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## **Ready-made Meals and Housewifery: Precooked Food as a Tool of Contemporary Japanese Housewife's Affirmation**

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## *Ready-made Meals and Housewifery*

Precooked Food as a Tool of Contemporary Japanese Housewife's Affirmation

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## INTRODUCTION

Ready-made food is a type of instant meals that is currently trending in Japan. The distinctive feature of this highly diversified typology of food is that the meals are precooked, prepacked and meant to be eaten without any additional preparation. Today, the ready-made food market includes different types of pre-cooked food, ranging from simple snacks to side dishes and entire meals, like lunch and dinner boxes (Japan Ready-made Meal Association 2022).

Considered as the most influential invention of 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan, precooked and instant food played a fundamental role in revolutionizing Japanese eating habits (Motoko 1989, 207).

Appearing in Japan in the 1980s, ready-made food was understood as a form of convenience food, and provoked a negative moral response among both the Japanese institutions and public opinion (Solt 2012).

The use of premade meals in place of home-made eating practices was conceived as a “morally bankrupt” form of cooking associated with sloppiness or a lack of care for health and well-being, especially in regards of Japanese housewives (Jackson et al. 2018). The negative correlation between lazy housewife and ready-made food consumption within the household remained grounded in the common imaginary throughout all the period of economic growth. During those years, the conservative ideal of the perfect housewife was still a fundamental aspect of Japanese society. In the domestic setting, the typical Japanese woman was characterized by a strong sense of sacrifice for the sake of her children and husband, showing an unwavering commitment to households’ matters. One of the ways through which the Japanese housewife conveyed her dedication, devotion and affection towards her family was by preparing and serving homemade meals (Nakano and Wagatsuma 2005).

However, with the changing needs of Japanese people and the spread of a high demand for quick and convenient food in the market after the burst of the bubble, ready-made food gained more and more popularity, reaching, together with dining out, more than the 60% of all household food expenditures (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2018). The growing popularity of precooked food coincided with a shifting perception of its consumption. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the contested category of pre-made food has started to be reframed in a more positive light (see Jackson et al. 2018). Nowadays, the use of precooked meals within and outside the household has become normalized and widely accepted.

Accordingly, the use of pre-made food by Japanese mother began to be endorsed, marking the slowly disappearance of previous moral discourses about the duty of the mother to provide authentic Japanese home-made food to the family as a form of love, care and benevolence

(Goldstein-Gidoni 2018). Traditional cooking practices embedded with the figure of good motherhood and housewife, like the preparation of obento lunch-boxes (Allison 1991), have been gradually substituted by pre-made meals options. In the meantime, the figure of Japanese housewife confined to the domestic environment and in charge of taking care of the family has become more and more obsolete, and the gender roles division that characterized the Japanese family of the economic boom decades went missing, in favor of new household's dynamics (see Kumagai and Keyser 1996; Nonoyama 2000).

The aim of my research is to analyze how the consumption of ready-made food helped reshape the role of housewives and domesticity in contemporary Japanese households.

My hypothesis is that the use of pre-made meals have challenged traditional notions of good motherhood and housewifery, and contributed to the emergence of a new type of housewife, impacting gender dynamics within Japanese households, and reflecting broader societal changes. In my research I will highlight how precooked meals have acted as an ideological and cultural tool in the reshaping of womanhood in Japanese households. My study will show how the widespread use of precooked food and its positive perception contributed to redefining the image of women in the Japanese family, fostering the emergence of a new type of housewife and reshaping their relationships with other family members.

To do so, I will first introduce the contemporary Japanese family, focusing on the new internal dynamics and the emergence of a new housewife. After examining the family context, I will move on to the exposure of the ready-made meals and their use within Japanese homes. Finally, in the last part of my thesis, I will point out the relationship between the use of precooked food and housewifery, showing the threats to traditional concepts of motherhood and the controversies caused by this. In the conclusion, I will be able to show how the use of pre-cooked food has fostered the rise of a new type of housewife.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: food, family and gender roles

Social anthropologists have explored food consumption practices as embedded in cultural rituals that marked societies in several dimension. The socio-cultural significance of food consumption has been widely analyzed within the family context, as it provides a window into the cultural and social dynamics of a given society. From a sociological perspective, food consumption patterns within families can reflect broader societal trends and values, such as

changing gender roles, and the role of food in shaping identity and social status (Murcott 1982; Charles and Kerr 1988; DeVault 1991; Gregory 1999). Anthropologists, on the other hand, are often interested in the cultural meanings attached to food consumption within families, such as the social significance of certain foods, and the ways in which food can be used to build and reinforce social relationships (Delphy 1980; Fieldhouse 1986; Mennell et al. 1992). Both sociological and anthropological perspectives recognize the importance of food consumption within families as a site of social and cultural meaning-making, reflecting and shaping the social world in which we live.

In the Japanese context, the cultural expectations and norms concerning food and family have been closely tied up with the concept of motherhood, being subject of several studies (White 1987; Iwao 1993; Akiko and Yoda 1993; Dickensheets 1996; Jolivet 1997; Negayama 2000; Sand 2003; Sato 2003). These expectations are based on the ideal of the *ryōsai kembo* (good wife and wise mother), a fundamental aspect of both the Japanese household and society. This model of motherhood was proposed with the emergence of the mass culture during Meiji period (Sato 2003), and perceived as the “nation’s most important job” of mid-twenty century Japan (White 1987, 154). The ideology of “good wife, wise mother” stood upon a specific gender role division of labor within the household, where the man was the working force and the woman was in charge of ensuring the welfare of the family (Sato 2003). Nishimura (2001) provided a sociological description of housewifery, analyzing the role of housewife as a real institution constituted of systems of meanings, material structure, and practices. According to the author, it is through this set of practices that the housewife constructs and maintains her status and image in the daily life (p.231).

The ideal Japanese *oka-san* (mother) is expected to be a skilled housewife who takes full responsibility for managing the household and caring for its family members. One of her primary duties is the preparation and provision of food, which is seen as a crucial way for her to express her dedication to her family (Dickensheets 1996). In fact, food preparation is closely tied to the concept of "good motherhood" in Japan, with mothers expected to provide nutritious homemade meals to their families. Being an accomplished housewife meant being able to "give her family flavour and variety" through her cooking skills (Jolivet 1997, 91).

Older traditional documents on household management emphasize the significance of providing fresh and seasonal dishes for the well-being of family members, which ultimately contributes to the happiness and harmony of the household (see Beeton 2015).

The serving of fresh homemade food was not only a way to ensure the well-being of the family, but it also worked as a mean to establish relationship within the family members and express the status of the mother.

Allison (1991), highlighted the ideological implication embedded in the preparation of school lunch boxes (*bento box*) and how it helped constructing the relationship mother-child. In her work, the traditional practice of bento boxes was part of a cultural process that defined the role of motherhood and her duty. In her study of traditional Japanese women imagery, Iwao (1993) outlined the function of home food preparation as a measure to estimate the quality of a mother in relation to her children. Jolivet (1997) analyzed housewife's food making and serving practices as the opportunity to express their love for their children. Finally, in her study of mother-infant feeding interaction, Negayama (2003) analyzed nurturing practices as a "communicative situation of control, conflict, cooperation, and/or negotiation between them, which reveals cultural fundamental of mother-infant relationships." (p.59).

Besides the dimension of mother-child interactions, serving homemade food was also a key element in the relationship between wife and husband. Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the preparation of homemade food by housewife was still characterized by a strong moral and physiological relevance, where a woman's great cooking skills were part of the requirements for a successful marriage (Sand 2003). Through the preparation of distinctive homemade food, the housewife claimed her position in the family as responsible for the general well-being, as well as fulfilling her husband's needs.

The studies above mentioned explored the cultural significance of homemade culinary practices and how they are used to reinforced gender roles and maternal duties, at the basis of the myth of Japanese motherhood (Akiko and Yoda 1993). No studies have yet been conducted on how new eating practices trend may be intertwined with the developments of gender roles and expectations within Japanese contemporary society.

