**The Discourse on Natural Childbirth in Japanese Society:**

**Its Evolution from the 1980s to the Present**

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1. Introduction

The spiritual boom of the 2000s triggered the emergence of a market for buying and selling “spiritual” products in Japan. Prompted by the media’s attention to Hiroyuki Ehara, a spiritualist, this boom led to the rise in popularity of auras, yoga, energy spots, fortune-telling and so on.1 Topics related to pregnancy and childbirth soon became prominent in this “spiritual market.” Examples of such topics include *shikyu-kei*, a movement that regards the womb as sacred, the female organ, and prenatal memory (*tainai kioku*), in which the mother decides for herself after consulting with the gods before the child is born.2

Natural childbirth has attracted much attention. It refers to the practice of giving birth to a child without resorting to medical treatment or drugs, and it is characterized by its association with spirituality, as in the mystical experience of giving birth.3

The concept of natural childbirth did not, however, make its first appearance in the 2000s, as it had already begun to spread in the 1980s. This was triggered by the introduction of foreign books on natural childbirth. In response, books on natural childbirth were published in Japan. Today’s natural childbirth phenomenon is an extension of that trend. By examining books on natural childbirth, this paper aims to discuss why natural childbirth is associated with spirituality.

Traditional Japanese communities have a history of viewing pregnancy and childbirth as *kegare* (impure) and keeping pregnant women away from the community (Segawa 1980, Namihira 1984, Narikiyo 2003). Among others, Emiko Namihira discusses this from the perspective of impurity.4 Specifically, pregnant women were isolated in a birthing hut and had to stay there for some time after delivery. Similarly, menstruating women were required to spend their menstrual period in isolation in a menstrual hut. This practice of associating childbirth with impurity came about because childbirth was regarded as bringing women close to death, so it was thought necessary to purify those who might be affected by impurity. Commenting on this practice surrounding pregnancy and childbirth, Namihira points out that, unlike the women’s own perspective on this common rite of passage, this was a ritual that was ‘done to’ the women (1984:124).

Although the view of pregnancy and childbirth as impure declined with modernization, birth huts and menstrual huts still existed for some time after World War II. In light of this fact, the idea of natural childbirth is a very modern phenomenon, as it encourages women to distance childbirth from the idea of *kegare* and to imbue it with positive meaning for themselves.

Natural childbirth is also closely related to the existence of midwives, whose role has developed in Japan in a unique way. Naoko Kimura examines the position of midwives and changing attitudes toward them from the Meiji period (1868–1912) to prewar times (Kimura 2013). According to her, from the Meiji period to the early Showa period (1926–45), midwives expected their work to be recognized as an authoritative profession based on the knowledge they had acquired through experience. After the war, as midwives were integrated into the medical system, they became deeply and intensely involved not only in childbirth, but also in matters of women’s reproduction in general. According to Kimura, midwives emphasized their significance by glorifying motherhood and femininity. She also notes that since the mid-1950s midwives have undergone a qualitative change by recommending elective delivery (Kimura 2013:245–46).

As the social position and values of midwives changed in this way, natural childbirth has become a focus of attention among them. In Japan, midwives can open midwifery clinics to handle births, but their use of drugs and medical supplies is prohibited by law. Midwives are also required to transport pregnant women in some cases in partnership with hospitals. Therefore, the significance of midwives and midwifery clinics has been emphasized as one way to provide women with a natural childbirth experience that does not rely on medical intervention. Doctors are also now actively promoting natural childbirth. It has also come to be viewed as a mystical experience that can be experienced only by women.

The increased emphasis on the value of natural childbirth is thought to be related to the relative importance placed on the experience of each birth, as the number of children a woman gives birth to in her lifetime has decreased since the 1970s. It has also been suggested that along with the decline in the birthrate, information about pregnancy and childbirth has begun being shared through books and the media rather than among families or between parents and children. In books, birth methods influenced by the New Age movement and feminism (particularly in the West) have attracted attention and been introduced to Japan. Thus, the growing popularity of natural childbirth in Japan since the 1980s has been attributed to a combination of circumstances.

