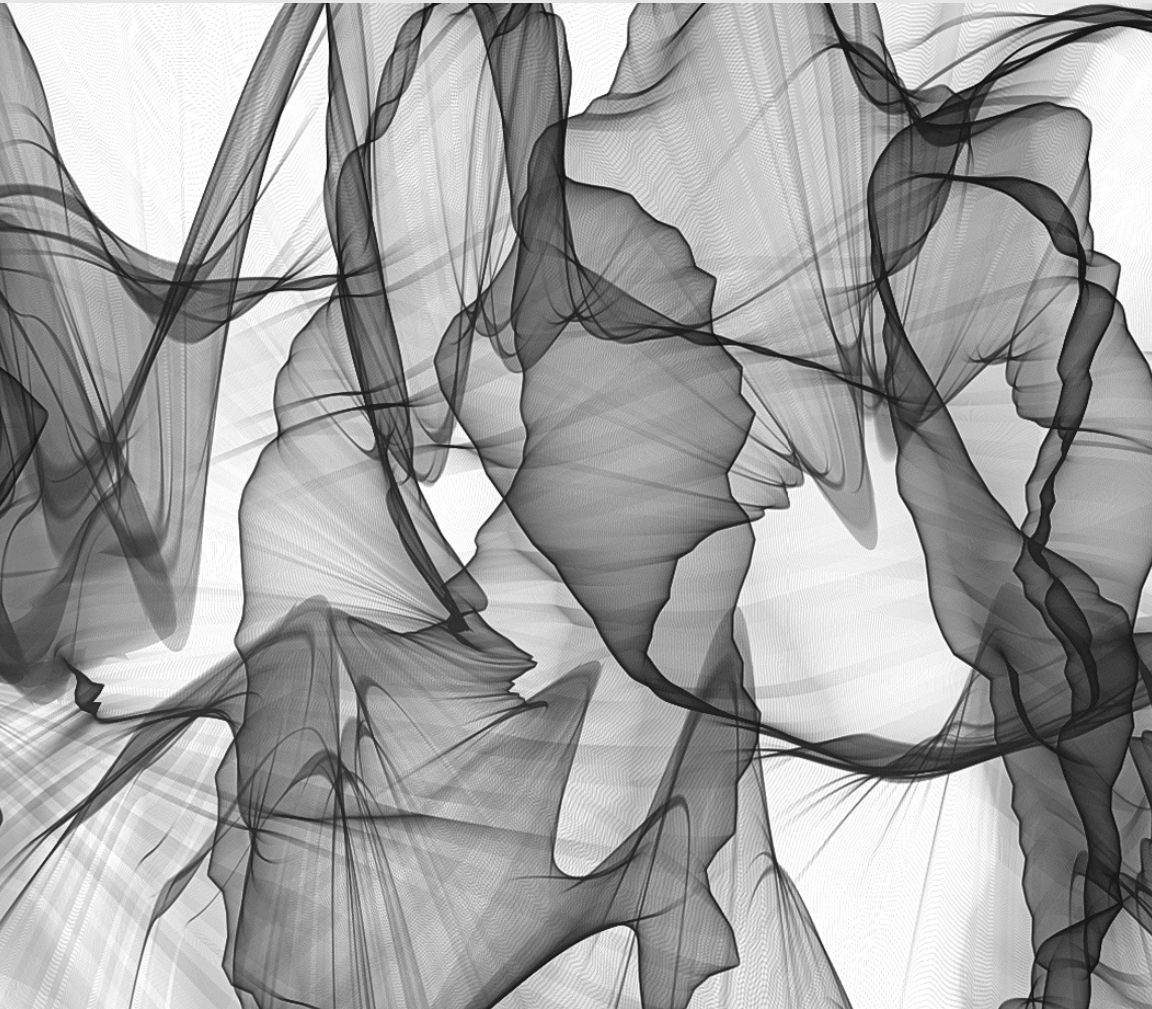


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## **Who Cooks What, How, and for Whom? Gender, Racial, Ethnic, and Class Politics of Food in Asian Global Households**