My research aims at highlighting the potential of pre-made meals use in Japanese families as a tool to disrupt the traditional gender roles and expectations around domesticity. Precooked meals, which are prepared in advance and require minimal cooking or preparation, offer a convenient and time-saving alternative to traditional home cooking.

In my thesis, I aim to illuminate the evolving cultural significance of housewifery in contemporary Japan in relation to the replacement of homemade food with prepackaged meals. To this purpose, I will show how the use of pre-made food has challenged traditional notions of good motherhood and housewifery, as it can be seen as a departure from the ideal "wise

housewife", skilled in all domestic tasks, and "good mother" who sacrifices herself for the wellbeing of her family. In a society where food preparation practices have become intertwined with the image and perception of women, the widespread use of pre-made meals can be interpreted as a means of reshaping womanhood within the contemporary Japanese family. The aim of my work is to understand the impact of evolving food practices on gender dynamics and broader societal changes concerning housewifery in Japan.

## METHODOLOGY

My research will be conducted by using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. I will observe the data presented in the statistics and surveys provided by official Japanese institutions (Statistics Bureau of Japan; Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Cabinet Office; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; GAIN) to gather information about Japanese household changes, from their composition to their lifestyle preferences and food expenditures. In addition, I will use reports published by food service organizations (Japan Food Service Association, Japan Ready-Made Meal Association, The Japan Society of Food Service Studies) to understand the evolution of the side dishes market and its products, pointing out the main trends of the last decades. Other primary sources like customers' reviews and website articles will be used to understand the perception and attitude of Japanese consumers towards the use of precooked food. Finally, I will incorporate insights from previous studies and researches about motherhood and eating practices in Japan to provide a comprehensive analysis of my thesis topic.



## CHAPTER 1. CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE HOUSEWIFE

### 1.2. Changes in Japanese family arrangements

Contemporary Japan is a society in the midst of significant change, with traditional structures of family, gender roles and household management undergoing transformation. The past decades have seen important economic, demographic and cultural shifts that have brought to the revise of the prototypical Japanese nuclear family and the flourishing of new type of households (Takeda 2003; Yamashige 2017).

According to Takeda (2003), the nuclear family can be defined as: “[...] a family consisting of a married couple exercising a sexual division of labour and a small number of children tied by emotional bonds.” (p.452). Takeda argues that the typical nuclear family which characterized the decades between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, also called ‘post-war family’, definitely collapsed by the 1990s (Takeda 2003, 453).

Accordingly, the current state of Japanese households’ composition differs from the past, with the appearance of new family structures. One of the most notable trends of 21<sup>st</sup> century Japanese household has been the decline in the number of members in the average household. The surveys conducted by the Statistics Bureau of Japan about the family composition have shown a steady decrease in the size of Japanese household, aggravated since 2010, with an average of 2.27 individuals per family in 2021 (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2015; Statistics Bureau of Japan 2021). This has led to an increase in the number of single-person households, as well as households with only one or two members. The spread of these new typology of family went hand in hand with the decline of the percentage of nuclear families in the country. Over a period of 15 years, nuclear-family households in Japan have decreased by 2.5 %, dropping from 58.3% to 55.9% on the total Japanese households from 2000 to 2015 (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2020, 11). The number of household members has continued to decline, dropping to 2.33 in 2015, and in 2020 one-person household covered a total of 34.6 % on the total number of households (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2020). Of the total private households, the 40.7 % was accounted to households comprising only one person aged 65 years and over (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2020, 12). In fact, another significant trend in the structure of Japan’s household is the rising number of single elderly-people household, which increased by 35.6% since 1990 (Statistics Bureau of Japan 1995). This data reflects the impact of the demographic crisis and ageing of society on Japanese family composition. Another factor

related to the demographic crisis that has affected the structure of Japanese family is the declining rate of births in the country. The statistics table issued by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare shows a downward trend of the total fertility rate, marking a record dip below 1.30 in 2005, which raised to 1.36 in 2019 (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2020). Despite the apparent upturn in the last years, the rate of fertility has experienced a constant decrease since 1990. The factors that resulted in the decrease of births in Japan are related to another significant trend characteristic of 21<sup>st</sup> century Japanese society, the decrease and delay in marriages and the increase in divorces. In fact, Japanese couples have become more reluctant to marry and give birth to children, both because of the economic instability and the need for an increasing number of women to look for a job to sustain the family economy (Kingston 2004, 258). After the marriage boom during the period of economic growth in the 1970s, Japan has seen a continuous decline in the number of marriages, recording a rate of 4.8 % in 2019. In 2015, the proportion of never married people at the age of 50 was 23.4% for males and 14.1 % for females, marking the highest rate of single people in the country since 1920 (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2020, 18). Beside the single-person household, this tendency resulted in the emergence of another cultural phenomenon, the "parasite single" phenomenon, where young adults, particularly women, choose to remain living with their parents well into adulthood (see Masahiro 2001). This represents a departure from traditional expectations of marriage, with an increasing number of Japanese people deciding to pursue an unmarried life.

Beside the single lifestyle, Japanese people are also tending to get married later in life. Marriage delay is another important factor that helped shaping contemporary Japanese family. The table presented in the Handbook of Japan (2020) shows that the average age for marriage has raised since 1950, with 31.2 for males and 29.6 for women (p.18).

In contrast with these two trends, there was an upward trend about the divorces since the late 1960s, "hitting a peak of 289,836 divorced couples in 2002". After that, the number of divorces in Japan have been declining since 2003. However, the divorce rate in 2019 of 1.69 was still higher compared to the years before the early 2000s (p.19). The changes in Japanese family household composition reflects economic and socio-cultural developments, which "[...] eroded the bases of stem family households" (Kamo 1990, 399).

The prototypical Japanese nuclear family was characterized by specific internal dynamics that were rooted in Japan's traditional norms concerning gender roles and expectations (see Kamo 1990). Over the last decades, as the popularity of nuclear household decreased, the basic values of the nuclear family have slowly faded away, in tandem with the emergence of new family

structures. As a result, the rise of alternative family types and the spread of social practices such as postponed marriages, divorces and the decision to not to have children have marked significant changes in cultural norms concerning the image of the traditional family (see Takeda 2003; Nonoyama 2000 and others). This has been driven by a variety of factors, including changing social norms, economic shifts, and generational differences.

As explained throughout the paragraph, the evolution of Japanese family household composition has been strongly affected by socio-economic developments. In the next paragraph, I will analyse how the shifts in household composition reflect new dynamics within the Japanese households, impacting families' internal dynamics and relationships.

## 1.2. The housewife crisis and contemporary household dynamics

The traditional Japanese stem-family arrangement was based on a sense of shared collectivism among all the members of the household. The common goal of the family was to achieve a collective state of welfare over the individual's well-being (Kamo 1990, 399). However, despite the emphasis put on the image of stem-family as a group of individuals who acted together as a group, the responsibility for the happiness of the family rested mainly on the shoulders of the woman. As a matter of fact, the standardized concept of the "modern family" has promoted the image of women as an individual with the full responsibility to represent the ideal wife and mother of the nuclear family (Takeda 2003, 453). The notion of the traditional housewife has been deeply rooted in the concept of family and society in Japan, being a real societal role for women in Japan from the early 20th century until the latter half of the century (Sato 2003). This role was based on the expectation that women would marry and devote their lives to support their husbands and raise their children. In fact, one of the defining features of the traditional Japanese housewife was her dedication to domestic duties. She was responsible for maintaining a clean and organized household, cooking meals, and ensuring that her husband and children were well-cared for (see White 1987; Akiko and Yoda 1993; Dickensheets 1996; Goldstein-Gidoni 2018).

Furthermore, the traditional representation of motherhood and housewifery was tied up to sexual division of labour, which sees the couple of the nuclear family composed by the working salaryman and the home-stay supportive mother, reinforcing the domestication of women (Nonoyama 2000, 33). During the decades of economic progression of post-war Japan (1950s-

1970s), the presence of a supportive wife was fundamental to maintain the stability not only of the household, but of the whole nation (Dickensheets 1996, 73).

