Introduction

What determines the level of utility that people derive from their everyday lives? There is no doubt that the consumption of goods – necessities and luxuries – is primary in considering the utility level of ordinary people. However, tangible goods are not the only objects consumed. Various kinds of ‘services’ also have a great influence on the level of individual utility. Specifically, before the ‘contemporary’ age, services delivered inside the household made up an important part of the overall consumption. These services have mainly been provided by means of ‘housework’ in a broad sense. The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on the practice of housework in modern Japan from the point of view of consumption history.¹

Gary Becker’s seminal argument provides us with the basic framework for considering the relationship between ‘goods’ and ‘housework’ within the household (Becker, 1965). In this framework, the household is assumed to combine time and market goods to produce more basic commodities that directly enter their utility functions. These commodities are called Z-commodities and written as,

\[ Z_i = f_i(x_i, T_i) \]  

¹ Though the analysis of discourse related to housework is not uncommon in the literature, there is not much research investigating actual housework from a historical perspective. Shinada (2007, ch. 3) discusses the role of actual housework, though briefly, from the 1930s.
where $x_i$ is a vector of market goods and $T_i$ a vector of time inputs used in producing the $i$th commodity. On the other hand, the household must be under the constraint of ‘time’.

$$T = T_w + T_c + T_r$$

(2)

where $T$ is a vector denoting total time available in a household and is divided into three major categories: $T_w$, $T_c$, and $T_r$. Each household allocates the time of its members among these categories: labour to acquire the money income needed to purchase goods ($T_w$); labour retained within the household to transform purchased goods into Z-commodities ($T_c$); and leisure, which includes the time to actually consume the commodities ($T_r$). This formulation offers an explicit way of incorporating the role of ‘non-working time’, which has usually been recognised merely as ‘leisure’ or a residual in discussing the household economy. More specifically, the introduction of category $T_c$ clearly indicates the indispensable role of housework in the production function of Z-commodities as shown in equation (1).

In fact, making use of this framework, Jan de Vries has provided us with a frame of reference in terms of the historical relation between consumption and housework (de Vries, 2008). De Vries discusses the historical changes in the time (labour) allocation behaviour of households in early-modern Europe, from the production of self-sufficient goods to the production of saleable goods and the provision of the household workforce to the external labour market. He also points out the emergence, during the nineteenth century, of the breadwinner–homemaker household, within which housework recovered its importance in the labour-allocation process. This is one of the most systematic accounts of the changing role of housework in the historical setting of the early-modern and modern periods.

However, we should consider carefully both the theoretical and factual aspects of the account given by de Vries before applying it to the consumption history of Japan. As de Vries pointed out, the household’s decision to allocate its time ($T_w$) towards labour to acquire monetary income for the purchase of goods was ultimately based on revisions in the mix of desired Z-commodities in the direction of those produced by more goods-intensive consumption ‘technology’. This implies, in other words, that the birth of consumer society was accompanied by the

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2 The formulation (2) is based on the exposition given by de Vries (de Vries, 2008, pp. 26–27).