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*This article explores how the seemingly mundane practices of food preparation and consumption can become intersectional sites of gender, racial, ethnic and class politics in the contexts of global migration and household labour. It develops the idea of a “familial gastropolitics” (Vallianatos) by focusing on the experiences of Japanese mothers who have relocated to Hong Kong and Singapore and chosen to outsource housework to a female migrant domestic worker typically from a Southeast Asian country. How do these mothers reconcile their new role supervising a maid in a foreign environment with a traditional Japanese value system that ties notions of motherhood to the preparation of family meals? Analyses of original interview data as well as mom blog entries suggest, first, that many research participants adhere to the ideologies of Japanese motherhood by assigning to the maids only basic preparations before cooking (such as cutting up the ingredients) and the cleaning afterwards, both of which they still micro-manage. Disturbingly, several participants cited racial, ethnic, and class stereotypes of “them, foreign maids,” who could never acquire the cooking skills and knowledge of “us, Japanese madams,” when they described their experiences. The women seemingly drew on such stereotypes to sustain an ideal of Japanese foodways, such as obento (boxed lunch) making and other practices rooted in Japanese cultural nationalism and gender ideology. Simultaneously, there was a shared understanding among them that managing the family’s foodways and running the household smoothly were the women’s job, freeing their husbands of household responsibilities and reinforcing the third-shift labour of the mothers. The analyses reveal that gendered divisions of labour are sustained in complex ways in tandem with global disparities and cultural nationalism in the most private sphere—home.*

**Introduction: Familial Gastropolitics in Asian Global Cities**

This article considers mothering in the context of intra-Asian migration, focusing specifically on cooking in transnational households. Food preparation and consumption everywhere are imbued with gender politics (Avakian), and mothers, who are usually the sole or main member of the family to cook, are likely to be entangled in the complex web of this politics (Guignard and Cassidy). When a family relocates across national borders, the food that they consume will almost inevitably be different, and the daily considerations that go into preparing meals, as well as by whom, may also change (Cassidy and El-Tom). And when the household takes on a migrant domestic worker, a common practice in many global cities, the new member of the household may bring about changes not only in relation to foodways but also in family dynamics. By studying this “familial gastropolitics” (Vallianatos) in the context of intra-Asian migration—namely, with a specific focus on Japanese mothers who relocate to Hong Kong and Singapore—this article will examine the intersectional politics of gender, race, ethnicity, and class that can unfold in global households.

Below, I focus on the experiences of “mother madams,” whom I define as mothers who hire and supervise a domestic worker inside their private home. Instead of shouldering carework solely on her own, a mother madam chooses to outsource all or a portion of the housework as well as childcare. For a mother madam, food preparation is often a site of tension because it is she, as a household supervisor, who decides who cooks what, how, and for whom. The decision is personal as well as political, as the mother madam weighs not only her own preferences but also familial, communal, and social expectations on food and motherhood.

I engage with this complex nature of mother work through drawing on a feminist ethnography I have conducted since 2015 in Hong Kong and Singapore. Along with participatory and nonparticipatory observations of Japanese mothers’ activities in those global cities, I have conducted in-depth interviews with mothers who moved from Japan to Hong Kong and/or Singapore and have experience of managing their households in the context of intra-Asian migration. These interviews typically involve the research participants and me, a mother researcher also from Japan and raising a child of mixed heritage, sitting together for two to four hours in a café, a restaurant, or their home and talking about our experiences as mothers. Although I conduct my interviews using this empathetic, feminist approach (Oakley), the ethnography I present here does not assume any sense of a natural or instinctive womanhood (Visweswaran). There is often empathy and camaraderie as well as dissonance and discrepancy between the research participants and me. The resulting narratives vividly point to personal dilemmas and difficulties of mothering in global contexts along with a wide range of political consequences

around the mothers' experiences.

Following this introduction, before analyzing the actual voices of the mothers, I first contextualize this study by explaining the specific position that food occupies in Japanese society. I discuss how the nationalistic significance of Japanese cuisine—washoku—is closely related to gender roles assigned to women, as exemplified in the importance attached to obento—a homemade (that is, mother-made) boxed lunch for taking to school. For the mothers in my research, relocating from Japan to Hong Kong or Singapore often means transplanting such culturally loaded food customs abroad. At the same time, the mothers from Japan, for the first time in their lives, are given a choice to employ a migrant domestic worker at home and occupy the new role of household supervisor. They face a new set of tasks and responsibilities that further complicates their familial gastropolitics.