What, then, is the significance of the growing emphasis on the sanctity of natural childbirth and its emergence as a new trend in society? To elucidate these issues, I used the National Diet Library’s search system (NDL Online) to search for Japanese books with the keywords “natural” and “childbirth” in their titles. To identify differences in the characteristics of these books over time, I divided the search into four ten-year periods, from the 1980s to the 2010s. Specialized medical books and works on cultural anthropology, ethnography, or feminist studies were excluded from the search results. The results revealed that 7 books on natural childbirth were published in the 1980s, 6 in the 1990s, 19 between 2000 and 2009, and 6 between 2010 and 2019.5 A total of 38 books on natural childbirth were published in Japan in this period, including 7 translations of foreign books.6

Below I analyze a selection of these books that I believe illustrates the characteristics of each period. The discussion does not attempt to portray the actual practice of natural childbirth. Rather, it is intended to examine the discourse on natural childbirth so as to elucidate its meanings and associated values.

2. The discourse on natural childbirth outside of Japan

The thirteen books on natural childbirth published in the 1980s and 1990s can be divided into two categories: (1) those translated from foreign publications or written by Japanese authors influenced by the foreign publications, and (2) those that summarize natural childbirth methods that have developed independently in Japan.

One of the non-Japanese books that greatly influenced the spread of the natural childbirth discourse in Japan was Danaë Brook’s 1976 book *Naturebirth*, which was translated and introduced to Japan in 1980 (Hihyosha). Since no book on natural childbirth had been published previously, this clearly had a considerable influence on the discourse surrounding this topic.

Brook, a British journalist, wrote this book of over 400 pages based on her own experiences of giving birth to three children. In it she describes the process of giving birth and the struggles she went through to achieve a satisfying delivery, as well as the natural birth method. The book was translated into Japanese by Yoko Akiyama and others involved in the women’s liberation movement.

The main thrust of the book is a critique of the medicalization of childbirth. Brook criticizes how childbirth is treated like a “conveyor belt.” Specifically, she criticizes the practice of delivery in the supine position to make it easier for doctors to perform procedures; she also criticizes the administration of drugs and procedures such as shaving and enemas to make the birth process smoother, as well as prior incision of the perineum to avoid lacerations. Brook also states that she was unhappy with the fact that her baby was taken from her immediately after birth and placed in an incubator. Brook expresses special criticism of painless deliveries with epidural anesthesia, a practice that has become more popular in the Western world since then. She speculates that the fact that most doctors are male is the main reason that these procedures are used during childbirth.

Brook uses the term “natural childbirth” to describe situations where a woman gives birth without excessive reliance on medical care, and she introduces in detail different methods for achieving natural childbirth by weaving her own experiences into the book. She describes how men and women learn exercises and breathing techniques together and how expectant mothers express and encourage each other to give birth. The book also details how to choose a caregiver for labor and delivery, a doctor or midwife to suit one’s needs, and a hospital. Brook never advocates separating childbirth from medical care, instead aiming for a birth that combines science and nature.

Interestingly, Brook emphasizes the mystical aspect of childbirth. This is suggested by the fact that she quotes a passage on “sympathetic witchcraft” from *The Golden Bough* by the British anthropologist J. G. Frazer:

I suddenly realized that I had lost the touch of the concept of magic that I knew as a child, and that I was rapidly losing my contact with nature. It was through childbirth. Having a child was enough to get me going, and watching the magical union of man and nature during childbirth made me come back to the essence of things. (Brook 1976; trans. Akiyama et al. 1980:19)

Brooks also argues that mothers giving birth have historically been in contact with witches and that the church system has stripped them of their knowledge through witch hunts. For natural childbirth, she recommends the use of medicinal herbs, homeopathic remedies, yoga, and breathing techniques. Brook’s views on childbirth were strongly influenced by the New Age movement of her time, and the fact that the father of her third child was an astrologer seems to have also had an impact on her views.

