

Reimagining Kinships: Queering the Labor of Care and Motherhood in Japan's Rental Family Services

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Abstract : This study investigates the constructed notion of "motherhood" and queered forms of care in contemporary Japan, focusing on rental family services. In Japan, the concept of motherhood is often equated with womanhood, reflecting a pervasive ideology that views motherhood as an essential aspect of a woman's societal role, particularly amidst economic recovery and an aging population. This study interrogates these gendered expectations by linking rental family services, particularly the role of rental mothers, to traditional caregiving roles. It critiques the gendered construction of domestic labor and aims to expand conceptions of alternative family structures and caregiving roles beyond normative frameworks. Emerging in the 1980s to provide companionship for the elderly, rental family services have evolved to meet diverse social needs, with paid actors fulfilling familial roles at various social events. Despite their growing prevalence, academic exploration of this phenomenon remains limited. This research aims to fill that gap by investigating the cultural, social, and economic factors fueling the popularity of rental family services and analyzing their implications for contemporary understandings of family dynamics and care labor in Japan. Furthermore, this study underscores the disproportionate domestic labor burden women in Japan bear, often managing time-intensive household tasks, which creates a "double burden" for those in full-time employment. Care work, including elderly and disability support, is undervalued and typically compensated at near-minimum wage levels, with women predominantly filling these low-wage roles. This gender disparity in Japan's care industry contributes to labor shortages in caregiving and childcare, highlighting broader structural inequities in the labor market. Through semi-structured qualitative interviews with fifteen rental mothers, this study investigates their experiences, motivations, role dynamics, and emotional labor. It critically examines whether the labor performed by rental family actors constitutes a subversive practice deserving of appropriate compensation. Utilizing a role-playing method, the author engages with rental mothers as if they were her own, reflecting the dynamics of compensated labor. This interaction delves into the economic and emotional aspects of constructed motherhood, facilitating a broader inquiry into the value of both productive and reproductive labor in Japan. The study also investigates the relationship between sex work and rental family services within the socio-economic landscape, recognizing the links between the welfare sector and female employment in legal sex work. Although distinct, these sectors merit joint consideration due to the commonality of male clients in both industries. This research engages with theoretical perspectives framing mobile sex work as inherently queer, directly challenging the dominance of heteronormativity. The agency exercised by sex workers complicates narratives of conformity and deviance, underscoring the need to reevaluate caregiving labor in both paid and unpaid contexts. Ultimately, this research critiques the intersection of gender, care, and labor in contemporary Japan by examining the undervaluation of traditional caregiving roles alongside the labor involved in rental family services. It challenges Japanese policies that equate womanhood with motherhood and explores the potential of viewing outsourced care as queered maternal and non-reproductive labor, advocating for the recognition of alternative family structures and non-reproductive forms of motherhood.

Keywords : motherhood, alternative family structures, carework, Japan, queer studies

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