedly occurred; but, as in many places around the world, change is uncertain, imbued with “tensions and ambivalence that subjects face as they position themselves simultaneously within emerging neoliberal regimes and in relation to social contexts that may be governed
by alternative ways of conjoining subjectivity, social relations, and politics” (Goodman 2009, 206).

By the time the earthquake, tsunami, and radiation of 2011 occurred in Japan, individuation, a sense of risk, and distrust of government were already well developed, and these events boosted them sky-high. The ambivalences of long-term resistance honed by these women have come to permeate Japan, producing negative tension, disbelief in nation, and profound uncertainty about the future—but on the positive side yielding reflective awareness, increased tolerance of difference, and a conscious search for new kinds of human linkages.