Brook’s goal of natural childbirth was to make the experience of delivery not painful but orgasmic and ecstatic, just like sex. Arguing that “both delivery and sex are genital events” and that women need to let go of control and allow nature to take its course, Brook states as follows:

Is not modern man afraid of the forces of nature? Are we not afraid of the union of man and woman and all that it implies? If there is a fear, or if we are aware of it, then we should try to do something to change this state. Like childbirth, orgasm is a conscious choice at first, but at the time of its fulfillment, it is an unconscious choice that unravels and becomes senseless. Although it is possible that at the moment of embrace and union the future union of mother and child, as well as the coming separation, may occur to one’s mind. (Brook 1976, 1980:35)

In this way, Brook argues that surrendering one’s body to nature is essential to the birth process and makes it a supreme experience.

Although Brook herself had an affinity for the New Age movement, she criticizes it for its acceptance by the middle class as a consumer good and, above all, for the fact that women’s liberation and the New Age movement a common affirmation of the communal view of the family. Brook argues only that children are important to being a mother and creating a family through childbirth.

For this reason, although Brook identified as a feminist, she was critical of women’s liberation, a mainstream trend at the time, because “women who are mothers are being shut out.” While acknowledging the importance of women’s liberation, she says, “I want to reinterpret the role of motherhood so that those who thought that motherhood must also encompass motherhood, and that having a family was a trap, can see that having children is a path to enjoy” and that “women themselves must understand the psychology and physiology of women.” Brook also argues the importance of the time of conception, when a woman is at her most feminine (1976; trans. Akiyama et al. 1980:55).

Thus, a major feature of Brook’s book is that it presents natural childbirth as something that reclaims independent childbirth from medicine and feminist consciousness. In this context, she emphasizes that childbirth is a sacred act that resonates with nature. This is consistent in that it emphasizes the importance of women’s trust in their own physicality and their willingness to take on the challenges of childbirth at their own initiative. While the influence of feminism is apparent here, her view was critical of women’s liberation, which was the mainstream at that time.

Around the same time, books on natural childbirth began to be published in Japan with uniquely Japanese features. The following section examines these books.

3. The Dawn of Natural Childbirth in Japan

Books on natural childbirth began to be published in Japan in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of these were written by midwives, because midwives tried to influence modern pregnancies and births through their professional skills, as mentioned earlier. In this context, natural childbirth in Japan can be found in the orientation of Eastern medicine and its own health practices to be associated with natural childbirth.

As an example, Yoshie Yamagata, a midwife and former macrobiotics instructor, wrote a book titled *Sei naru ubugoe* (“The sacred cry of a newborn baby”; Tama Shuppan, 1986). Based on her own experiences, Yamagata discusses the importance of natural birth and introduces specific methods. The blurb on the cover says, “Natural childbirth is as mysterious as the shining morning sun and is a natural gift of nature.”

Yamagata’s book was also critical of the medicalization of childbirth, which was prevalent at that time. According to Yamagata, deliveries where women are confined to hospital delivery rooms and depend on drugs and medical supplies cause them to lose their “maternal nature.” For the same reason, she also criticized Cesarean births and painless deliveries. In Yamagata’s view, such “easy and painless” births ignore women’s dignity and awareness of motherhood, as well as the heart of the baby to be born (1986:35). Although painful, natural childbirth is a mysterious experience and a necessary act to nurture motherly love, according to Yamagata:

All living things in the universe bring you the energy needed for giving birth to your child. Without being taught, your baby will tell you the extent of your labor pains as it slowly progresses into a new world. You should be generous and relaxed in mind and body and just let things happen between contractions. No birth is painless. Yet if you are willing to await the birth of your baby with joy, you will feel differently. You must not forget, if you are worried about the danger to yourself and your baby during the birth, that the birth will be exactly as it should be. Nothing is more important than being prepared to face the rituals of God, wishing for the healthy birth of your baby and putting aside your own health. (Yamagata 1986:214)

Yamagata emphasizes that a mother should face natural childbirth with maternal love for the child, even if it means risking her own life. This view is consistent with the idea that the mother’s mental state affects the fetus and that her attitude determines the baby’s humanity, health, and even appearance. By contrast, according to Yamagata, children born using medical approaches or who are born by C-section are disadvantaged in many respects.