To do so, the ideal Japanese housewife was expected to prioritize the needs of her family above all else, including herself. As a result, women in 20<sup>th</sup> century Japanese society were relatively disempowered in terms of their economic and political participation. However, the socio-economic circumstances of contemporary Japan have led to more and more women joining the labour workforce. The number of employed women has progressively grown since early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2005, the total number of women in the labour force was around 26,000 while in 2019 was almost 30,000. Accordingly, the rate of women unemployment has almost halved, from 4.2 % in 2005 to 2.2% unoccupied women in 2019 (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2020).

The increase of women joining the labour market is one of the societal changes that affected the reshaping of Japanese family dynamics over the past decades (Hashimoto and Traphagan 2008). The traditional expectations of women prioritizing their families' needs over their personal exigencies are being challenged as working mothers struggle to balance the demands of their careers with the expectations of traditional motherhood. Takeda (2003) discussed about an ambivalent feeling that characterize contemporary Japanese women, who are in "[...] need to take part-time/full-time jobs in order to 'afford children'. Yet, they are simultaneously required to meet standards for childcare that demand total maternal commitment." (p.456) This contraposition is what characterized the 'housewifery crisis' (see Nishimura 2001; Murakami 2010). This crisis results in a spread reluctance to get married among young women, who does not want to deal with the challenges of maintaining both employment and family duties (Nagase 2006).

Nishimura (2001) pointed out an emerging sense of "incongruity" in Japanese housewives. Reporting real life experiences of Japanese housewife, he highlighted a sense of "impossibility" and "instability" of the position of a "full-time" housewife, and the binding power of embodied housework, showing a fluctuation of the housewife system (Nishimura 2001, 228).

In contrast with the spread of a sense of discomfort, the housewife crisis has had a positive impact for Japanese women empowerment and independence. The shifting role of Japanese women from passive to active contributor to the economy of the country has marked a change in women's mind-set and attitude towards work and career, with many younger Japanese women placing a higher value on work-life balance and personal fulfilment than on traditional notions of obligation to the family (Dickensheets 1996). For this reason, the phenomenon of

“parasite single”, i.e., adults that decide to adopt a single life style to maintain their independence and pursue their own goals, is more common in young women (Dales 2014).

A study conducted in 2019 by Shuai Wang showed that the way women understand the influence of employment on domestic life differs according to their form of employment. However, the research confirmed that the mobilization of women is positively perceived in terms of family independence (Wang 2019).

In point of fact, the emergence of this new model of housewifery reflects a general tendency towards more individualistic practices in Japanese household dynamics. As Otsuka (1984) already pointed out in her work, the Japanese family showed an inclination towards individualisation. This trend has intensified since the beginning of the 21st century, expressed in the shift away from traditional values of collective obligation and duty towards more individualistic and self-expressive tendencies. Yamashige (2017) claimed that “the Japanese people are no longer dependent on families or communities, and they have started trying to live as free independent individuals.” (p.19). Nonoyama (2000) outlined the importance of the economic recession on this shift towards “more individualized, voluntary ties” (p.9). According to the author, the labour instability caused by the economic recession has made children realized that “attaining a better living than their parents through hard work and better education was no longer guaranteed.” (p.9).

This trend of individualization affected the transformation of intimacy relationships among the members of the household. Unlike the traditional nuclear family, where the bonds were more intense and emotional (Yamada 2001), contemporary alternative Japanese families show less intense mother-children and husband-wife interactions. Hashimoto and Traphagan (2008) outlined how the lowering of the expectations for parent-child relations contributed to the tendency to individualization, which seem to be the main characteristic of “postmodern families” (p.3). This trend has led to changes that went against the maternal ideal and its emphasis on the role of the sacrificed and submissive women who prioritize their children's needs above their own. Nonoyama (2000) argues that the “internal emotional integration” achieved by Japanese housewife through the devotion to housekeeping and child-rearing practices went slowly missing (p.34). In the next paragraph, I will outline how these changing dynamics have impacted the role and perception of the Japanese housewife inside and outside the household.

### 1.3. The new housewife

In the previous section, I have pointed out the main trends that are currently characterizing contemporary Japanese families. In this paragraph, I will focus my attention on the socio-economic developments that have resulted in the reshaping of Japanese housewives' lifestyle. Today, the maternal ideal is frequently framed by the sense of loss and nostalgia (Yoda 2000, 871). One of the changes that contributed to the reconsideration of the perception of housewifery and motherhood was definitely their entrance in the workforce.

The shift in the division of labor in the Japanese family is one of the main factors that have led to changes in the gender balance of the household (Rebick and Takenaka 2006).

The increase in women's employment has impacted the long-held assumptions about the ideal Japanese family, including the traditional assumption of role of the housewife as the caretaker of the home and family.

Modern times marked the emergence of a new type of housewife, a combination of the "self-motivated middle-class housewife and the professional working woman" who "[...] addressed disruptions that were occurring in established assumptions about gender." (Sato 2003, 114).

As discussed in the previous paragraph, the popular conception of motherhood and womanhood in general were tied up with a strict gender labor division. "When the 'good wife, wise mother' was the ideal image of them, women were excluded from the opportunity to actualize themselves through work or outside activities and therefore found vicarious fulfillment through their husbands and children." (Iwao 1993, 134).

As a consequence, the great entrance of women in the workforce led to an inevitable reconsideration of the traditional implication that had centered around the role of housewifery in Japan for centuries. The new contemporary Japanese mother is often described as more independent, career-oriented, and interested in achieving a better work-life balance than previous generations. In 1993, Iwao highlighted the emergence of a different mindset spreading among post-war generation Japanese women, who started to have mixed opinions about their role as housewives. The ideal image of the "nurturing mother holding a household together" was slowly fading away, leaving space to more modern considerations. The post-war Japanese housewife seemed to move towards a more self-centered consideration of herself, starting to "seek an identity of their own" (Iwao 1993, 270) outside of the family dynamics. In order to combine personal needs and aspiration and household management, Iwao (1993) assumed that

Japanese housewives would have tended to “take things relatively easy” (p.280) in the future, putting less effort in the household chores.

At the same time, postwar mothers still had the entire responsibility of domestic management, and they were still “expected to be the creators of comfort at home, nurturing their family with love, care, and nourishing food.” (Yoda 2000, 8).

Nonetheless, the tendency of self-independence continued to grow over the years. In accordance with what Iwao said, ten years later, Sato (2003) talked about a “self-cultivation boom”, that saw more and more housewives dedicating their time in practices that led to oneself-improvement outside of the household duties. This shift of attention towards different types of activities resulted in the decrease of the time that housewives spend within the domestic sphere.

According to the surveys published by Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2021) about time use and leisure activities of household components, women's weekly average time spent on various practices from 1976 to 2021 reveals some interesting trends. The duration dedicated to housework activities has consistently decreased over the years, starting from 3 hours and 18 minutes in 1976 to 2 hours and 26 minutes in 2021. Additionally, the time allocated to housework, caring, or nursing has also diminished, decreasing from 3.52 hours in 1976 to 3.24% in 2021. Following an opposite trend, the time spent on personal care has consistently grown, escalating from 1.07 hours in 1976 to 1.32 hours in 2021. Likewise, the duration devoted to rest and relaxation has experienced a similar upward trend, progressing from 0.58 hour to 1.56 hours in 2021. The same pattern is observed for hobbies and amusement activities (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2021).

This data reflects the spread of the self-cultivation trend that Sato (2003) outlined in his work. The increasing attention of women towards personal growth activities resulted in the rise of Japanese housewife with higher education and established career before having children, who are more willing to continue to work outside the home after becoming a mother. The survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2022 about the advancement rate to higher education reveals a significant rise in the number of Japanese women seeking higher education. Over a span of 20 years, the proportion of women enrolled in universities experienced a remarkable surge, effectively doubling in numbers. In 1990, the rate stood at 15.2%, whereas in 2022, it soared to 53.4% (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2022).

Another important aspect to point out concerning the contemporary Japanese housewife is the perception of women's household duties.

