The Borderlands of Motherhood: Representation of Spatial Belonging of Mothers and Families in Government Posters

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Japan, like many developed countries, has recently seen its population decrease so that in 2012 it reached the lowest-low fertility rate of 1.41 (TFR). Since the 1970s, the main identified cause is the postponement of marriage, and therefore childbirth, by women. This is primarily interpreted as the consequence of a conflict between personal choice and the country's good, and one further affected by an ageing society. Since the 1990s, the Japanese government has intervened with various campaigns aimed to reduce this conflict. This paper focuses on one of those campaigns. More subtle and less authoritarian than the eugenic campaigns of the prewar and wartime governments, they nonetheless aimed at 'molding the mind' (Garon 1997). The posters depict ideals of family, parenthood, childhood, as well as society as a whole. This paper focuses on two main visual aspects of the posters: the spatial representation, and the social relationships. The posters show an attempt to redefine the geographical space of motherhood, shifting from an indoor, private space to an outdoor public space. The ads depict ideals of family, motherhood, childhood, as well as a harmonious cohabitation of all families, to form a unified and peaceful community.

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Japan has seen its population decrease to reach the lowest-low fertility rate of 1.41 in 2012. This tendency is predominantly interpreted as a consequence of the conflict between women's personal choices and the country's good, a situation that is exacerbated by an increasingly ageing society. Since the 1990s, the Japanese government has made several interventions to mitigate this situation: including changes to financial help and campaigns around work/life balance and gender stereotypes. Each of these laws and campaigns aimed to reduce the struggle between the individual's and society's ideals. This paper focuses on one campaign advertisements launched by different government organizations to raise the fertility rate since the 1990s. More subtle and less authoritarian than the eugenics campaigns of the prewar and wartime governments, they nonetheless aimed at 'molding the mind' (Garon 1997). The posters depict ideals of family, parenthood, childhood, as well as society as a whole. This paper attempts to identify the arguments put forward in the campaign advertisements as a solution to the issue of low birth rate.

I will first, retrace the changing construction of the family, especially through motherhood. I then consider the specific context of production of the posters and lately proceed to identify the main ideas used to present an image of the Japanese family.

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Modern Motherhood and the Privatization of the Family

The term *shufu*, usually translated as housewife, originally referred to upper class women who acted as head and manager of their household. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the Japanese modern society defined the *shufu* as the dominant model of womanhood. This role implies a separation of productive and reproductive labour. The private space of the household is identified with womanhood, and more particularly motherhood, whereas public space is claimed by men as productive agents. This gender role distinction is also a spatial separation of public and private spheres.

Kathleen Uno further develops the idea that there was an evolution in the caring role of mothers throughout the modern period. She identifies the persistence of pre-modern forms of the family during the Taishō period (1912-1926), especially in rural and lower classes households in which the woman's income was necessary for the family's survival (132). As with the immediate postwar period, the Taishō years brought along a set of different expectations, in which motherhood was not exclusively associated with child-care. However this image of womanhood as productive, rather than reproductive labour, was denigrated by the emerging ideology of *ryōsai kenbo,* the 'good wife, wise mother'. In order to fulfill economic and political national goals, women's role was redefined as primarily within the family. Women were held responsible for bearing children to accommodate the state's needs for soldiers until the mid-twentieth century and later for workers. Motherhood is then constructed throughout the modern period as a reproductive asset for the nation, not just the family.

More recently the strict separation of the private and public spheres, and its conflation with the feminine and the masculine, has become increasingly blurred. In response to the low birth rate and feminist women's demands for social changes, the Japanese government broadened responsibility for children to other members of society: professionals (with the Angel Plan), as well as fathers (as developed by the *Ikumen* project).

Not until the 1990s did official discourses offer an alternative view on gender roles as a response to the 'family crisis'. Previously the government promoted the idea of the male breadwinner and female housewife/child-carer.