In the next section, to explore the complex experiences of Japanese mother madams in Asian global cities, I refer to my original interview data with forty-two Japanese women in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Tokyo. I also draw on my analysis of twenty Japanese mom bloggers in Hong Kong and Singapore to explore how the women describe their motherwork abroad in a virtual space. Although only a small segment of the overall data is quoted here, the analysis demonstrates that the mother madams' narratives together construct a certain ideal of Japanese foodways, which is rooted in Japanese cultural nationalism and strengthens the racist and classist distinction between “us, Japanese madams” and “them, foreign maids.” A closer analysis further reveals that the Japanese mother madams' painstaking efforts to provide Japanese meals for their Japanese family are structurally bound. The women's struggles derive from and in the end sustain the gendered divisions of labour that have long constrained women in Japan. Through uncovering such ironic consequences, this article discusses the myriad—global, national, and domestic—politics of food that the mother madams are positioned within.

### **Food Is Love: Nationalized and Gendered Meanings of Cooking in Japan**

In Japan, as everywhere else, there is a particular sociocultural value attached to food; it is a part and parcel of Japanese identity, in which “pure white rice” has symbolized the “pure Japanese self” throughout Japanese modern history (Ohnuki-Tierney). Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney explicates how since Japan's modernization era in the late nineteenth century, rice repetitively surfaced in public debates and represented an essence that differentiated Japan from other Asian nations as well as Western countries. To be Japanese has come to mean to be able to appreciate the taste of white rice, the labour that went into the crop, and the ritualistic meanings designated to the food.

This metaphorical tie between Japanese food and Japanese identity has

persisted despite drastic changes to dietary patterns in postwar Japan; rather, because of the hybridization of food cultures, the uncorrupted, so-called pure Japanese culinary tradition has had to be revoked and reified. In 2013, after a long and fervent bid by the Japanese government, UNESCO recognized “Washoku, Traditional Dietary Cultures of the Japanese, Notably for the Celebration of New Year” as an intangible cultural heritage, aiding in the development of global and domestic washoku booms. The diverse and complex foodways that existed across time and place in Japan are now packaged in a particular set of rituals and aesthetics—an invented tradition—that is to be marketed globally while sustaining Japanese pride domestically (Bestor; Cwiertka). This form of cultural nationalism in return maintains the myth that Japan is a monoethnic and monocultural nation-state, thereby spurring on racism and xenophobia within Japan (Yoshino). Ohnuki-Tierney summarizes:

This symbolic process renders food a powerful symbol not only conceptually but also, we might say, at a gut level. “Our food” v. “their food” becomes a powerful way to express a “we” v. “they” distinction (Bourdieu 1984), be it between classes, ethnic or national groups. The beauty and purity of “we” are embodied doubly in the body of the people and in the food that represents them, and, conversely, the undesirable qualities of the other are embodied in their foods. (Ohnuki-Tierney 233)

Furthermore, this amalgamation of food and identity in Japan is inevitably bound up with gender politics. Under the slogan of “good wife, wise mother”—the gender ideology that was coined alongside Japan’s modernization in the late nineteenth century (Koyama)—the Japanese woman has borne the role of cultural guardian, cooking Japanese ingredients in Japanese ways for her Japanese family. Providing proper Japanese meals, teaching the ethics behind the food, and thus reproducing legitimate Japanese citizens have all been considered as the woman’s job, even when Japanese families relocate overseas (Kurotani). This heavily gendered image of cooking has long tied Japanese women to domesticity.

One significant example is the obento. In her influential study published in 1991, anthropologist Anne Allison argues that the small lunch boxes that children take to their kindergarten serves as an ideological state apparatus in Japan. Drawing on the cultural symbolism attributed to food in Japan, she explains how the little obento boxes must be filled with different colours and shapes so that young children learn the Japanese ways of food. That is, the intricately created obento is a device where Japanese identity is instilled through Japanese ingredients, which are cooked and presented in Japanese ways by Japanese mothers. The teachers, another guardian of tradition, make

sure that mothers as well as children follow the prescriptions, at times interfering with obento contents and presentations. A colourful Pikachu face made with rice, egg, and vegetables would be good, enticing, and nourishing, whereas a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich would be frowned upon.