The Japanese awareness survey conducted by NHK Broadcast Culture Research Institute (2018) about the perspectives of Japanese individuals regarding women's participation in the workforce unveils intriguing shifts in the interpretation of woman domesticity. In 1973, 30% of women and 41% of men believed that women should primarily focus on being homemakers. However, by 2008, this percentage had dramatically decreased to 10% for both women and men. A similar trend emerged regarding the belief that women should balance work and family. In 1973, only 20% of women and 24% of men saw this as a viable solution, whereas in 2008, the figures rose significantly to 48% of women and 51% of men. This shifting perception is shown in another survey conducted by the Cabinet Office (2017) about the thoughts of women occupation. According to the report, in 1979 almost 70% of both men and women agreed in affirming that the men was supposed to work while the woman should stay at home, rate that lowered down to 51% at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and eventually reached the 40% in 2016. Although the traditional belief that men should work while women should take care of the house is still quite common among Japanese people, the results of the surveys reported are the evidence of the emergence of a new understanding of the role and duties of women inside the Japanese household.

The reconsidering of the nature of housewife together with the empowerment and improvement of Japanese women is reflected in the changing relationships between women and the members of the Japanese family. The new contemporary Japanese mother may share these responsibilities more equally with her partner or hire outside help. As shown in other surveys, in contrast with the feminine counterpart, men have shown an increase in their involvement in household chores, with a rise from 12 minutes in 1976 to nearly an hour in 2021 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication 2022). This implies that men are now more willing to assist with domestic tasks compared to the past. These shifting dynamics about gender responsibilities within the household has brought to a "renew attention" to the concept of fatherhood and the role of father in Japanese family. If in the past, the task of child-rearing was attributed fully to women, with the children being the *ikigai* (reason to live) of mothers, today this traditional implication is less conventional.

In this new picture, the responsibilities of child-caring are more equally shared among both parents, although in the popular opinion, child-caring is still considered mainly a woman's tasks. In fact, on the topic of child-care responsibilities, the changes were comparatively less pronounced compared to the other aspects. The percentage of both men and women considering



child-rearing as solely a mother's duty decreased from 42% in 1973 to 37% in 2008 (NHK 2008).

The survey findings provide evidence of the emergence of novel household dynamics characterized by altered perceptions of femininity, housewifery, and parental responsibilities. Iwao (1993) asserts that the profound societal transformations centered on women's inner changes can be interpreted as a revolutionary shift (p.282). In the subsequent chapter, I will explore the role of ready-made meals in contributing to this revolution in the realm of housewifery.

## CHAPTER 2. READY-MADE MEALS AND THE JAPANESE HOUSEHOLD

### 2.1. The industry and its consumers

Ready-to-eat food or meals in Japan are defined as “food or a meal that are cooked or processed outside the home and can be eaten immediately (without cooking or heating) at home, workplaces, schools, or other outdoor location.” (Japan Ready-made Meal Association 2022, 3). The main feature of this typology of food is that, thanks to the use of specific technologies, its period of conservation is longer than any other meals, and they do not require any additional preparation in order to be consumed. Official reports categorized ready-made meals in the in the sub-sector of home-meal replacement (HMR) sub-sector, together with take-out foods, distinguishing them from eating out or cooking at home practices.

Appeared in the country in the 1950s, pre-cooked meals became the revolutionary convenience food of the future Japanese consumer-oriented society, emerging after the years of food shortages of the Second World War (Seligman 1994). Introduced as instant ramen at the end of the 1950s, the popularity of ready-made food reached its peak in the 1980s, when the practice of eating pre-made food became common among the majority of Japanese households (Seligman, 1994). The introduction of instant food is considered as the most influential innovation of 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan, with their fundamental role in revolutionizing Japanese eating habits (Motoko 1989, 207). With the appearance of pre-cooked food, for the first time Japanese people experienced foreign tastes and flavors without rejecting them (Seligman 1994, 174). In fact, several scholars have studied Instant meals as a mean through which Japanese people internalized and absorbed foreign foods and different primary flavors. The contact with meals coming from abroad had a huge impact on Japanese eating habits, leading to changes that led to the ‘westernization’ of the Japanese diet<sup>1</sup>.

Today, the ready-made market is highly diversified, offering a wide variety of products for all taste, from simple snacks to complete meals. The most popular options are bento lunch boxes, rolled sushi and fried chicken, followed by vegetables and salads (Japan Ready-made Meal Association 2022, 8). Over the last decades, the ready-to-eat sector has grown considerably, and to date the market of pre-cooked food covers a very large share of the food service industry

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<sup>1</sup> For further information about the westernization of the Japanese diet see Cwiertka (2006).

in Japan. According to the data showed in The Japanese White Paper<sup>2</sup>, annual survey that has tracked the development of the ready-made market since 1980, over the past ten years the side dishes industry has experienced continued evolution and growth, driving primarily the growth of the entire Japanese foodservice market (Japan Ready-Made Meal Association 2022, 6). Other reports have shown the steady increase in the size of the prepared meal market. According to industry estimates, the sub-sector of ready-made dishes saw a marked rise of the + 5.9 % year-on-year, with a total revenue of 1,161.4 billion yen in 2017 (Hot Pepper Gourmet Restaurant Research Institute 2018).

Among the segments of the food service industry, the side dishes market is the one that experience the greatest growth in the shortest time span (Yamada Consulting Group 2020).

In 2020, the total value of all food service industry sales in Japan decreased by 26 percent to o JP¥25,517 billion (US\$239.1 billion) from JP¥34,294.4 billion (US\$321.3 billion) in the previous year, according to Fuji Keizai Marketing Research. The Japanese HRI industry, broadly defined, has ten major segments. The Takeout/HMR segment includes ready to eat meal/home meal replacement (HMR) type products sold at Obento (lunch box) shops, convenience stores, supermarkets, and department stores. Sales in this market segment have accounted for 28 percent of the HRI market. Restaurants was the second largest with nearly 18 percent of the market (Otsuka 2021, 3).

While the industry of ready-to-eat meals have grown steadily, the restaurant sector has followed an opposite trend. The survey published by the Japanese Food Service Association (2021) marked a decrease of 24.7% from the previous year to 10.978 trillion yen in the size of the Restaurants sector<sup>3</sup>. Full-service restaurants are facing several challenges, worsened with the Covid-19 pandemic, and resulted in the decrease of the number of total establishments and their sales, while the number of commercial establishments that handle side dishes is increasing, covering different business types, like grocery supermarket, department store and convenience stores (Japan Ready-made Meal 2022).

The popularity of ready-made meals upon other type of food intakes is due to the capacity of the ready-made market to adapt to the changes and diverse consumer needs.

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<sup>2</sup> Issued by the Japan Ready-made Meal Association, The White Paper on Prepared Dishes is a survey on prepared dishes that collects the basic data of the side dish industry, tracking the process by which prepared foods have grown as social infrastructure that is essential to the diet of consumers every year.

<sup>3</sup> The breakdown is as follows: dining halls/restaurants (down 28.5% year-on-year), including family restaurants, general cafeterias, specialty restaurants, etc.; “sushi restaurants” (down 18.3% year-on-year), including conveyor belt sushi restaurants, and “other restaurants” (down 1.4% year-on-year), including fast food hamburger restaurants and okonomiyaki restaurants.” (JFSA, 2021, p.1).

Surveys and reports conducted by different corporations and institutions pointed out the relation between the factors that have contributed to the steady growth of the ready-made market and the socio-cultural changes that have occurred in Japan since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Yamada Consulting Group 2020; Hot Pepper Institute 2018; GAIN 2016).

