At the beginning of the twentieth century in Japan, an eighth-century poem experienced a new life. Originally part of a *tanka* written by Yamanoue no Okura (660?–733?) and read by Heian-era aristocrats as part of the poetry anthology known as the *Man’yōshū* (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves), the poem was taken up again 1,200 years later by family reformers intent upon transforming Japanese childhood; by scientists speechifying in department stores, girls’ higher schools, and women’s clubs; and by highly educated mothers, who committed it to memory and embraced it as a parental creed. The poem read:

What are they to me,
Silver, or gold, or jewels?
How could they ever
Equal the greater treasure
That is a child?1

The sentiments of the poem were also captured in an expression—*kodakara*, or the child as treasure—that became a catchphrase of the early twentieth century. It served as title for a child development diary issued in 1909 by the nationally known Mitsukoshi department store in Tokyo, a novel serialized in the widely read women’s magazine *Fujin sekai* (The Lady’s World) in 1911, and a parenting magazine published by Tokyo’s Child Cultivation Center (*Jidō kyōyō kenkyūjo*) in 1918, not to mention serving as the name of a brand of
diapers and a Tokyo children’s goods store. The widespread appearance of this poem and the catchphrase associated with it signaled the ascendance of the child as a newly important locus of attention among family, society, and nation. Such concern for the child was not limited to Japan. The rapid, worldwide translation of Swedish feminist Ellen Key’s book *The Century of the Child* (*Barnets århundrade*, 1900) made clear that children and childhood were matters of international importance at the start of a new century. People in Tokyo, Berlin, London, and New York declared in unison their desire to make the child’s world less adult-centered and more “child-centered,” to use the phrase from the time.

As much as it was part of a transnational rethinking of the world of children, Japan’s version of modern childhood was also the product of profound social change taking place within its borders. In particular, the history of modern childhood is inseparable from the emergence of Japan’s modern middle class. The rearing of children became the defining emblem of middle-class identity in early twentieth-century Japan. While the family’s devotion to childrearing was important to the formation of the modern middle class in America, Europe, and elsewhere, it was particularly central to middle-class formation in the Japanese case. That is because Japan’s version of middle-class identity, which was itself a historical product, held up the middle class as a social foundation for national strength and as a social group that served as a wellspring of well-educated citizens, whose energies, talents, and discipline were needed to create a stable society at home and to maintain a growing empire abroad. The family came to be seen as the foundation and fountainhead of the middle class, and the family’s obsessive devotion to the child’s education became the defining task of the middle class, albeit only after a series of battles during the late Meiji (1868–1912) and Taishō (1912–26) periods over the requisite identity and ethos of a social middle. By 1930, however, the family’s mission came to be widely accepted as the mother’s training the child for educational achievement, both as a means to establish the child’s future place in the ranks of a growing middle class and also as a means to build an educated core of citizens able to secure a glorious future for a non-Western nation within a Western-dominated globe. In this way, the fate of class and nation, as well as mother and family, came to rest on the narrow shoulders of Japan’s children.
Introduction

Childhood in Modern Japan

The image of Japanese childhood today—with its carefully packed school lunchboxes, daily anxiety over school grades and examination scores, and an eye-popping array of children’s goods, including magazines, books, and toys—originated at the turn of the twentieth century. It was then a new world confined largely to the families of an urban elite. By the years following World War II, however, it had spread to become the accepted version of childhood for the majority of Japanese society. Around 1900, when this new world was first articulated by adults, the ubiquitous phrase “the child’s world” (kodomo no sekai; jidō no sekai) was deceptive, since its primary creators were not children but adults. To be sure, adults spoke of giving to the child the gift of a world that rightly belonged to it. “The child is the child’s child” (kodomo wa kodomo no kodomo), declared one commentator in the 1910s, pointing to the child’s proprietary role within that world. Yet the act of giving is ambivalent, at once generous and self-interested, and the rhetoric of ceding the child its own world obscures the adult interests at work in its creation.

