

The Cultural Politics of a Demographic Crisis: Motherhood and the Nation in Contemporary Japan

[Dr. Chigusa Yamuara](#)

Funder: John Fell Fund

This project asks: How have the ways in which Japanese demographic challenges have been narrated at the national level reshaped notions of motherhood as reflected in the domains of childbirth and childcare? The focus here on childbirth and childcare is motivated by the fact that these domains are seen as intricately linked to current demographic and corresponding labour market trends. Indeed, the Japanese government has urged mothers to engage in paid work to increase the labour force while simultaneously also encouraging more children. Using the approaches and methods of historical anthropology, policy analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork, this project will therefore examine three related topic areas: (1) prevailing anxieties concerning a “declining Japan” within the state and popular discourses; (2) the medical and popular discourses of “ovarian ageing” (i.e. the notion that women should bear children before their eggs become too old); and (3) debates over expanding public childcare provision in post-war Japan. This project addresses issues of motherhood not only in terms of the actual experiences and choices of Japanese women, but also the sociocultural significance and roles attributed to mothers as part of the Japanese nation. By doing so, this project aims to shed light on how the consequences of demographic change are not limited to their effects on the composition of the national population, but also generate discourses that influence how people—particularly women—interpret their life course expectations, their productive and reproductive capability, and their relationship to the nation-state.