1. Urbanization: Rapid urbanization in Japan has resulted in smaller living spaces, and many city dwellers have limited access to full-fledged kitchens. Ready-to-eat meals offer a practical solution for urban consumers who may not have the means or space to cook elaborate meals at home. Furthermore, technology development and the use of electronic kitchen appliances are part of the urban life and definitely affected the changing of food consumption patterns in favor of precooked meals (Kaneda 1967, 417).
2. Aging Population and changes in household composition: Japan has one of the fastest aging populations in the world. Furthermore, it has experienced significant changes in its family composition, which have experienced a decrease in size, and consequent increasing ratio of single-households. Ready-to-eat meals cater to this demographic changes by providing easily accessible, pre-packaged meals that require little effort to prepare.
3. Increase of number of women in the labor market: with more and more women occupied in full time job, precooked meals are an optimal alternative to provide food for the family without needing too much time.

These changes have shaped Japanese consumers' preferences, that are now driven by two main factors: convenience and quickness. Side dishes perfectly meet the demand of contemporary Japanese consumers for quick and cheap food, providing convenience to busy Japanese consumers who have limited time for meal preparation due to their fast-paced lifestyles. Thanks to its adaptability to Japanese consumers' needs, ready-made meals are consumed by a broad spectrum of the population in Japan, across different demographic groups. However, among all categories, according to the statistics published by the Statistic Bureau of Japan, ready-made meals seem to be consumed more in households with younger adults both occupied in full-time jobs. In 2003, the average money spent on precooked food of households with working couples was around 73 thousand yen per year (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2003). The results of the survey published in 2022 by the same institution, showed a significant implement in the expenditures on pre-made meals made by Japanese households. On average, all households

spend 126 thousand yen per year on cooked food (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2022). Once again, households with both working couple seemed to consume more than the one with only one-working parent, reaching a peak of yearly expenses of almost 134 thousand yen. Furthermore, going more into the specific, according to the White Paper survey, which provided a breakdown by gender of the monthly purchase of side dishes in 2022, women spend more on side dishes than men. These data demonstrate that families with working mothers show the tendency to consume more processed food than others (Japan Ready-made Meal Association 2022). According to an internet questionnaire conducted by Bulk Co., Ltd. about the frequency of use of side dishes and frozen foods at home by women in their 30s and 40s reported by Sonobe (2016), households with working mothers recur to side dishes at least once a week. In the following section, I will outline how the use of ready-made meals have impacted traditional Japanese households' eating practices.

## 2.2. Ready-made meals and homemade food decline

The growing demand for convenient and quick meal options among Japanese consumers was made at the expenses of homemade food practices. The spread of side dishes in the Japanese household contributed to the emergence of a new trend highlighted by Hasegawa and Sakai (2021) which consisted in the “externalization of food preparation”, explained as “[...] dependence on food preparation and consumption outside the home and includes both ready-made meals as well as the catering trade.” (Hasegawa and Sakai 2021, 2). Accordingly, the reports of the Statistics Bureau of Japan showed a remarkable increase in the use of cooked food, category which experienced a steady growth over the decades, while the other typology of food, such as fresh products like meat, dairy products and vegetables, have remained either quite stable or experienced a negative downturn (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2021). In fact, the Japan Ready-made Meal Association reported an increase in the consumption of ready-made meals per person by more than 10% from about 72,800 yen to 81,796 yen from 2014 to 2019” (Japan Ready-made Meal Association 2019).

Moreover, over a period of ten years (2011-2020), the ready-made meal market experienced a growth by 117.5%, surpassing the home meal market by 2% (Japan Ready-made Meal Association 2022, 6). This data demonstrates that the expansion of side dishes is happening at the expenses of homemade meals eating practices, leading to what Ishige (2019) defines as a crisis of homemade food culture.

Eating practices in the Japanese household followed fundamental rules that went beyond the simple act of nurturing the body. A central aspect of Japanese home eating practices was the practice of eating together. In the Japanese context, eating together, practice called *kyōshoku* 共食, was the most important dietary habits in the way it built the relationship of the family and its components (Nakagawa et al. 2010). Through communal dining, Japanese households emphasize the values of respect, gratitude, and harmony. It allows family members to express their appreciation for the efforts put into meal preparation, reinforcing a sense of care and togetherness. The practice of shared commensality stood upon the serving of homemade meals. The housewife was the one in charge of preparing food, and, therefore, had the full responsibility of the success of the *kyōshoku*. As a consequence, “[...] the burden to establish a harmonious family” was heavier on women than the other members of the household (Nakagawa et al. 2010, 55-56).

The surge in female participation in the workforce is regarded as a significant incentive for the decline of homemade food culture, in opposition to the increasing trends of solitary dining and the consumption of ready-made meals (Ishige 2019). In fact, the adoption of pre-packaged food has posed challenges to the essential principles of *kyōshoku* in various respects. Firstly, it introduced an individualistic approach to dining. Ready-made meals were primarily seen as a convenient option for single individuals who needed a quick meal to be consumed in public settings like schools or workplaces. Otsuka (1984) observed that the use of ready-made meals, with their portioned servings, reflected a growing trend of individualization in Japanese eating practices. This shift towards "個食" (*koshoku*, i.e. individualized and solitary eating) was becoming increasingly prevalent in Japanese society. Notably, the consumption of prepacked meals was primarily targeted towards single individuals, and various studies have highlighted the connection between ready-made meals and the rise of solo eating practices (Otsuka 1982; Ishige 2019; Bocanegra et al. 2022). The practice of individual eating challenges the traditional value of home food culture in Japan, as it reduces the opportunities for social interaction, communication, and the strengthening of familial bonds. Recognizing the potential drawbacks of individual eating, there has been a growing awareness in Japan about the importance of communal dining and efforts to encourage shared meals, of which the promotion of the Shokuiku law<sup>4</sup> is the example. As a matter of fact, among the goals set forth by the Shokuiku

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<sup>4</sup> Enacted in 2005, the Basic Act on Shokuiku (Food and Nutrition Education) aimed at improving the general knowledge of Japanese people about food and healthy food choices, in order to “enable all citizens to ensure their physical and mental health and a vigorous life” (*Basic Act on Shokuiku (Food and Nutrition Education)* 2005).

law, the importance of families eating meals together<sup>5</sup> stands out (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 2015, 4). However, the findings from a national survey presented in The White Paper on Shokuiku (2015), revealed that a significant portion of respondents derive pleasure from the custom of communal dining, provided they have sufficient time to enjoy the meal and can participate without incurring substantial costs (p.9). Consequently, this situation opens the door to pre-prepared alternatives, emerging as an ideal resolution to fulfil these prerequisites.

Another controversy surrounding the use of side dishes concerned its lack of freshness and naturality, which distinguish them from homemade food. Homemade food, a key element of *kyōshoku*, is highly regarded for its connection to nurturing, familial warmth, and the expression of love through cooking. It symbolizes the dedication and effort put into preparing meals for family members or community members. In contrast, ready-made food is mass-produced and lacks the personal touch associated with homemade cooking.

Considering this aspect, it is possible to claim that ready-made food posed and its challenges to the fundamental aspect of *kyōshoku* represents a departure from the traditional values and practices that have long been associated with Japanese household's eating experiences.

However, the developments of the ready-made market made sure that side dishes became a valuable alternative to homemade meals, spreading in the Japanese households. In the next section, I will demonstrate the gradual replacement of homemade meals by side dishes, which have gained acceptance within households due to the evolving societal perception of ready-made options.

### 2.3. Ready-made food as hybrid

Despite its challenges to the traditional concepts of commensality and its contrasting features, today side dishes cover a big portion of the living expenses of the Japanese household, representing a common dietary habit of the majority of Japanese families (see paragraph 1).

The introduction of side dishes on the Japanese people dining table was helped by the improvements of the products. Over the last decade, the ready-to-eat industry made significant improvements in product quality.

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<sup>5</sup> In the Japanese literature, the notion of family meals refers to when household's members eat breakfast or dinner together (Takimoto et al. 2015, 10).

One of the critics moved against side dishes centered around their negative impact on the health and well-being of its consumers. While the widespread availability of pre-made food provides greater convenience and variety, they also led to the emergence of concerns about the impact of this typology of food on the well-being of its consumers. Several researches focused on the health outcomes that could derive from a major consumption of convenience foods, contributing to a decline in the overall health and well-being of the Japanese population (Shinozaki et al. 2023; Tamada et al. 2022; Matsumoto et al. 2021; Yagi et al. 2020). One of the main criticisms was that ready-made foods were often high in fat, salt, and sugar, which could lead to a range of health problems, including obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. For this reason, over the past decade there has been a renewed interest in creating healthier and more authentic ready-made meals. In the market, new products based on wellness are being promoted, focused on calories check and nutrients balance (Otsuka 2021).

