

# Don't Do It Yourself

## Japan's New 'Convenience Business'

By Yoshihiro Kamimura

Around this time last year, the Japanese archipelago was swept by an unusual fever. Everyone, from Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, Yoshihiro Inayama, president of the Federation of Economic Organizations, and other leading political and business leaders, down to ordinary housewives, intently followed every move of a woman on television every morning.

The name of the woman who enthralled the entire nation was Oshin, the heroine of a serialized 15-minute TV drama broadcast every morning by NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) from April last year to March this year. The series portrayed a woman who stout-heartedly fought her way through life by persevering through one adversity after another.

Oshin's struggles aroused the sympathy of all classes of people. According to a Nielsen survey, the program had an amazingly high viewing rate of 56.6% on the average and 65.0% at the highest.

Some of the top political and business leaders were lavish in their praise of the program. They saw the life of the heroine as symbolizing the basis of the character of the Japanese people and as reflecting the "philosophy of endurance in a period of low economic growth."

### Shift away from traditional values

Ironically, however, despite the zealous efforts of the political and business leaders to publicize the philosophy of endurance and forbearance and the virtue of diligence—and the high viewing rate that Oshin was enjoying—the lifestyle of the Japanese, chiefly that of the so-called

first postwar "baby boom generation," born during the years 1947–1949, is undergoing a transformation away from traditional values.

"Endurance" and "diligence" are, admittedly, words that have always symbolized, in a sense, the national characteristics of the Japanese, and, of course, the Japanese have not lost those characteristics completely. But if one looks at recently successful new businesses, it becomes doubtful whether the Japanese today do display endurance and diligence in all respects. The success of such new businesses and the lifestyle of the people sustaining them are revealing.

### Selling 'convenience'

There is a business called *benri-ya*, which might be translated roughly as a "convenience service." It is a business that literally sells convenience, one that will do just about anything upon request provided it is not immoral or illegal.

Such business has, in a sense, existed since ancient times, but Katsuyoshi Ukon claims to be the originator of a convenience service which actually makes money. Ukon Service receives well over 100 requests daily, the majority of the work being of a nature which housewives or family members could do themselves if they tried. Such requests involve, among other things, the cleaning of wall ventilation fans (¥6,000–¥12,000—approx. \$25–\$50), the hauling away of large-size junk (¥30,000–¥60,000), shopping (¥3,000–¥20,000) and repapering of *fusuma* (sliding doors in Japanese homes) (¥3,000–¥4,000). Very few of the jobs re-

quire any special professional knowledge or technical skill, except for a certain knack in repapering the *fusuma*. Ukon's monthly income ranges from ¥1,500,000 (\$6,250) to ¥2,000,000 (\$8,330) for performing such services.

As soon as Ukon's earnings were publicized in the mass media, there was a rush of convenience service aspirants to his office. As a result, Ukon now holds 5-day "Home Management Training Seminars" for such people from whom he collects a fee of ¥200,000. Thus, he is also shrewdly making money as an instructor.

Ukon hires the most promising participants as trainees in his company and personally teaches them his business know-how. Approximately 140 persons have gone independent after completing three months of training under severe conditions (Working hours from 8:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. without pay). They are scattered all over the country, from Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost major island, to Kyushu, the country's main southern island. The majority of them reportedly earn from ¥600,000 (\$2,500) to ¥1,000,000 (\$4,170) a month.

As already stated, most of the tasks sustaining the prosperity of these convenience services are of an extremely simple nature that housewives could manage themselves.

According to Ukon, "This is not an easy business. The fact that every job request is so simple troubles us. Because of this, many operators lose the will for such work."

Why do people request others—and pay them at that—to do what they could do themselves?

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Taihei distributes prepacked cooking ingredients to a million households.

## Housewives' changing lifestyles

Hidesuke Morinaga, senior researcher at the Asahi Research Center, who has been studying the changing lifestyle of housewives over many years, states: "Kei Sahashi, of Idea Bank Co., pointed out the changes in the behavior of housewives and said that *Okusan*, or housewife (*oku* also means "interior") has become *Sotosan* (*soto* means "outside"). That's exactly what is happening. The number of women who devote themselves to housework has declined; 50% of housewives now have outside jobs. As a result, what cannot be overlooked is the change in their concept of 'time'."

According to Morinaga, life is no longer family-centered; housewives' choice of activities is expanding, extending to jobs, sports, hobby lessons, circle activities, participation in community affairs, etc. There are many things they would like to do. That is why, he says, the market is expanding rapidly for products which help to save time, such as processed foods, cooking equipment, driers, etc. Morinaga points out that it is for the same reason that convenience services are utilized.

One can easily do the work himself or herself, but one prefers to spend the time on something of personal interest rather than on, say, cleaning the kitchen wall ventilator fan, which involves considerable labor. The convenience service neatly meets such needs.

Naturally, it would be a different story if the customer were charged an exorbitant sum for the convenience service, but a housewife can manage to pay the charge out of her budget if it is around ¥6,000.