In terms of specific methods for natural childbirth, Yamagata stresses the importance of a macrobiotic diet and meditation, as well as giving birth on tatami mats in whatever position the woman finds comfortable. Macrobiotics aims to regulate the body and mind by mainly eating vegetables and avoiding meat, fish, eggs, and milk.7 Yamagata established a Learning Garden/Natural Village School in Yakushima to practice macrobiotics based on her views, and she cultivated a field there to achieve self-sufficiency.

As a reason for recommending macrobiotics, Yamagata argued that returning to nature through food nurtures motherhood. According to her, civilized and affluent modern society has deprived women of time for housework and child-rearing, and it has also destroyed maternal love by making Japanese women less diligent and frugal and depriving them of unity with their families and society. Therefore, Yamagata decided to shift to a self-sufficient lifestyle, thinking that she could recover her motherhood by protecting mother earth and living a life blessed by nature (Yamagata 1986:126–31).

Yamagata’s approach to natural childbirth is also characterized by the position of the mother during delivery. In hospitals, women generally deliver while lying on their backs, but Yamagata insists that standing upright is the ideal position. Referring to overseas medical articles, Yamagata says that upright delivery is not only easier for delivering the child, but is also less onerous for the woman. The Yamagata method recommends that instead of just waiting for the child to be born, expectant mothers should sing a song, walk around, and stimulate their anus. Yamagata also argues that it is essential to breastfeed the newborn child.

In this discourse, natural childbirth represents a rediscovery of the birth methods invented and devised by midwives in Japan. Childbirth is reevaluated as an opportunity for women to fundamentally rethink their lives and way of life, not only during childbirth. The emphasis on developing motherhood and the importance of prioritizing the child’s life is a clear indication of this. Doctors came to recommend this kind of natural childbirth in the 1990s, but what exactly did that mean? The following section examines this point.

4. The spread of natural childbirth

Books on natural childbirth continued to be published in Japan in the 1990s, some translated and some written in Japanese. Stories of women who had experienced natural childbirth and collections of photographs of childbirth sites were published, making books on natural childbirth more diverse in content.

In particular, the popularity of natural childbirth has been greatly influenced by obstetrician-gynecologist Dr. Tadashi Yoshimura. He first came to prominence in 2010 with the release of Naomi Kawase’s documentary film *Genpin* (referring to Lao-tzu’s proverb about mysterious motherhood), which depicts natural childbirth at Yoshimura Clinic. Even before that, Yoshimura had been making headlines for his advocacy of natural childbirth at a clinic he opened in Okazaki, Aichi Prefecture. Yoshimura himself published several books on natural childbirth and played a key role in spreading this philosophy.

One of Yoshimura’s earliest books was titled *Osan-tte shizen de nakuccha ne: Aru sankai no shinjitsu no teigen* (“Childbirth must be natural: An obstetrician’s proposal for truth”; published in 1992 by Nobunkyo). This book is unique in that, compared with many of Yoshimura’s works published since the 2000s, it describes in detail his life, his views on medicine, and his reasons for advocating natural childbirth.

This work also stands as a critique of current modes of childbirth, which are under medical control. Nevertheless, the criticism is not from the perspective of a pregnant woman, but from that of a doctor, who gives an “insider” denunciation of how births have been integrated into the medical system. According to Yoshimura, the many disorders listed in textbooks on obstetrics have caused medical practitioners to believe that many tests and procedures might be necessary for delivery. He argued that this state of modern obstetrics is not unrelated to the increased level of medical intervention in childbirth.

Among other things, Yoshimura noted that painkillers were mainly given in the daytime, when it was more convenient for medical professionals. As a result, he cautioned, there was a risk of disturbing the mother’s natural mechanism for safe delivery (1992:72). Yoshimura also described the use of perineal incisions and prolonged use of delivery monitoring devices as dangerous for pregnant women. Nevertheless, he did not reject medical birth altogether, instead taking the position that it is important to assist the pregnant woman and create an environment that facilitates a harmonious and natural birth.