Allison thus argues that obento is both creative and regimented. A Japanese mother, in charge of making individually customized obento for her child, devotes much time, energy and creativity to it, but strictly within culturally sanctioned ways:

The making of the obento is, I would thus argue, a double-edged sword for women. By relishing its creation (for all the intense labor expended, only once or twice did I hear a mother voice any complaint about this task), a woman is ensconcing herself in the ritualization and subjectivity (subjection) of being a mother in Japan. She is alienated in the sense that others will dictate, inspect, and manage her work. On the reverse side, however, it is precisely through this work that the woman expresses, identifies, and constitutes herself. (203)

In Chikako Nihei's words, obento has been a "ritual" that Japanese mothers engage in every morning because it is "often seen as a measure of a mother's love and care for her children." This custom—a source of "subjectivity (subjugation)" for Japanese mothers in Allison's words—frequently causes astonishment and embarrassment for mothers who are from outside Japan (Nakanishi; Stephens).

However, it is important not to dehistoricize and decontextualize this thesis. Since the publication of Allison's work, the emphasis has been mainly on how the obento functions as a symbol of love in Japan. However, the colourful, nutritious, and love-filled obento has been a strictly historical and class-specific phenomenon—historical because the anecdotal supports for the thesis are typically from the 1980s, a specific period when Japan enjoyed the ever-thriving bubble economy, the last stage of Japan's so-called miraculous recovery after World War II. It was a time when in urban middle-class contexts, corporate-warrior salaried men and professional-housewife women engaged in a strictly gendered division of labour in pursuit of national prosperity (Vogel; Brinton). In other words, it was a historical moment in which socioeconomic structures allowed middle-class women to stay home and carry out the obento ritual for their children every morning.

Even amid the bubble economy, women who engaged in paid work—including agricultural workers (Bernstein) and factory workers (Roberts) along with those in precarious temp and parttime employments—were not in the luxurious position to keep up with the urban, middle-class ideal. The children of those working mothers might have attended nurseries and daycares where lunches were provided or might have taken with them obento that were

less colourful, less elaborate than those made by the fulltime homemakers in Allison's study. Furthermore, since the 2000s, when the controversial "Womenomics" political campaign inflicted the dual responsibilities of paid labour and familial duties on women (Dalton; Hamada), the ways in which women engage in cooking have become far more diverse across generations, regions, and classes. That is, the realities have always been highly divergent when it comes to food and cooking in Japan.

Moreover, Klara Seddon, in her analysis of Japanese mother bloggers' obento, discusses that those intricate crafts are not necessarily a sign of an uncritical pursuit of motherhood ideology; rather, she argues, the obento presented in the blogs are a manifestation of the individuality and creativity of mothers in virtual spaces. The over-the-top presentations of food—as in the egg-and-vegetable Pikachu face—indeed appear not so much as examples of selfless devotion as of self-full expression. Seddon emphasizes that the new technology—namely, online communication via smartphones, which even the busiest mothers can easily take advantage of—allows women to playfully engage with the mother role. Women themselves may attach different meanings to their cooking labour.

It is this complex web of food and gender politics in Japan that the mother madams' experiences that I am analyzing below are situated within. Certainly, the obento and other food norms continue to yield their power as an ideological state apparatus, promoting maternal love and imposing work on mothers, as the research participants have middle- to upper-middle-class backgrounds and have the economic and cultural means to pursue the traditional "good wife, wise mother" ideology. At the same time, they have now relocated to foreign Asian global cities, in which cooking might be associated with a different set of expectations. In this context, do the women choose to stay within the ideologies of Japanese motherhood or not?

### **Food Is Management: Becoming a Madam in Asian Global Cities**

Another layer of the complex contexts that my research participants find themselves in is that in Hong Kong and Singapore, unlike in Japan, carework tends to be outsourced without much reservation. Both cities have institutionalized national schemes in which migrant domestic workers from Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand, work in local households, oftentimes as live-in maids. Those international arrangements are famously problematic; frequent cases of exploitation and abuse have been documented in both Hong Kong and Singapore. And when migrant workers themselves have organized and called on the governments to provide greater protections, the support they have received for workers' rights has been woefully insufficient (Constable; Lindio-

McGovern). The neoliberal cities are built upon such socioeconomic inequalities, and the global-elite families from Japan also constitute a part of the “global care chain” (Hochschild; Kitamura).