## Saving time

"Another thing that cannot be overlooked with respect to changes in the lifestyle of housewives," adds Morinaga, "is

that the practice of calculating time in terms of money is spreading. Since most of them have, or had, outside jobs, they are able to calculate about how much their labor for an hour is worth. That is why when they consider various factors, such as how much time would be required if they did the work themselves, and its value in terms of money, how much they would have to pay for such service, and whether it would be more advantageous to use the time for other purposes, they conclude that the expenditure for convenience service is not wasteful at all."

The perception is spreading among housewives that if they can economize on time, that is, if cost and performance balance each other, then the expense is worth it. Thus, some of the work which housewives engaged in before is now being entrusted to the convenience services.

In forecasting future trends, the prosperity of convenience services deserves attention, but their scale as an industry is still minuscule. However, an increasing number of businesses are achieving rapid growth in other formerly self-sufficient home areas, such as the food sector. These companies include Taihei (sales, ¥110 billion—\$458 million) which distributes prepacked ingredients for meals (in different sizes depending on number of family members) to one million households throughout the country; Hokka Hokka Sohobu (sales, ¥42.7 billion—¥178 million) which caters principally to single, salaried workers and students but which reports a conspicuous increase in the number of housewives buying its packed food sets for supper; and Kozozushi (Sales, ¥67.5 billion—\$281 million) which sells take-out *sushi*. All these products belong in the category of what specialist Morinaga refers to as "time-saving products."

Hidehiko Sekizawa, chief researcher at Hakuhodo Advertising Co.'s Comprehensive Life Research Center, says that in the old days a housewife would surely have been scolded by her mother-in-law if she

had served dishes delivered to the home or purchased prepared meals for supper on her way home from an outing. But today, with the nuclearization of families, mothers-in-law live apart, and so housewives unhesitatingly take advantage of such conveniences. They simply reason that whether it be convenience services, take-out food, part-time work, volunteer activities or seminar participation, these things represent the cost resulting from the advance of women into various areas of society outside the home.

## Working women

It is only in the past several years that this development has been increasingly taken up as a topic of discussion. Today, approximately two-thirds of the women who work in sectors other than agriculture and forestry are married.

A little over 40 years ago, when the youngest child of a family finally entered primary school, the average age of the mother was 42. And about the time when the child advanced to junior high school, the mother was 48, which was the average

## Utilization Rate of Various Services

### Baby care, tutoring and nursing

Diaper rental	13.1%
Baby foods	40.5
Baby "hotel"	1.4
Nursery	17.8
Lesson room rental	57.6
Private tutorial school	35.7
Child training/consulting	6.6
Live-in dormitory school (for junior high school pupils)	1.5
Old people's home	2.7
Day-care center	3.3

### Food and meals

Telephone menu service	4.1
Home delivery of meal ingredients	4.3
Cook books	82.7
Delicatessen store	49.0
Instant/frozen foods	79.0
Catering for parties (cook dispatched from restaurant or hotel)	1.5
Dining out (fast foods)	65.4
Dining out (family restaurants)	67.1
Delivery of cooked dishes	68.0

### Shopping

Catalog sales	41.7
Mail order sales (Mobile "supermarket")	—

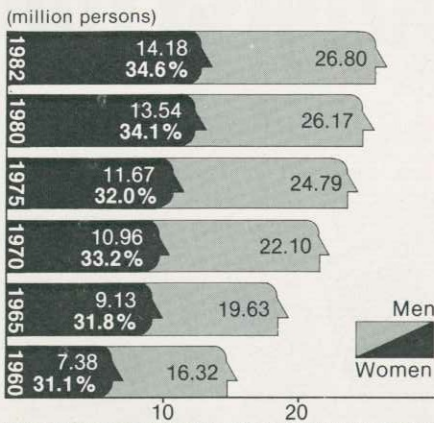
### Cleaning and laundry

Cleaning	2.3
Dust cloth (chemically treated) rental	42.9
Bathroom cleaning	1.9
Coin laundry	24.5
Dry cleaning	98.4

Source: *Development of Service Economy and Changes in Family Structure* (1982), published by Mitsui Information Development Co.

## Japan's Working Women

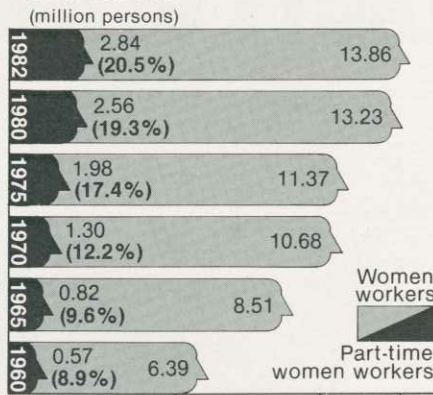
### 14 million working women



Note: Percentage indicates ratio of employed women to total employment.

Source: Labor Survey, Prime Minister's Office.