Yoshimura’s issue with childbirth in modern medicine was hospitals’ detachment from external nature. He called attention to the fact that the connection with nature has been lost, even though giving birth in a natural environment that allowed women to experience the four seasons was a Japanese tradition. Yoshimura argued that the destruction of “external nature” has led to the destruction of “internal nature,” thereby “destroying the nature of the human mind.”

It is understandable to want the birth to be natural, but strangely enough, with that kind of mindset, having a baby in an apparently safe delivery room in a large concrete hospital seems like a good way to give birth with all the benefits of civilization. It’s horrible. But it hasn’t been all that long since this approach began, and as soon as we restore the external environment, then the internal environment, the mind of nature, will come back to life. (Yoshimura 1992:64)

Moreover, Yoshimura said that restoring such “nature” makes it easier to develop a love for children.

Yoshimura’s view of “nature” is directly reflected in the guidance he provided at his own maternity clinic. At Yoshimura Clinic, he developed an original teaching method for expectant mothers to experience natural childbirth. In particular, he emphasized the importance of strengthening the pregnant woman’s body to prevent a difficult birth, and he gave specific examples of how to exercise and eat to avoid gaining too much weight. A distinctive feature of these methods is that they incorporate traditional Japanese lifestyles. According to Yoshimura, pregnant women in today’s industrialized society who do not engage in physical activity on a daily basis are not suited to a natural birth. Yet he believed that making it a goal to strengthen the body for a natural birth can be a psychological burden.

Therefore, the Yoshimura Clinic renovated an old family home with a traditional fireplace (*irori*) and offers it as a place where expectant mothers can gather casually. They chop firewood and pull out a saw for the old house. They mop the floor, weed the garden and, depending on the season, plow the fields and harvest rice. Yoshimura claims that such work not only helps pregnant women overcome their lack of exercise, but also strengthens their lower body muscles and prepares them for a natural birth. He also stated that when pregnant women gather around the hearth, they can easily share their worries and anxieties with one another. Furthermore, gathering around a meal cooked over a wood-burning stove creates an environment in which nutritional guidance can be given naturally.

Yoshimura recommended that expectant mothers should not be overly nervous about childbirth, but rather take it in their stride, and he argued that doing so will lead to natural childbirth. He maintained that we need to take a holistic approach to childbirth, instead of dividing the body into parts on a scientific basis. Thus, he argued that natural childbirth makes a mother’s love for her child natural and deep:

In the first place, pregnancy and childbirth are not only medical-biological phenomena, but also broadly cultural phenomena, i.e., a part of life, and human beings do not live solely according to scientific findings, but also in line with overall human culture, including literature, religion, aesthetics, and philosophy, not to mention other cultures, morals, customs, legal systems, and so on. […] Science tends to deny the autonomy and diversity of each human being because it is by nature universal and cannot help unifying everything into a single value system. (Yoshimura 1992:220)

At the heart of Yoshimura’s argument for natural childbirth was his insistence on the importance of tailoring the birth to the individuality of the pregnant woman. One of the features of his book is that it contains the memoirs of women who have experienced natural childbirth at Yoshimura Clinic, and these illustrate how valuable natural childbirth is to women.

The girls’ comic (*shojo manga*) at the beginning of Yoshimura’s book is also interesting. In this comic by Natsuno Kiyohara, a woman with a son tries to have a natural childbirth after consulting with her husband and welcoming the baby with her family, and Yoshimura appears as a character portrayed in the style of a girl’s manga. His books were also influenced by this style, which was often used in books on pregnancy and childbirth published in the 1980s and 1990s; those books also used many illustrations.8

In this way, natural childbirth has gradually become popular in Japan independently of its popularity overseas. The traditional Japanese way of life and the nature that was part of this lifestyle were rediscovered and incorporated into natural childbirth. Furthermore, the importance of natural childbirth based on daily life has been emphasized, and this idea has taken center stage in natural childbirth in Japan. The following section examines how this trend has changed since the turn of the millennium.

5. Diversifying “natural childbirth”

Ever since the early 2000s, a number of books related to natural childbirth have been published. As mentioned above, Yoshimura’s natural childbirth has played a central role in these books. In addition, the mystique of childbirth was emphasized, and the argument that it was an essential spiritual experience for women began to take on increasing importance. The connection between traditional Japanese life and natural childbirth was also stressed, so much so that it formed the mainstream natural childbirth approach in Japan.