The ready-made market has improved the freshness, quality, and variety of the take-away foods they offer, providing a more attractive menu selection to consumers for a higher price than the convenience stores (Otsuka 2021, 23). Shops that propose ready-made meals are now broadening their choices inserting series of products with low-salt and raw material based. An example is the launch in 2020 of the line of products Co-op Smile Dish, a “a series that was developed without using the 7 specified raw materials” target for families with children. Focused on the introduction of “children's menu and seasonings for side dishes, and are strengthening our lineup of products such as bone-removed fish and low-salt products.” (Japan Ready-made Meal Association 2021, 16).

Another criticism was that the consumption of ready-made foods was leading to a loss of traditional food culture in Japan. Some critics argued that the convenience of these foods was causing people to rely less on traditional cooking methods and ingredients, leading to a loss of culinary heritage (Lyon, Colquhoun, and Alexander 2003; Albala and Henderson 2010; Scholliers 2015). As a response to these assessments, ready-made meal manufactures have actively worked to introduce traditional Japanese recipes into their product offerings with the aim of capturing the essence of classic Japanese dishes. Famous distributors of side dishes have started to dispatch precooked food online as authentic Japanese household recipes, like Plaza Japan.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Website available on the link: <https://www.plazajapan.com/ready-to-eat/>



Another important marketing strategy conducted by the industry was to correlate side dishes with the ideal image of handmade food. FamilyMart Co., Ltd., the Japanese-owned second largest convenience store retail chain in the world, opened in 2017 a “mother’s cafeteria” based solely on the selling of ready-made meals<sup>7</sup>. The goal of the company was to propose a product that reminded the “warmth of a mother” in its naturalness and deliciousness.

Thanks to the development of the industry and the promotion of healthier and more traditional side dishes which simulate more closely homemade meals, the reputation of precooked food among Japanese consumer drastically improved. The results of the survey of the White Paper (2022) about the overall evaluation of side dishes show a recognized appreciation for the industry developments among Japanese consumers. According to the data, 62.8% of people “strongly agree” and “somewhat agree” to the claim that “the freshness has improved and the variety has increased”, recording an increase in the proportion of women who agreed, being higher in all categories (p.10).

Product upgrades have coincided with wider use in Japanese households as a meal replacement. In the Japanese household context, the spread use of ready-made dishes as dinner replacements went hand in hand with the emergence of concerns about the proper use and serving of side dishes on the dinner table.

To assist homemakers in addressing this concern, multiple websites provide pre-prepared meal recipes and offer guidance on presenting accompanying side dishes as a viable alternative to a home-cooked dinner. The popular time-saving recipes are composed by side dishes to which the housewife adds a little extra, usually fresh cut vegetables or salads<sup>8</sup>. In this way, the dinner is arranged in a short time without the exclusion of little bit of effort and freshness. The result is a hybrid between a homemade recipe and a simple processed meal. It represents a smart solution for women who cannot spend too much time in the kitchen but feel the responsibility of serving food which resemble the traditional homestyle meals to the family as much as possible. The internet survey conducted by Bulk Co., Ltd. on “Lifestyles of Women in Their 30s and 40s” about cooking showed that commercial precooked dishes, especially rice or noodle base meals or stewed dishes, are considered close to homemade dishes (Sonobe 2016). Today, thanks to the development of the industry, the line between handmade and ready-made is slowly fading away. It seems that ready-made meals have reached a balance between homemade and processed, being proposed and used as a hybrid.

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<sup>7</sup> Information available on the official website <https://www-family-co-jp>.

<sup>8</sup> Information available on the website: <https://gourmet--note-jp.translate.google/posts/14811? x tr sl=ja& x tr tl=it& x tr hl=it& x tr pto=sc>

In the following chapter I will analyze the controversial relationship between ready-made meals and Japanese housewives.

## CHAPTER 3: READY-MADE AND HOUSEWIFERY

### 3.1. Ready-made and traditional notion of motherhood

As mentioned in the previous section, one of the factors that contributed to the quick spread of side dishes in the household context is the rise of working women in the Japanese household. As the main quality of side dishes is the simplicity and quickness of their preparation, contemporary Japanese housewives with their busy lifestyle became one of the main targets of the market. Despite the popularity of prepacked food among Japanese women, the relationship between side dishes and Japanese women, especially housewives, has always been controversial. That is mainly because the use of precooked food in the family context challenged the traditional image of motherhood and housewifery in Japan.

As discussed in the theoretical framework, the provision of homemade food was intertwined with the ideal of good motherhood and housewifery. In modern times, the ideal Japanese women was portrayed as the "good wife and wise mother", who balanced the roles of caregiver, homemaker, and supporter of her husband and children. The traditional housewife was expected to be obedient, humble, and selfless, putting the needs and desires of her husband and family before her own, and prioritizing the well-being of their children and family above their own desires and aspirations. By doing so, she played a crucial role in maintaining the family's social status and reputation, conforming to societal expectations and cultural norms. Through the performance of household activities, Japanese housewives showed their dedication and sacrifice, which were highly valued and recognized as a symbol of Japanese womanhood. One of the main domestic practices carried out by housewife was the making of food, nurturing the family and providing harmony and balance in the household.

This considered, it is clear how hand-made food was embodied in deeper ideological and cultural discourses that shaped the image of housewife and its role in the Japanese society. Precooked food represented a real challenge for homemade meals practices for the following key aspects:

#### 1. TIME and EFFORT

The innovative procedure of side dishes consumption and the consequent cut of all the traditional steps that were centred around the preparation of homemade food went against the

ideal domestic labour related to food making by Japanese housewives. In Japan, traditional concepts of motherhood emphasized the importance of selflessness, devotion, and sacrifice. Mothers were expected to prioritize the well-being of their children and family above their own desires and aspirations. One way for a mother to give support to the family was through the preparation of homemade food. The ideal mother was the one that spent hours in the kitchen. Employing cooking methods that prioritize convenience and speed, such as microwaving or reheating, ready-made meals marked the emergence of new culinary practices that drastically reduce the effort and time that Japanese mothers spend on the preparation and serving of meals, representing a shortcut. With the introduction of side dishes, the traditional food practices that required hours of preparation went missing, leaving space to easier and quicker culinary practices. Now, the Japanese housewife had the possibility to offer a tasty and complete meals to her family without sacrificing herself as she did until then. In other words, the use of side dishes called out the full duty of the housewife to provide homemade meals to the family as a symbol of sacrifice and care.

## 2. FLAVOR, VARIETY and RESULT:

The main feature of ready-made food is that they are pre-packaged and prepared in a mass-production setting, where efficiency and mass production are the priority. This standardization can lead to a limited range of flavors and a lack of culinary diversity, which may fail to cater to individual tastes and preferences.

However, an accomplished housewife was the one that gave her family “flavor and variety” (Negayama 2000, 91). In accordance, the success in the kitchen environment was ensured by the making of hand-made meals, where seasonal, fresh and high-quality ingredients were used to achieve flavor, nutrition, and taste of the meals.

Therefore, the palatable options proposed in side dishes and the fact that they may not always match the depth of flavors and nuances found in homemade meals challenged the reputation of a housewife who, being the “main performers” of housework, was supposed to excel in all household chores (Nishimura 2001, 228).

## 3. EMOTIONAL SIGNIFICANCE:

The absence of personal touch, limited involvement, missing cultural and traditional significance and limited personalization often attributed to side dishes withstood the emotional and cultural significance embodied in hand made meals. The vision of hand-made food as

expression of care and love was represented in the ideology of kokoro-o kometa tezukuri ryori (the “handmade” magnetized by mother’s love) (Negayama 2000). Through the provision of homegrown food, Japanese mothers established and reinforced emotional connections with her child, in a process of “imprinting” (Negayama 2000, 91).