The Japanese women in my research accompanied their husbands on international job transfers, permanently relocated to the Asian economic hubs, or were married there; after moving, they found themselves eligible for the opportunity to hire help in their private home. They tended to be ill-equipped and hesitant new madams because they did not have such an option in Japan (Kitamura). They now needed to learn to allocate homemaking duties—such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, ironing, and grocery shopping—between themselves and the domestic worker they hired. When one is a mother, childcare, including obento making, also becomes a site of negotiation and potential conflict. Cooking thus takes on a new meaning; it is not necessarily something done out of motherly love but something that can be outsourced if she so chooses. She no longer needs to be the main preparer of meals for the family; instead, she can be the manager and supervisor of another woman who does the actual work.

For those Japanese mother madams in my research, therefore, cooking was at times a contested issue. On the one hand, the Japanese gender ideology that sanctions mothers to prepare homemade meals is hard to disregard. Especially now that they are overseas, the mothers are expected to maintain the family’s Japanese identity through providing Japanese meals. Meanwhile, it is now possible for the women to hire help and have someone do all the above on her behalf. She is therefore faced with the question of how much and in what ways she should outsource carework. Below, through analyzing the actual data, I explore the entangled politics of food, gender, race, ethnicity, and class from the mother madams’ perspectives.

### **Who Cooks? Domestic Hierarchy between Madams and Maids**

As described above, my feminist-ethnography approach has allowed me to elicit honest and poignant narratives of mothering experiences. For one mother, Ms. Ueno<sup>1</sup>, who had lived in Singapore for two years with her corporate executive husband and two preschool boys, shared stories of her hectic mothering experiences with a hint of humour:

I’m sure I’d be frowned upon in Japan because our maid-san does most of the work. She cooks rice, washes, and cuts the vegetables for dinner. All I do is fry and season them. Cleaning and laundry are all done by her, and she feeds the children and puts them to bed. I do nothing, really.... Some Japanese people here [in Singapore] may be speaking behind my back—that I work only part time and still hire a maid and that the baby is always with the maid. But I don’t care.



Because I'd die otherwise. Look at my boys. They are wild. Picking them up at kindergarten is a two-person operation. I grab one, and the maid carries the other. I drive the car, and they'll start fighting in the back, spill water, vomit. I need the maid to sit between the two. Every day, she does housework, and I yell at the kids, "Don't ride your bicycle inside the house!" "Don't push your brother into the pool!"

Ms. Ueno hired a Filipina domestic worker, whom she called "maid-san" (with a Japanese honorific) as is customary among Japanese expat communities in Hong Kong and Singapore. With her husband frequently away from home for international business trips, Ms. Ueno struggled with raising her two "wild" boys, and motherwork was often overwhelming for her—so much so that she felt she "would die" if she had shouldered all of it on her own. Though declaring "I don't care," she was clearly acutely conscious of how others viewed her mothering.

Interestingly, although Ms. Ueno repeated that she did "nothing really" at home, she in fact kept a central role for herself in making meals. She had the maid-san take care of the preparations before cooking and the cleaning afterwards, but she decided the ingredients, methods, and flavours of the family dinner every day. This was a common practice among Japanese mother madams in Hong Kong and Singapore: The final execution of the cooking process was predominantly considered to be the Japanese madams' job. Ms. Iguchi, a stay-home-mom whom I interviewed in Tokyo after her return from Hong Kong, and Ms. Ishikawa, a wife of a Chinese American husband and a mother of three preschool children in Singapore, did the same and had a positive view about the division of labour.

Ms. Iguchi: I miss my life in Hong Kong, where I had a live-in maid-san. At that time, I actually enjoyed cooking. The maid-san did all the prep work, and all that was left for me was the fun part, the finishing-up part. I didn't have to go shopping, chop up vegetables, or wash dishes. That was beyond helpful.

Ms. Ishikawa: My husband says he likes to cook, but what he means is he likes to barbecue. Of course, he doesn't clean up afterwards. That's why I prefer for my maid and me to do the cooking together; she does the washing and cutting, and I do the actual grilling, stewing part. It suits me perfectly.

While a few mother madams said they left cooking entirely to the domestic workers they hired, the more common arrangement was that of the Japanese mother madam making Japanese meals using ingredients that were washed and chopped ahead of time by her maid-san.