Be that as it may, the trend toward publishing guidebook-style books on the practical aspects of natural childbirth suggests that we have moved past the level of recommending natural childbirth to the stage of popularization. One example of this new trend is *Anzanryoku ga tsuku nachuraru na osan no hon* (“A book of natural childbirth for an easy delivery”; Asupekuto), published in 2012 by midwife Shoko Soh. The book includes exercises for pregnant women, daily routines, and even a collection of recipes, all geared toward strengthening the body for a natural childbirth.

Soh’s book also contains many accounts by women who experienced natural childbirth at her midwifery clinic. According to Soh, by adjusting her lifestyle around her diet, the expectant mother can gain the strength to give birth on her own so as to experience a good labor and a smooth delivery. She says, “The body also resets itself through the birth of the baby. The woman’s pelvic area is adjusted, her bowel movements improve, her skin becomes more beautiful, and her body line becomes more beautiful.”

The recipes proposed by Soh recommend increasing vegetable intake and minimizing animal protein. They stress the importance of time-consuming Japanese food practices, such as avoiding ready-made seasonings and making soup stock from *kombu* (kelp), or using brown rice as a staple food. Soh also recommends choosing the best possible ingredients and eating fresh, seasonal vegetables with only light flavoring added. These recipes are apparently based on Soh’s own experience when she gave birth, and as a result her child is no longer allergic to them and Soh’s milk production improved.

The book also introduces several ways to rid the body of cold sensations (*hie*), which are believed to interfere with natural childbirth. The term *hie* is based on Eastern medicine, and it refers to a decrease in blood circulation and a “chilling” not only in the hands and feet, but also of the internal organs. This is thought to cause menstrual disorders, muscle tension, and constipation. It is also believed that a “cold” uterus can make it harder to conceive or can cause a difficult delivery.

For this reason, it is said to be especially important to eliminate cold sensations in order to ensure a natural childbirth, and Soh’s book introduces specific methods for this. For example, it explains that it is important to “prepare the foundation of life” by taking a bath at a regular time every day to warm the body in the bathtub and ensure adequate sleep. The book also mentions the importance of pressing pressure points to warm the body, using a hot-water bottle when it gets cold, and refraining from wearing clothing with an open collar or clothing that bares the ankles. Turnips, chives, and garlic, for example, warm the body, but cucumbers, eggplants, salt, and soy sauce cool the body and should be avoided.

Soh’s book also introduces exercises for natural childbirth and breathing techniques that incorporate yoga, among other practices. It also discusses how to apply pressure points and moxibustion to treat headaches, constipation, and other pregnancy-related problems.

Thus, Soh’s view of natural childbirth is very comprehensive and practical. For her, natural childbirth is not dependent on medical care; instead, one can “bring about” a better birth through one’s own efforts. Soh refers to natural childbirth as a familiar delivery full ofenergy and develops her theory as follows:

Natural childbirth is a delivery where a woman is guided into natural labor and feels her own potential energy, just like the women of old. Childbirth has been around for a long time, and a woman’s body has the ability to bring a child into the world on its own. […] Natural childbirth requires a break from modern life and conditioning of the body. Indeed, it is hard work, but it allows you to feel forces and pains you didn’t know you had in real life. Giving birth to a baby that is surrendered to the energy is a moment of reawakening to the fact that you are an animal. (Soh 2012:8)

Soh also notes that natural childbirth has practical effects such as facilitating the production of breast milk and increasing the immunity of the child to be born. In addition, as mentioned earlier, she says natural childbirth increases a woman’s beauty. Soh argues that it allows a woman to be reborn (2012:10–12).

Soh’s book goes into great detail about how to spend one’s time before and after giving birth, and she recommends relying on others, especially in the last trimester of the pregnancy, so as to take things easy as much as possible. In her opinion, too much pressure on the mother in the last trimester might prevent her from forming a bond with her baby.