This book examines the making of a new child’s world in Japan between 1890 and 1930 and focuses upon the institutions, groups, and individuals who created it. These adults—who might be called “architects of childhood”—included child psychologists, family reformers, pediatricians, department store executives, book and magazine editors, state bureaucrats, children’s literature authors, schoolteachers, and parents. They reshaped not only the idea of childhood (defined here as ages four through twelve) but also the actual daily life of children (yōnen; jidō; kodomo). By 1930, they had created a child’s world recognizably different from that of 1890. By 1930 children of an urban elite possessed a room of their own within the house; they performed homework daily and worried regularly about the prospect of gaining admittance to secondary school; boys and girls partook of a burgeoning children’s literature, including magazines as varied as Shōgakukan’s examination preparation magazine Shōgakkō rokunensei (The Sixth-Year Elementary School Student), the best-selling Shōnen kurabu (Boy’s Club), the literary Akai tori (Red Bird), and the artistic Kodomo no kuni (The Child’s Country); if time allowed, they became absorbed in activities designated as child’s play, whether the solitary enjoyment of a toy or a romp with friends at the local playground.
This version of childhood took decades to coalesce and was the product of conflict as much as cooperation among the architects of childhood. Although there was widespread agreement on the centrality of the child to the present and future of a rapidly modernizing Japan, there was lack of consensus on the nature and function of the child in a modern society. What kind of being is the child? How is the child to be raised? If the child is a treasure, to whom does that treasure belong? Whose needs should the child serve? These were questions widely debated yet never decisively answered. During Japan’s prewar years, there was no single image of the ideal child. In fact, three ideals circulated and competed—the “little citizen” (shō-kokumin), the “superior student” (yūtōsei), and the “childlike child” (kodomorashii kodomo). The following chapters examine these three ideals and the social conditions, ideologies, and actors that gave birth to them.

The story of childhood’s making reveals significant changes not only within the home but also outside its walls. In Japan and elsewhere, modern childhood is distinguished by the degree to which individuals and institutions from outside the home—such as the “architects” listed above—placed claims of interest upon the child and disseminated new understandings of childhood. No longer were the family and community the primary determiner of the child’s everyday experiences or the principal definer of childhood’s meaning. If presented schematically, the architects of modern Japanese childhood worked on multiple levels: 1) a global level, as exemplified by the involvement of Japanese experts in the creation and worldwide circulation of scientific knowledge such as child psychology and pediatrics; 2) a national level, which involved the participation of the nation-state, in particular, the Ministry of Education, and the nationwide print media in endorsing and spreading new images of childhood; 3) a local level, at which the school, the department store, the mother’s club, and other local institutions reshaped an understanding of childhood; 4) a household level, where the child’s experience of daily life was constructed by the decisions of parents. Yet the construction of childhood is not simply a story of how institutions and individuals from the outside impinged upon the home and weakened parental authority. Parents were not pawns; they were, in fact, crucial agents in the creation of modern childhood who maintained a dynamic and dialectical relationship with the other architects.
Although differing visions of childhood competed during the late Meiji and Taishō years, one ideal in particular had risen to dominance by 1930. The ideal of the yūtōsei, or the superior student, gained the support of families, society, and nation and proceeded to reign triumphant across the twentieth century. It remains the norm today. Contemporary Japanese childhood is known throughout the world as an intense period of preparation for entrance examinations, educational success, and social mobility. Although this version of childhood has produced a multitude of disciplined, talented adults able to undergird Japan’s twentieth-century economic growth, it has also exacted a physical and psychological toll upon children. As Horio Teruhisa and Norma Field have written, stories of Japanese children today suffering from high blood pressure and ulcers, going bald from the stress of “examination hell” (shiken jigoku), locking themselves away in their rooms for months at a time (hikikomori), or refusing to go to school (tōkō kyohei) all testify to the underside of Japan’s modern ideal of childhood. Modern Japanese childrearing has often been portrayed in the Western press as deviant and exploitative, but it is important to note that the obsession with making children into superior students is today no longer exclusively Japanese. According to a contemporary observer of South Korea, “Schooling is an all-consuming way of life for students in South Korea. . . . [N]early every minute of their lives is organized around school and, in particular, examinations.”5 Chinese children raised during the era of China’s one-child policy are now called “little emperors” and are trained from a young age to outpace scholastically their fellow singletons. “We started him on the [English] alphabet when he was one or two years old,” boasted a Chinese grandfather in 2003.6 The quest to make the child into a superior student is taking root beyond Asia as well. Within American society, a new genre of fiction known as “admissions lit” documents the recent frenzied quest among families to navigate the educational hierarchy, starting with parents selecting the “best” preschool and ending with the child’s earning admission to the “right” college.7 Moreover, that frenzy is now beginning earlier in the child’s life. The recent popularity of multimedia products with purported educational value such as Baby Einstein, Baby Mozart, and Brain Quest, along with the preschool math and writing workbooks issued in America by the Japanese company Kumon, point to the further colonization of childhood’s early years by parental anxiety about children’s educational success and future social
status. Whereas Japan in the past has been derided in some quarters as a late-developing modern nation, the globalization of Japan’s modern obsession with children as superior students is evidence of Japan’s modernity, at least in this regard, being ahead of the times. As such, a history of modern Japanese childhood is a cautionary tale because it furnishes an understanding of the human costs that are inherent in the increasingly global pursuit of modernity’s dream: the attainment of social mobility through the child’s educational achievement.