A 2003 NHK survey on the issue of birthrates concluded that 'if a policy of reversing declining birth rate (*shōshika taisaku*) is to be pursued in earnest it must begin by reconsidering male dominance in this society' (quoted in Coulmas, 2007, 6). The Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society (1999) in its preamble offers the framework within which such changes could occur: 'to respond to the rapid changes occurring in Japan's socio-economic situation, such as the trend toward fewer children, the aging of the population, and the maturation of domestic economic activities, it has become a matter of urgent importance to realize a gender-equal society in which men and women respect the other's human rights and share their responsibilities, and every citizen is able to fully exercise their individuality and abilities regardless of gender.' Several other actions were taken up following this initiative. In 2000 the Plan for Gender Equality established eleven priority areas under four basic directions: building social systems that promote gender equality; achieving gender equality in the workplace, family and community; creating a society where human rights of women are promoted and defended; contributing to the equality, development and peace of the global community. Based on the provisions of the Basic Law, the Japanese government submits to the Diet each year the Annual Report on the State of the Formation of a Gender-Equal Society, which is the so called White Paper on Gender Equality. The White Paper describes the situation and progress made in each of these eleven priority areas for the current year, and reveals the measures that would be taken by the government in the following year.

It corresponds to the discourse reported also by the media. In 2005 the *Asahi Shimbun* stated: 'we should build a society where young people find it easier to want to have children' (quoted in Coulmas, 2007, 6). This better and easier society wanted by women goes through a redefinition of gender roles and an acceptance of a less tight model of family.

Family Day: Family as the Basis of Society

In 2007, the executive body of the Japanese government, the Cabinet Office, presided by the Prime Minister, instituted a national 'Family Week' (which actually lasts for two weeks) built around a 'Family Day' to be celebrated on the third Sunday of November. This day follows a series of other days dedicated to specific members of the community and highlighting their role within society: Coming of Age Day (seijin no hi) for those turning 20 in January; Girls' Day (*hina matsuri*) in march; Boys' Festival (*tango no sekku*) in May; Respect for the Aged Day (*keirō no hi*) in September; *Shichigosan* (a festival for children aged 3, 5 and 7) in November. All except the Respect for the Aged Day, are festivals dating back to pre-modern forms of religious ceremonies. Both, this eventand the Family Day, were created in the

contemporary period to respond to social concerns and attempt to influence citizens' behaviour. The government website even explicitly links the emergence of the Family Day to the 'fertility crisis'. As such, it addresses some of the issues identified by the state as causes of the decrease in fertility such as differentiated gender roles and women's isolation in childrearing, thus responding to feminist critiques of nuclear family models. Conservative critics have argued that the Western ideology of 'individualism' and women's 'selfish' pursue of higher education and careers are responsible for the low Japanese fertility rate thus causing the contemporary 'crisis' (Coulmas, 54). The online article encourages fathers to balance work and childrearing, as well as asks 'local people' to help parenting couples.

Unlike the aforementioned festivals which adresses a specific sectional cohort, the Family Day adresses all Japanese citizens, who all form part of a 'family' unit, as registered on the *koseki*. As the posters analysed below demonstrate, the governement actively reproduces an ideal image of the family: composed of a couple and child(ren), sometimes with grand-parents. It also favores the representation of young couples in their late twenties or early thirties with young children who are neither demanding babies nor independent teenagers. The posters then represent the ideologically preferred family model.

This festival can be read in opposition also to the previously established Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day which individually celebrate members of the family. Mothers' Day was introduced in the 1930s, as part of the emulation of the model of the good wife-wise mother. It was initially celebrated on the day of the Empress's birthday, the 6th of March and thus reinforces the family-state (*kokusai*) system, by designating the Empress as the nation's mother. This date was later modified in the post-war period and a random day was chosen.

Since 2007 and until 2011, a poster was published annually advertising the 'Family Week' and the events taking place during this period. Other posters have been published by different prefectural governments to advertise local events.

The Natural Space and the 'Natural Family'

Japan is a highly unbanised country, nonetheless the 'Family Day' posters emphasise a countryside-style landscape where the natural space seems to dominate. All the families are standing among green grass and under a blue sky. The only elements of urbanism are the houses. There is at least one house visible in each poster, a symbol of the refuge of the family. In Japanese, the family and the house are even further than that assimilated, as the term *ie*, often translated as family, also refers to the 'home'.

Thus, the home and the family members living in it are one single entity.

The posters follow a recurrent pattern found in children's drawings of their families: the family members in front of the house, with trees and grass. The anthropomorphisation of several elements (sun, house) encourages such comparison. So not only is the child essential, even sometimes central (as in the 2010 poster), but it is also the maker and carrier of such an image of the family.