The consumption of precooked food in place of homemade recipes broke this process, threatening the emotional and affectional dimension of food practices.

Differing from homemade traditional culinary practices, the use of side dishes threatened the ideological and cultural implications around housewifery and woman domesticity, which were at the basis of traditional family dynamics and gender roles expectations. The innovative practices introduced with side dishes consumption and the consequent cut of all the traditional steps that were centred around the preparation of homemade food went against the ideal domestic labour related to food making by Japanese housewives. Breaking down the conventional discourses around womanhood and domesticity, the substitution of homemade meals with side dishes led to the rise of several critics that concerned housewife expectations. However, as previously discussed, the development of the ready-made market and improvement of its products led to a positive turn of precooked perception, soften the critics behind the use of such meals by Japanese mothers.

In the next paragraph, I will analyze the attitude of Japanese women towards side dishes consumption in the household.

### 3.2. Japanese women attitude towards side dishes

With its challenges to traditional notion of motherhood and the threat to housewives’ domestic expectations, Japanese women who used side dishes were exposed to several critics. Especially during the decade of the economic boom, when the conventional modern family and its gender role implications were still a strong feature of Japanese households, the use of ready-made meals by Japanese women was followed by severe judgements.

On the one hand, with the deep-rooted idea that homemade cooking was a sign of the love of a mother for her family still in auge in pre-war Japan, it was hard for Japanese housewives to rely on side dishes without stumbling across severe critics concerning lack of affection and benevolence (Toyo 2021, 46). On the same premise, commercial baby food was rejected

because it prevented the mother from establishing an intimate relationship with her child through food personally made (Negayama 2000, 91).

On the other hand, acquiring her value by her mothering, the Japanese *oku-san* could run into a real loss of public morality if she failed to carry out a domestic procedure (White 1987). Therefore, the avoidance of homemade plates and the use of precooked dishes in their place was considered a sign of low moral status and laziness (Hasegawa and Sakai 2021). In the article “The women of today are lazy” reported by Jolivet (2003), the relation between laziness and mothers who gave ready-made food to their children is explicit (p.91).

Moreover, the relation between the use of pre-made food and Japanese housewives’ indolence was reinforced by popular saying that circulated in the Japanese society like “*Okaasan yasume, Haha kitoku*” (Mother take a rest, Mother is on her deathbed) (Seligman 1994, 174).

Influenced by the public criticism, the attitude of Japanese women towards the use of ready-made meals has always been controversial. In spite of this, ready meals did not immediately emerge as a viable solution for Japanese housewives, but rather the opposite. Worsened by the higher pressing expectations about motherhood and housewifery, throughout all the period of economic growth in the 1960s, the use of ready-to-eat meals by housewives was mostly “accompanied by a sense of guilt” (Hasegawa and Sakai 2021, 2). These concerns led to a tendency to avoid the consumption of ready-made meals in the first decades after its introduction (Otsuka 1982).

However, as highlighted in the previous sections, among the socio-cultural factors that have influenced the increase in the use of prepacked food, the increase of working women is the most significant. In fact, despite the critics behind the use of precooked dishes were strong, as the increase of working housewives, the use of ready-made meals came about almost as an inevitable necessity to reconcile work and home commitments.

In her article about domestic affairs, Ruriko Shirota, a 45 years old housewife from Tokyo claims that:

“When I had to work overtime and come home late, I had no choice but to arrange ready-made side dishes on the plate. This dinner scene is commonplace for working housewives.” (‘母とは正反対の「完璧な主婦」に執着しすぎて落ちた穴’ 2020).

Ruriko's testimony is similar to that of other Japanese working women who see side dishes as a necessity, representing the most convenient meal options that require minimal cooking and preparation.

Other than in relation to socio-economic factors, in recent years, the use of ready-made meals has also been linked to other cultural tendencies that are spreading among Japanese young women, such as a lack of interests in preparing food and the lowering of their cooking skills (Merve Yanar and Barry 2020). The results of the Dietary Habits Comprehensive Survey monitored by Kewpie in 2013 revealed new interesting trends about Japanese women attitude towards food making. Targeted to married women aged between 20 to 59 years old, the aim of the research was to analyze the behavior and awareness regarding cooking among Japanese housewives. The answers of the candidates showed new current compared to previous years, revealing two main tendencies. Firstly, Japanese women tend to spend less time cooking, shortening their cooking times. Secondly, there was a decline in their cooking skills. These trends seem to have developed simultaneously with a changing perception of cooking duties. According to several public surveys, more and more women are expressing a feeling of uneasiness in regards of the responsibility of preparing food for the family. The press release PR TIMES reported the results of a nationwide survey conducted in 2019 by Taihei Family Set, underlining a significant trend among Japanese women. According to the report, more than 80% of the working women interviewed in the questionnaire answered that they “feel burdened when preparing food” (Taihei Family Set 2019). This sense of discomfort about food making exacerbated in another tendency. The same press published the results of another interesting surveys about Japanese housewives’ attitude towards the “emotional fulfillment” derived from meal preparation (Taihei Family Set 2019). Apparently, the sense of guilt originated from the lack of homemade recipes on the family dinner table has been steady reducing over the years. Similarly, the shaming feeling of using precooked food have also decreased drastically.

Despite this changing attitude, the use of ready-made meals is still generating contradictory viewpoints among Japanese mothers. The survey conducted by Taihei Family Set in 2019, a home delivery health-food company, showed the thoughts on ready-made food and eating out of 112 women between their 30s and 50s. According to their responses, there are varied perspectives on the use of ready-made food. Some women expressed a sense of guilt but find it convenient and time-saving. Others emphasize the importance of home-cooked meals for family members, focusing on nutritional balance and the effort put into preparing meals. For working housewives, both options are seen as helpful in managing their busy schedules, and

they are seen as occasional treats rather than regular choices. Cost is also a factor to consider, as eating out can be expensive. Overall, the consensus is that while occasional use of eating out and ready-made food is acceptable, it is important to prioritize home-cooked meals for a sense of control, nutrition, and family bonding.

### 3.3. Shifting dynamics

In this section, I will examine the impact of women's evolving attitudes towards the utilization of pre-made meals on the development of novel family dynamics within the Japanese household, despite the contentious nature of this phenomenon. In the previous chapters I have outlined the relation between side dishes and housewifery, pointing out how the use of precooked food has challenged the traditional notion of motherhood and the controversy that it brought up among Japanese housewives. Despite the ambivalent feeling derived from the use of precooked food, the consumption of side dishes appears to be more normalized among Japanese women. More and more Japanese housewives seem to have come to terms with the discontent that the use of pre-cooked food can cause, accepting even the possible criticism. Confirming this, there are both statistics about the increasing use of pre-cooked food (see chapter 3) and personal blogs where Japanese women express their thoughts. The website 「巣ごもるブログ- sugomoru burogu」, literally translated as “nest blog”, emerged as a platform where Japanese women discuss about domestic affairs. On the page, it is possible to find the testimonies of housewives about family lifestyle. For example, the 40 years old full-time housewife Iko expressed her lack of will to cook homemade food for herself and her husband, defining herself as a “lazy full-time housewife”. However, she does not use the term 'lazy' in a derogatory but only descriptive way, and she suggests the use of precooked food as a possible solution to her issue (Iko 2023). Another significant aspect highlighted by Iko is that her husband cooks for her at least 3 days per week. This reflects a broader trend that it is spreading among Japanese households, which consists in a major involvement of fathers in the household chores. The results of the internet survey conducted by Bulk Co., Ltd. in 2017 on the frequency of meal preparation by husbands showed that “among all married women in their 30s and 40s, 61.4% of husbands cook, and 31.5% of them cook at least once a week” (Bulk Co., Ltd. 2017). This shift of cooking responsibilities inside the household appears to be supported by the use of side dishes. The website Pigeon. Info provides interesting insights about the use of side dishes in Japanese households and its link to shifting gender dynamics (‘育児ママ相談室’ n.d.). Discussing about husband’s lunch, Japanese women expressed their negative opinion



about the duties of preparing food for their partner, rejecting the society's expectations and addressing the issue including their husbands. Following, I will report some relevant comments made by different users.