However, as the interviews proceeded, some of the same mother madams began to disclose some discontentment:

Ms. Iguchi: I grew up in Japan, so small differences between her and me sure bugged me. I had taught her how to cut vegetables for curry and thought that she had learned it. And then, one day, I found all the vegetables were diced up, like when you make minestrone. “No, that’s not what I taught!” It frustrated me.

Ms. Ishikawa: They are rough. That’s how they grew up. She comes home from shopping and just dumps everything together into the fridge. I’m screaming in my head, “You are damaging the food!” but pretending not to notice.

Such food-related frustrations were common among the research participants, oftentimes in disturbingly stigmatizing manners. Other mother madams in Hong Kong and Singapore candidly shared the following with me:

Ms. Kinoshita: I ask for a certain dish for dinner and coming home see something completely different on the table. The scary part is I’m getting used to it now.

Ms. Yagi: Sometimes the vegetables are chopped in *hyōshi-giri* instead of *sen-giri*! I have to ask her again to cut them more thinly. Of course, she pouts because I make her redo all the vegetables.

Ms. Amino: She takes beef out of the fridge and puts it in the hot pan right away. I scream, “No, we don’t do that! You have to take the meat out thirty minutes before you cook it!” It’s troublesome, but I closely monitor her cooking that way.

In many interviews, the mothers shared these types of “scary” and “troublesome” stories almost offhandedly, as if they were recycling an oft-cited, no-fail joke. There was a noticeable narrative pattern in these stories: The mother madams are happy that they can skip the bothersome parts of cooking but are not entirely happy because the maids do not cook to their Japanese standards. The frequent recurrence of such stories in the interviews was suggestive of the ways in which many Japanese mother madams commonly talk about the domestic workers they hired inside their communities.

The division of labour that we see in these households between a madam and a domestic worker—the former from Japan and the latter from Southeast Asia—is predicated on an unequal relationship. It is the mother madams who allocate the work and give minute instructions on the ways in which the work is to be done. While the degrees of supervision may vary, the underlying assumption is that “the maids know no better, and so we madams should train them”—as Ms. Amino, the mother in Singapore who was strict about meat

handling blatantly put it. The domestic workers' failures and shortcomings—by the Japanese mother madams' standards—are rarely narrated as the workers' personal flaw; they are instead collectively interpreted as what “they, foreign maids” are like. Studies have shown how employers of migrant domestic workers often subscribe to demeaning and stigmatizing stereotypes in Asian global cities (Constable; Lan); the Japanese mother madams here are no exception.

Mother madams' blogs also constitute a site where such problematic narratives are circulated. Among the twenty blogs I analyzed, there were some positive entries about intercultural food experiences that a foreign domestic worker brought to a Japanese expat family, but many had a different tone. For example, a mother madam in Singapore who has blogged about her experiences of global householding since 2015, frequently mentioned the difficulties she has with her maid-san. In one article, she responded to her readers' requests to share what obento her children took to their private Japanese school in Singapore. According to the mom blogger, every day she would decide the menu and leave shopping and cooking instructions for each item so that the maid-san could go shopping, freeze and defrost meat and fish, wash and cut vegetables, and fry, stew, and grill the ingredients—all to be completed by a specified time according to a specified method. One of the photos accompanying the entry showed a three-tiered obento, including one container of white rice, another container of miso soup, and a third container with small portions of fish fries, rolled eggs, fried green peppers with bacon, and cherry tomatoes. Following the colourful obento was another photo, this one of a whiteboard on which the madam had left detailed cooking instructions. The two photos showed the precise work that the domestic worker had performed according to the madam's prescriptions.

Not unlike the interviews above, however, the blog was seemingly not complete if it did not include some mention of the madam's discontentment: The maid-san was described as someone lacking the knowledge of nutritional balance and colour coordination. The three different containers were a necessary device, according to the mother madam, because for the domestic worker, balancing rice and other food items in one container was beyond her capacity. The texts were decorated with smiley- and winking-face emojis to create the same joking atmosphere that I had witnessed during the interviews.

It is interesting to contrast such blog entries to those analyzed by Seddon. Whereas the mother bloggers in Seddon's study exhibit their creativity beyond home through online communication, in this case, what the mother madam's blog showcases is not her own culinary or artistic creativity so much as her skill as a household supervisor. The domestic worker's obento making reflects the mother madam's ability to provide clear instructions that even a foreign maid-san can follow. The proud narratives are, obviously, at the expense of the

maid-san's autonomy and dignity as a professional domestic worker. Although most of the work was done by the domestic worker, it was the madam who decided whether the end product was up to par.

