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Tomoko Matsudaira and Home Economics:
The Transformation of Consumption and Women in Japan
(松平友子と家事経済学——日本における消費と女性の変容)

<Abstract>

The household has long been one of the most essential parts of economic life, yet it has rarely played a central role in the history of economic thought. Only in the early 20th century did the household gradually emerge as an analytical unit worthy of systematic study, especially within the newly developed field of home economics. Although the American tradition, associated with scholars like Ellen Richards, Hazel Kyrk, Elizabeth Hoyt, and Margaret Reid, has been widely studied, the Japanese development of home economics has received comparatively little scholarly attention, particularly outside Japan. Nonetheless, its development was deeply influenced by Japan's rapid industrialization, the increasing complexity of consumption, the expansion of women's education, and the social movements that accompanied these changes. In this intellectual and social context, Tomoko Matsudaira (1894–1969) holds a significant yet often overlooked place. As the first woman to engage professionally in economics research and education in Japan, she created an early and notably systematic framework for understanding the household as an economic unit.

This paper examines the development of Japanese home economics and the central role Matsudaira played in establishing its economic foundations. Using a mix of historical reconstruction, theoretical analysis, and comparative interpretation, the paper aims to highlight both the originality of Matsudaira's ideas and the broader intellectual environment in which they emerged. To accomplish this, the paper is divided into three parts and six chapters, each building on the previous one to provide a thorough overview of how household economics changed in Japan and how Matsudaira's contributions should be situated within the larger history of economic thought.

Part I provides the historical and social background needed to understand how Japanese home economics developed. Chapter 1 traces its growth from the late 1800s through the postwar period, showing how what started as simple domestic training gradually took on an economic and scientific focus. As Japan industrialized and women gained greater access to modern education, household management became an academic field concerned with efficiency, rationality, and modernization.

By comparing Japanese progress with the American development of home economics, this chapter highlights the unique intellectual path that created the environment for Matsudaira's work. Chapter 2 broadens this historical look by analyzing major social changes—such as shifts in consumption, the expansion of women's education, and the rise of organizations like consumer cooperatives and women's groups—that influenced the intellectual climate of early home economics. Through this wider view, the chapter shows how home economics emerged as an intellectual response to shifting social and economic conditions in Japan before the 1960s.

Part II focuses directly on Matsudaira, exploring her intellectual development and theoretical ideas. Chapter 3 offers an intellectual biography of Matsudaira, examining her education, her entry into economics during a period when women's participation in higher education was limited, and the main theoretical influences that shaped her thinking. The chapter also reviews her reception in existing scholarship, highlighting her strengths and tensions within her ideas—particularly her dedication to women's economic empowerment and her tendency to see changes in women's status mainly as the result of structural economic forces rather than women's own agency. Chapter 4 then provides a detailed analysis of the four main areas of Matsudaira's home economics: income, expenditure, accounting, and savings. It reconstructs her view of the household as an economic unit, emphasizing real income over nominal income, supporting double-entry household bookkeeping to promote transparency and cooperation within the family, and interpreting savings and insurance as vital forms of economic preparedness. This chapter demonstrates that Matsudaira's system was not only practical guidance for household management but also a cohesive theoretical model that reflected both economic logic and social concerns.

Part III places Matsudaira's ideas within both international and domestic comparisons. Chapter 5 offers a side-by-side comparison between Matsudaira and the American economist Hazel Kyrk, a key figure in modern consumption theory. Despite their differing intellectual backgrounds, the chapter uncovers common ground in their focus on rational consumption, household decision-making, and gender roles. It also points out important methodological differences—Kyrk's empirical, institutionally oriented, psychologically informed approach contrasts with Matsudaira's historically focused analysis. These comparisons help situate Matsudaira in a global discussion about the household in economic theory. Chapter 6 shifts to a domestic comparison within Japan, comparing Matsudaira with Kenzo Wadagaki and Hideko Inoue. By contrasting Wadagaki's production-focused approach and Inoue's socially reformist stance with Matsudaira's more balanced focus on economic rationality and gender issues, this chapter clarifies her unique position in the lineage of Japanese home economists.

Through this structure—progressing from historical background to theoretical reconstruction and then to comparative analysis—the paper provides a comprehensive interpretation of Matsudaira's role in home economics and the larger history of economic thought.