Mama Nemo says:

"I'm a full-time housewife, but I'm a lot of frozen food. It's always going to be the same lunch box. Is your husband not good at eating out? Frozen food and retort pouches are also on the market in the restaurant industry. If you have any complaints, I think you should make it yourself, and (I say so to my husband) I think I'll make it a hinomaru bento"

Another user says:

"If my husband said that, he would be angry!!!! Is frozen food that bad? I'm using it normally!!!! Although I say that I'm lazy, the quality of frozen food now is better than it was in the past."

Mikochin-san:

"Working part-time and raising a child, making lunch boxes is hard work, isn't it?  
Frozen food is also of good quality.  
How about having your husband make it for you?  
I hope you know how hard it is.  
On the contrary, I want to thank you for making it."

Mr. Yutto:

"It sounds like you were raised with a lot of care by your mother-in-law. Working part-time, raising children, and making lunches for my husband is truly mind-boggling. I'm a no-good housewife, so when I can't get up in the morning, my husband makes his own bento and feeds the kids breakfast"

Tsuu-san:

"If it were me, I wouldn't make it if I was told that. We say that if we complain, nothing will be done. I'm a full-time housewife, but I only put frozen food and leftovers from dinner in my bento. I make tamagoyaki every other day. If you're going to complain, why don't you let your husband make it once?"

The reviews provide insights into the perspectives of Japanese housewives regarding the use of ready-made meals in their households. It is evident that utilizing such meals is viewed as a

commonplace practice necessitated by the hectic lifestyles of contemporary Japanese housewives. The reviewers express frustration when facing criticism for relying on ready-made meals, even suggesting that their husbands should attempt to prepare meals themselves. This discourse highlights a distinct shift in women's attitudes toward household responsibilities compared to previous generations. Holloway (2010) reported a survey conducted in 2005 by the National Women's Education Center. The survey findings indicate that mothers in the study tended to accept the gendered division of labor within their families, revealing that women placed minimal importance on their husbands' involvement in household chore (p.113). According to the author, this acceptance could reflect signs of resignation, depression, or even fear (p.115). Conversely, the observations above mentioned shed light on new possible dynamics at play within marital relationships and highlight the potential shift of both emotions experienced by women and division of relationship in such arrangements.

Another important evidence that advises the understanding of side dishes as potential tool in reshaping the role of Japanese mother within the family is the promotion of precooked meals as special commodity targeted to mothers. Today, it is possible to find in the market resellers of ready-made meals that provide side dishes options specifically for mothers. It is the case of the online shop 「ママの休食 – mama no kyushoku」<sup>9</sup>, literally translated as “the rest of the mother”, which offers a wide variety of precooked meals with the aim of supporting the mother with quick but also healthy and fresh meals for the whole family, and ensuring she has some extra time to rest. In addition, the catalogue of the shop also presents a line of precooked products designed as gift for Mother's Day. The objective is to free the mother from the heavy load of preparing dinner when she is tired, giving her a delicious and balanced “rest food” 「休食」 that she can enjoy with the rest of the family.

Promoted as a gift, side dishes have transitioned from being perceived as emblematic of idleness and minimal effort to serving as a mean through which Japanese housewives can momentarily disengage from the demands of culinary obligations, affording them valuable personal time and the opportunity for rest.

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<sup>9</sup> Official website: <https://shop.mamakyu.com>

## CONCLUSION

Over the past few decades, Japanese households' dynamics have undergone important changes according to the socio-cultural circumstances of contemporary Japan. In the family context, new realities concerning womanhood and housewifery, such as the housewife crisis and the increase of full-time employed women, have impacted different aspects of the Japanese households' domestic routines. The changes in women lifestyle and work styles have threatened the boundaries of families' everyday practices, including its eating habits (Sato, 2003). The fast-paced modern lifestyle of Japanese housewives has had a significant impact on the approach to food and meal preparation within the household. Presently, Japanese women seek quick and convenient meal solutions that minimize the need for extensive preparation time. As a matter of fact, women advancement and their more active collaboration in the workforce have been related to the widespread consumption of side dishes as home meals replacement, a relevant eating habits that has significantly increased in Japanese households over the years (Yamada Consulting Group 2020).

Sociological researches have demonstrated that food practices are a pivotal aspect in household dynamics, establishing parental and gender roles expectations (Murcott 1982; Charles and Kerr 1988; DeVault 1991; Gregory 1999). In modern Japan, homemade food practices were embedded with traditional concept of womanhood, which depicted the Japanese housewife as the *ryōsai kembo* “good wife, wise mother” (White 1987).

Based on these premises, my thesis aimed at highlighting the role played by ready-made meals in reshaping women domesticity, both supporting and entitling new approaches to housewifery. The developments of the ready-made industry and the improvement of its products successfully created a commodity that perfectly meet the needs of contemporary Japanese families. Thanks to its positive evolution, since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, side dishes have started to be accepted by the consumers as a valid substitution to homemade meals. This factor, combined with the socio-economic changes that have influenced the role of women in Japanese society, has resulted in precooked meals becoming an important part of Japanese eating habits.

The treatment of processed ingredients in place of hand-made food enabled the detachment from traditional and conservative conceptions of food practices and the expectations around housewife's duties that were embedded in them.

The use of side dishes and the consequent departure from conventional cooking and serving rituals helped Japanese women distancing themselves from the obligations and commitments attributed to the traditional housewife. Accordingly, the consumption of side dishes has

influenced the shifting attitudes of Japanese women toward culinary responsibilities, both within the realm of cooking and more broadly within the context of domestic duties.

The contemporary Japanese housewife is increasingly beginning to distance herself from the depiction of the “good wife, wise mother”, who was constricted in the domestic realm of the house, where precise gender roles and balances were confirmed. In contemporary times, the Japanese homemaker exhibits a tendency to allocate increased personal time for self-care, pursuing professional pursuits, and cultivating personal interests. Furthermore, there is a notable shift in the distribution of household responsibilities, as the husband no longer adheres strictly to the traditional role of the salaryman, but actively engages in sharing domestic duties, getting closer to the figure of the “nurturing father” (Nakatani 2006).

On a practical level, through the use of precooked meals, Japanese housewives had the chance to shorten significantly the time spent in preparing food, which covered a significant part of traditional household chores, having more time to dedicate to herself.

On an ideological and cultural level, ready-made food challenges the dietary practices through which traditional family dynamics and gender role expectations were established.

New modern culinary procedures and the departure from the traditional homemade food practices and their cultural implications gave the possibility to the Japanese housewife to provide her family with tasty and complete meals, without sacrificing herself and compromising her on well-being. In other words, the use of side dishes called out the heavy duty of the housewife to prepare and offer homemade meals as a symbol of sacrifice, care and benevolence. Facilitated by a shared sense of burden when it comes to food preparation, an increasing number of Japanese women are starting to reject the idea of the housewife who masters the art of cooking and carries all the responsibilities of the house.

Despite the spread of new attitudes and opinions on housewifery among Japanese women, the process of housewife emancipation is slower and harder in Japan than in other countries, as Japanese women are more eligible to show a “tendency to experience rivalry and conflict between their identities as mothers, which are rooted in relation with others, and as individuals, which are based on development of the self” (Cao et al. 2012).

Indeed, contrasting feelings have also emerged in the use of side dishes, which, due to their defiance of traditional views of housewifery, have often generated a sense of guilt and frustration among women who use them regularly.

Nevertheless, in spite of the controversies surrounding this subject, my research proposes a perspective that views ready-made food, with its hybrid features, as a means of empowering

women and sustaining contemporary housewives' lifestyles. While disrupting traditional domestic expectations, side dishes seemed to have encouraged the emergence of new perception of housewifery in Japanese households, making room for cultural narratives which promote an ideal of womanhood freed from traditional domestic constrains.

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