The research participants as well as bloggers often used the metaphor of an equal business partnership when describing their madam-maid relationship; however, the reality is blatantly hierarchical (Lan). Japanese mother madams are unquestioningly considered an expert and the maid, a novice. The hierarchy is understood and justified in disturbing terms such as “because they are not Japanese,” “they are not educated,” and “they grew up in developing countries.” The mother madams' narratives together construct this distinction and hierarchy between “us, Japanese madams” and “them, foreign maids,” entitling the Japanese mothers to assert their authority in their private homes.

As such, cooking, which has long emblemized the alienation of mothers in Japan (Allison), now in the context of intra-Asian migration and racialized global divisions of labour comes to exemplify the alienation of migrant domestic workers at the hands of Japanese mother madams. Japanese knowledge and methods of cooking are considered something absolute, something non-Japanese workers will never fully understand or acquire. The same xenophobic implications that Ohnuki-Tierney observed among public debates of food in Japan here surface in the personal narratives of global-elite mothers from Japan.

### **For Whom? Gendered Division of Labour in Global Households**

Simultaneously, it is crucial to ask why and how the Japanese mother madams adhere to what they think is the Japanese standards of cooking in their global households. When examined closely, those decisions do not appear merely personal. Ms. Konno, who works fulltime in a local Singaporean company, is an illuminating example. She said, “I work in a Singaporean workplace, surrounded by my competitive, super-rational Singaporean colleagues. Just like them, I personally don't care what we eat everyday as long as we get a certain level of nutrition.” However, food is in fact often a source of conflict in her family:

My husband eats only Japanese food, so I had to teach the maid how to cook Japanese meals. I even bought an English cooking book for Japanese food.... He is okay when I make something that doesn't suit his taste. But he gets mad when the maid makes something that he thinks is not regular Japanese food. Not because the food tastes bad. He gets angry because he thinks I'm not doing the mother's job. That's why I don't let her decide the menu. It's my job, every morning, to decide what the family eats for dinner. I make sure to leave very specific instructions—two tablespoons of soy sauce here, not the big

spoon, but the small one! Otherwise, the food tastes too salty, and my husband complains.

Ms. Konno's narrative was freighted with tension; she was torn between her own indifference to food and her husband's insistence on Japanese food and between how the maid-san cooked and how her husband liked the food to taste. Preparing family meals was considered Ms. Konno's responsibility; moreover, it served to evaluate Ms. Konno's motherliness, which as a working mother, she felt insecure about. Therefore, just like the mother madams above, Ms. Konno micro-managed the domestic worker's cooking in an effort to maintain good family relationships as well as her status and self-identification as a mother. Notably, while Ms. Konno thus assumed madam- and motherwork on top of her fulltime career, her husband, who never cooked, only ate the food that the two women in the household prepared jointly, occasionally complaining how "un-Japanese" it tasted. He was seemingly devoid of any emotional work, too.

Such cases of domestic negotiations with Japanese husbands who only ate Japanese food appeared in some other interviews; just like the maid stories, there was a clear narrative pattern where those stubbornly conservative husbands were mocked and ridiculed. Ms. Yoshihara, whom I interviewed a few months after her return to Japan from Hong Kong, was another example:

We lived in Hong Kong, a gourmet heaven. What were we doing, eating rice and miso soup every day? All because my husband wanted Japanese food on the dinner table!... He doesn't like the food that nonfamily members cooked. So I made dinner almost all the time. It was a challenge to make Japanese meals in a foreign environment. I was always on the lookout for affordable ingredients from Japan. When I had to attend my son's school activities or afterschool lessons, I asked the maid-san to cook dinner. Four times a week, I cooked. Other times, I told her what to make, using this and that in the fridge. She had mastered only a few Japanese dishes, but we got by. At least, my family didn't complain.

Although the mother madams often spoke wryly of their husbands in the interviews—and presumably in conversations among themselves—they rarely seemed to defy outright their husbands' expectations. They would thereby fulfill the more general social expectations cast upon Japanese women.