### Sharp increase in part-time women workers

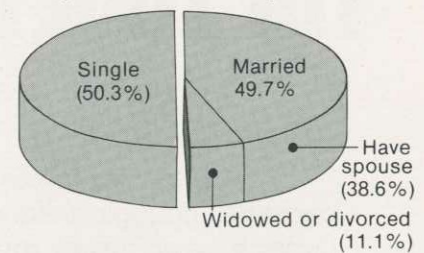


Notes: Part-time workers are those who work on the average 35 hours or less a week. Non-agriculture and non-forestry workers on leave or layoff are excluded. Figure in parentheses indicates ratio of part-time women workers to regular women workers.

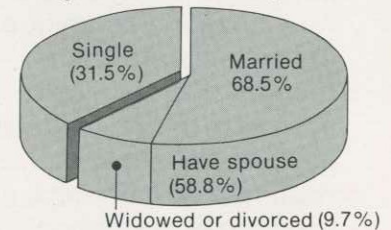
Source: Labor Survey, Prime Minister's Office.

### Two-thirds of working women are married

Non-agriculture/non-forestry sector 1965



Non-agriculture/non-forestry sector 1982



Source: Labor Survey, Prime Minister's Office.

life expectancy of a woman. Today, however, the average age of a mother when her youngest child enters school is 34 and her average life span is around 80.

Assuming that the time when the last child enters school is the point at which the mother is freed from her children, then she still has 46 years of life left. This is almost equivalent to the entire average life expectancy of women in 1940, which means that present-day women live nearly twice as long as prewar women.

Simply put, the life pattern of women today can be described as one in which they devote the first half of their life to the family and the remaining half to themselves.

The graph showing the ratio of Japanese women in the labor force by age bracket had always formed roughly the shape of the letter "M," but a recent sharp rise at the right tip of the M, the part which represents housewives in the 30-40 year age bracket, could be attributed to this development.

Most of these housewives, once their children are at school, find jobs in tertiary industry. And the more such women enter this job market, the greater the number who tend to utilize various convenience services. For example, when a woman who has been spending all her time on housework goes out to work part-time, she will find it necessary (unless she is a superwoman) to have someone take over some of her former chores, such as preparing dinner or cleaning the house. By working in tertiary industry, therefore, the housewives themselves are contributing to its expansion.

## The swinging singles

It was four years ago that the Ministry of International Trade and Industry pub-

lished a report titled "Outlook for Industrial Structure and Its Problems in the 1980s" (November 1980) in which it referred to expected changes in the employment structure in the 1980s (more middle-aged and older workers and the entry of women into the labor market) and the development of a service-oriented economy.

As predicted, events are moving in that direction. But, like the women advancing into working society, there is another group of people who are accelerating the development of a "service economy." They are what the Japanese call the "unmarried tribe," i.e., the singles.

According to researcher Sekizawa, singles are increasing—for two reasons. One is that they experience no inconvenience by not getting married and the other is the existence of a "baby boom generation."

The average age difference between a Japanese husband and wife is approximately three years. Therefore, on the basis of simple calculation, if there is a difference in the number of women in a certain age bracket and the number of men three years older, then a group of unmarried people will result. There are, naturally, many single people in the baby boom generation, which extends into the generations ahead and behind.

The members of the unmarried tribe, who do not even form nuclear families, are new customers for the service industry. A variety of service businesses have an eye on them. These include, in the clothing field, a "laundry locker" in which customers can leave their soiled clothing for cleaning even during the early morning and late night hours when the shop is closed; in the food field, as mentioned earlier, take-out meal packs and the delivery (started by Taihei) of cooked dishes to single persons; the nighttime delivery

service (up to 8 p.m.) begun by department stores for the benefit of people who return home late; and in the field of housing, the supply of single-room condominiums of around 15 square meters in space. And the more such services are increased for this category of people, the greater will be the increase in the number of singles who find no inconvenience in not getting married. Such a development holds great potential for the expansion of the services market.

The lifestyle of housewives is changing to a free and open pattern of actively taking the initiative in going out to work and of unhesitatingly making the necessary disbursements to that end. Diligence and forbearance are passé. There might be some nostalgia for these virtues displayed by Oshin, but the standards which govern the actions of today's housewives and young people are different.

In conclusion, let us introduce an item carried in the July 15th issue of the *Asahi Shimbun*.

"In NHK's TV drama 'Oshin,' there was a scene in which the aged Oshin visits her native home in a snow-covered, remote village in Yamagata Prefecture. That village today is being threatened with extinction. At present, only two houses remain, but they are about to disappear as a result of a generational change. Because of its popularity as the birthplace of Oshin, 2,000 tourists visited the village last year. Some voices are being raised in favor of its preservation, but the local authorities say that they are annoyed by the poverty-stricken image of the village as depicted in the drama. It seems that the village—the 'root of the Japanese character'—from which Oshin started out in life, is fated for extinction together with the 'Oshin boom'."