In the 2011 poster the home at the top of the hill is anthropomorphised and the chimney throws out hearts instead of smoke. It become then a loving member of the family. In the 2009 poster, the houses are far in the background and the tree is the

most visible component. The houses are rarely a major element of landscape and are surrounded by natural elements, like trees or bushes. The space of the family is thus not the home but the natural landscape of japan, in which the 'natural' model of the family can develop and form a healthy and happy society. If marriage remains central to birth and raise children, more couples do not see children as a necessity for married life. The NHK survey carried out in 2003 highlights the debate about the desirability of having children. In comparison with a decade before, a higher percentage of women consider that having children after marriage is not a 'matter of course' (mentioned in Coulmas, 2007, 6). They outnumber women who consider it as 'in the nature of things' (*tōzen*) as well as the number of men who think similarly. Several causes lie behind this change of mind. Women's higher participation in the labour force transformed the modern traditional role of the Japanese wife as a fulltime housewife. Moreover, the economical cost of raising children according to the dominant middle-class dream and the housing crisis push towards a nuclear family with one or two children, thus allowing women to delay childbirth. It is then essential in order to encourage couples to marry and have children to make it seem 'natural' and unquestionable. Moreover, the 'Family Day' posters do not depict families as isolated nucleus within society but as the basic unit of it. Within the families portraits, all ages and genders and represented in different configurations throughout the posters.

In this nature the family is happy together. Naturalness is associated with leisure: outside space, balloons, air balloon ride, pic-nic.. The image of the 'happy' family is thus based on week-ends and leisure time shared between all generations. This representation makes abstraction of two issues. First, the housing crisis, with the high prices and the lack of space in Japanese urban accommodations, is not mentioned. Second, the difficulties of everyday life, the reliance of the 'good wife, wise mother' to care for the children are swept away by the presence of both parents or even the grand-parents around the child. The use of a 'natural world' avoids reference to the housing crisis and high urbanisation of Japan, as well as might encourage people to move back to the deserted Japanese countryside.

There is a clear horizon line dividing the green grass from the blue sky. The natural space is separated into two: the earth and the sky. This separation is smoothen by the representation of a round, softed world. This protective shape is built either through the representation of the earth itself (2011 poster) or through the different elements of the landscape: the tree, the sun, the clouds. The natural space is thus protective, as is symbolised by the sun embracing the family in the 2008 poster. It presents an ideal family radiant under the embracing sun. The different elements symbolizing nature (the sun, the bird, flowers, and rainbow) points both at the blooming and happiness of the members and at the naturalness of the family system. Besides a symbol of nature, it is difficult not to see in the sun a reference to the Japanese navy flag *Kyokujitsuki*, often associated with imperialism and pre-war nationalism. It is then the state, symbolized by the sun, who embraces and protects the happy family.

By extension, the family is defined as 'natural', i.e. it is the natural way to be in the community, thus inducing that being single is an unnatural and unwanted state or at least temporary until achievement of the ideal family model. 'Growing' a family is also symbolised in the posters. In the 2007 poster the grand-mother and the daughter are both watering the large tree under which the family is resting. On the foliage of

that same tree are representing different families, thus showing how each family contributes to the growth of the Japanese society. The next year poster, also shows a young girl watering flowers. It is quite meaningful that the caring (through the action of watering) is done by female members of the community, on which the Japanese government relies manily to provide child and elderly care.

It is also an image of nature both reassuring and familiar, even domesticated. The trees are cut into round shapes or into a metaphorical heart in the oldest poster. The control of the natural elements to become a protection is seen through the presence of pets, domesticated animals: dogs and cats in all five posters. This protective nature is thus not only surrounding the house and the family but is also within it and a part of it.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on five consecutive posters of the Family Day campaign. I have focused on the concept of nature and ideas of naturalness within their visual content. The representation of nature in the 'Family Day' posters implies naturalness at three different levels. It is first, the 'natural' structure of the family; society's organisation to reach happiness. The family is then the 'paradise' to be reached by the individuals, thus making the single state unnatural and unwanted. Second, women's symbiotic relationship with nature is enhanced through actions like watering that affirm women's reproductive and caring roles as 'natural'. Lastly, the child-drawing style of the posters stresses as natural the child's desire for this ideal family. By extension, then, the childish aspect of the drawings, reminding a child's drawing of his/her family, implies that this ideal happiness is reached with and through children. Thus the natural space is part of a discourse to legitimise the family lifestyle promoted by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in the late 2000s

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