This was yet another commonality among the research participants' narratives: The women almost always went to great lengths to make the researcher understand that they did not neglect their mother role and that they were a good mother. Ms. Konno, the conflicted mother in Singapore I quoted above, shared with me how she painstakingly tried to pursue the mother role, and Ms. Yoshihara, while resenting that they had to eat Japanese meals in

Hong Kong, also projected herself as a good mother who cooked “almost all the time.” Presumably, the domestic worker cooked three times a week, but those times were deemphasized in her narrative because it was her, the madam, who oversaw the Japanese-ness of the family dinner, who enabled the family to “get by.”

The strict and painstaking attention that the research participants pay to the maids’ work in the kitchen is a result of their constant negotiations with family and society as well as within themselves. As discussed earlier, they impose Japanese—or to be precise, Japanese middle-class fulltime homemakers’—standards onto non-Japanese workers without considering whether that is necessary or efficient. That way, they recreate existing racial, ethnic, and class hierarchies within their homes. Meanwhile, their narratives suggest that the mother madams are in constant fear of being judged by others as a bad mother for outsourcing carework. As a result, Ms. Konno found herself assuming double and triple roles at home, overseeing family harmony. Ms. Yoshihara insisted that although she was occasionally away from the kitchen, the family’s dinner was Japanese enough. Ms. Ueno, the mother of two “wild” boys whom I quoted in an earlier section, mentioned how the Japanese expat community might frown upon and speak ill of her behind her back—another social background of the research participants’ daily motherwork. Their experiences as mother madams are never devoid of such familial, communal, and social relations.

When the mother madams calculate how much and in what ways they should outsource the cooking in their global household, they consider not just themselves and the domestic workers they hire, for there are other relationships that matter. Their families and other expat families as well as Japanese sociocultural norms interfere with their personal choices. Each woman tries hard to keep her family happy, when she herself may not necessarily be so. As the women’s words above illustrate, it is the mothers who shoulder this emotional work—the third-shift labour—to solidify a gendered division of labour at home.

### **Conclusion: For Whose Privilege?**

Throughout my interview research, food was a topic that surfaced spontaneously. Although most of the research participants celebrated the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the two Asian global cities as well as the level of gender equality they witnessed there, when it came to food, many Japanese mother madams were at pains to emphasize their adherence to what they saw as traditional Japanese norms and standards. Recall how, in one of the interviews quoted above, a research participant insisted on the Japanese cooking norm that vegetables should be cut differently when making curry and minestrone. Or

the other mother madam who referred to *hyōshi-giri* and *sen-giri*, cutting methods that she found were hard for non-Japanese domestic workers to distinguish. Such narratives served to establish themselves as proper Japanese mothers who, albeit overseas, provide proper Japanese meals for their Japanese family. Their narratives simultaneously subscribed to the imaginary distinction between “us, Japanese” and “them, foreigners” to leave unchallenged the problematic stereotypes that circulate among the Japanese expat communities all the while sustaining the structural socioeconomic inequalities endemic to the Asian global cities.

Concurrently, when examining the family gastropolitics of global households, it is necessary to study not only those who cook but also those who eat. In this particular intra-Asian context, those who do the cooking include the maids, who carry out the labour but are deprived of professional autonomy, and the madams, for whom the degree to which they should maintain their Japanese standards and norms of cooking overseas is a persisting question. Those who consume the meals are often exempted from the actual labour of cooking as well as from the emotional conflicts such daily rituals can give rise to. The maids are evaluated according to how knowledgeable and skillful they are in relation to their madams’ strict standards, and the madams themselves are judged on the accuracy and authenticity of the food on dinner tables and in lunchboxes by their husbands and children, by the wider Japanese expat communities in which they live, and by Japanese society in general. The gendered division of labour is thus sustained in complex ways, in tandem with cultural nationalism, within the global households.

Food is thus a site where multiple hierarchical relationships intersect with one another. Racial, ethnic, and class stereotypes and inequalities are amplified through the subjugation of migrant domestic workers who do the labour of cooking. The gendered division of labour is strengthened when it is solely women—those who assume actual cooking labor and those who shoulder the emotional labour—who engage in food work. One may be inclined to ask now: Who cooks what, how, and ultimately for whose privilege?

## Endnotes

1. All the research participants are referred to by pseudonyms throughout this article.

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