6. Characteristics of the natural childbirth discourse and how it has changed over time

In this article, I have examined trends in the Japanese discourse on natural childbirth since the 1980s, using books as a guide. This section examines the implications of these trends by reflecting on what has been discussed so far.

As already mentioned, natural childbirth has become widespread in Japan, inspired by the translation and introduction of books published overseas in the 1980s. Moreover, the spread of natural childbirth has brought traditional Japanese birthing methods back into the spotlight. Thus, the discourse on natural childbirth in Japanese society has been formed in response to natural childbirth in other countries as well as traditional Japanese methods of delivery.

It is important to keep in mind what is meant by “natural” when we speak of natural childbirth. As mentioned in the introduction, the natural childbirth discourse tries to make sense of women’s active and proactive attempts to give birth without relying on medicine or drugs. Repeated criticism of medical and pharmaceutical interventions in childbirth seeks to highlight the value of natural childbirth by critiquing the current situation where delivery is confined to medical institutions. Conversely, the increasing hospitalization of delivery has given relative meaning to “natural childbirth.”

However, the word “natural” also implies a focus on women’s physical capabilities and an orientation toward finding sanctity in their physicality as the childbearing sex. In other words, it is believed that women’s bodies have a latent natural power that is best exerted during childbirth. This has been a consistent perspective in the various books on natural childbirth published from the 1980s up until today.10

In terms of the details, however, some characteristics differ from period to period. In the 1980s, the dawn of natural childbirth, the word “nature” had two meanings. The first was the idea that “nature” originally arose from deep within the woman and that its potential power could be realized with the help of professionals, especially midwives. For example, yoga and meditation are encouraged in preparation for the birth of a child, so as to get in touch with one’s physicality and what lies deep within. In particular, in the discourse on natural childbirth introduced to Japan from abroad, it is believed that the body’s inner nature is brought out through childbirth.

The second meaning is the idea that “nature” is something to be taken in from the outside. It is on this basis that books published in Japan recommend absorbing “nature” from the outside by reviewing our lifestyles, especially our dietary habits. Macrobiotics and other diets based on vegetables are recommended for taking in nature from the outside. This is also why people are encouraged to reconsider the traditional Japanese lifestyle: because it is based on the idea that daily life is in harmony with nature, and if we live such a life we will naturally absorb nature into our bodies. The emphasis is on the fact that it is only through such efforts that childbirth is sublimated into a sacred experience.

For this reason, it has also been pointed out that feminist perspectives in Japan have been discarded in favor of natural childbirth. In Japan, the emphasis on natural childbirth has been more about traditional Japanese views of the family and life, and even more so about motherhood. In this context, it can be inferred that feminism was an ideology to be avoided.

This situation can be viewed as different from natural childbirth elsewhere in the world. Chronologically, however, we can see that the discourse on natural childbirth in Japan has changed over time. From the 1980s to the 1990s, it represented a contrasting model to the medicalization of childbirth. It is a cultural value, and this aspect has been maintained since the 2000s, a time when natural childbirth without medical intervention remains popular.

However, the discourse on natural childbirth in the 2000s also suggests that women have reexamined their everyday lives and the course of their life, and have positioned childbirth as a way to make a significant change. Put simply, the experience of natural childbirth has itself become purposeful. More and more books on this topic that were published since the turn of the millennium seem to be characterized by more casual and simple content than their predecessors. This suggests that women are choosing natural childbirth as a personal experience, rather than one with a purpose beyond themselves. The fact that natural childbirth is seen as something that gives the mother a sense of feminine beauty is the other side of this coin.

One reason for the appearance of these books is the current state of Japanese society, in which women can no longer look outward for reasons to become pregnant and give birth, or where society is unable to present them with reasons to do so. Japan lacks an adequate system that allows women to balance work and childbirth and to raise children while working. Despite this, there is still a deeply rooted sense that women should take care of the home, including child-rearing. Even if a woman does have a child, she is unlikely to have a happy life in the future. It is undeniable that the total fertility rate, or the total number of children born to Japanese women in their lifetime, has been declining for these reasons.11

Under these circumstances, women have no choice but to look within themselves for reasons to choose pregnancy and childbirth. The idea of a successful natural birth while striving to bring in nature from the outside positions childbirth as a positive change in one’s life, as women turn childbirth into an autonomous rite of passage. As mentioned above, however, such approaches discard the feminist gaze. Nevertheless, the natural childbirth discourse also suggests that even men, who are supposed to be deeply involved in childbirth, are no longer the basis for women to make decisions about pregnancy and childbirth and to endure this period.

7. Conclusion

Natural childbirth has been a consistently popular topic in Japan’s “spiritual marketplace.” The fact that it is widely discussed in magazines and books is a testament to this. The idea of natural childbirth will remain an attractive option for women who decide to become pregnant and give birth.

As previously stated, midwives, who developed independently in Japan, have been deeply involved in the formation of the current discourse on natural childbirth. The fact that natural childbirth has become a contrasting model to the medical model of childbirth persists as one aspect of the discourse even today. Nevertheless, things are unlikely to remain the same forever, and the state of modern medicine will change in due course. What will natural childbirth be like then? By contrast, it seems unlikely that the situation in our society, which places the burden of childbirth and child-rearing primarily on women, will improve any time soon. Under these circumstances, how can natural childbirth empower women? In light of this situation, the aspiration for natural childbirth does not seem to be a transitory phenomenon. Thus it will continue to be a theme that merits attention. How will natural childbirth be affected by and affect Japanese society in the future? There are a number of issues that require further examination.

**Notes**

1. For a discussion of the “spiritual boom,” see Munemasa Horie’s discussion of the role played by Hiroyuki Ehara in the media and the popularity of energy spots (Horie 2020). On the market aspect of the “spiritual boom,” see Arimoto’s study of the Internet data (Arimoto 2011).

2. For a discussion of the sacred womb movement, see Hashisako (2019a). Hashisako also examines why spirituality became marketable, using the 1980s boom in fortune-telling and spellcasting as a clue (2019b).

3. Although there are various debates about what is meant by spirituality, here I am referring to religious phenomena that are influenced by the neo-spiritual movement and culture discussed by Susumu Shimazono and that are not organized by a church, cult, or other organization. Shimazono defines spirituality as the individual’s experience of the holy and living a relationship with the holy and such work of human beings (2007: 5).

4. For more information on *hare* (honored occasion), *ke* and *kegare* (impurity), see Tokutaro Sakurai, *Kesshu no genten* (The origin of rallying; Kobundo, 1985).

5. The reason for the total number is that in 2000 Tsugiko Sugiyama, who popularized the Lamaze method in Japan, published a four-volume book titled *Shizen no osan ga ichiban: Ima wadai no Ramazu-ho o mi ni tsukeru* (Natural childbirth is best: Mastering the popular Lamaze method).

6. Books on natural childbirth published overseas include those originally published before the 1980s, but here the time classification is based on the year of translation and publication in Japan.

7. Macrobiotics basically refers to a diet that excludes meat, fish, dairy products, and eggs and that balances foods by classifying them according to its own yin and yang theory. However, its content varies and is not consistent. According to this book, eating fish seems to be acceptable in the macrobiotics recommended by Yamagata.

8. Eiji Otsuka argues that while girls’ comics have always depicted the struggle between mother and daughter, the 1990s witnessed the publication of personal accounts and essays about pregnancy and childbirth. He points out that their emphasis is on the mystical experience of childbirth. For more information, see Otsuka (2001).

9. ‘Attraction’ is a term popularized by the ‘spiritual boom.’ It refers to a method of bringing in good luck.

10. This idea is related to the rise in active births, an approach that emphasizes women’s proactive childbearing, but that is a topic for future study.

11. For changes in the total special fertility rate, see data from the Cabinet Office (<https://www8.cao.go.jp/shoushi/shoushika/meeting/taikou_4th/k_1/pdf/ref1.pdf>, last visited November 1, 2020[)](https://www8.cao.go.jp/shoushi/shoushika/meeting/taikou_4th/k_1/pdf/ref1.pdf　最終閲覧日2020.11.1).

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