The Middle Class in Modern Japan

The story of modern childhood unfolds within a broader social context—the making of a middle class in early twentieth-century Japan. Indeed, the rearing of superior students was widely declared the practice and province of the middle class in the prewar years; by the postwar years, it was considered the badge of middle-class identity. Yet such a version of middle-class identity was itself a historical product. In order to understand how a familial commitment to the child’s educational achievement became the emblem of belonging to a middle class, the historian must return to its originary years to explore the complicated, multifaceted process by which that understanding of the middle class was formed.

The formation of a middle class must be properly historicized by setting aside preconceived notions of what constitutes a “true” middle class and by moving beyond the view that its emergence was a natural, unproblematic outgrowth of capitalist development. The formation of a middle class was a historical contingency, not a historical certainty. Furthermore, the creation of a middle class, both as an ideal and as a collection of actual human beings, was not preordained but was argued into existence, built through effort, and forged in conflict. One way to root the emergence of a middle class in the particularities of the historical moment is to pay attention to the language of class. (By the language of class, I mean not simply the presence of terms like “upper class,” “middle class,” or “lower class” [or their approximates] in the historical record but also how historical actors used those terms to describe certain people and practices.) Because building a middle class was seen as an imperative task of modernization in Japan, references to a social middle appear regularly during the early twentieth century.
What were the terms used for the middle class? Who used them? What did they mean by those terms? What characteristics and attributes qualified an individual to be recognized as part of this group? Seeking answers to these questions reveals three important points about middle-class formation in Japan. First, the language employed to describe a middle class was never neutral. When employed in the early twentieth century, the terms for a middle class were as much ideological tool as social description, as much an attempt to shape reality as to reflect it. As a result, when we encounter references to a social middle in the archives of prewar Japan, we should examine critically what vision of the social order was being presented through the language of class. Second, between the 1890s and the 1930s, the middle class was a moving middle; in other words, who represented the middle class in public discourse changed over time. Third, Japan’s prewar middle class was imagined neither as a political force nor as an economic engine of growth but as a social foundation for national strength. In the early twentieth century, the mission of the middle class, as its advocates came to define it, was to produce a stratum of individuals capable of functioning as the well-educated managers of Japan’s modernity, both within the private sphere and the public sphere and within Japan’s territorial borders and in its growing empire. The family’s (in particular, the mother’s) training the child to excel academically came to be understood as the first step toward the child’s joining the middle class and, more broadly, as a crucial step toward the creation of a new modern social mainstay. In this way, family, woman, and child are central to the history of Japan’s version of modern middle-class formation.

The Language of Class

Historians today regularly examine the socially constructed nature of categories such as race, gender, and ethnicity, but few treat the category of class with similar scrutiny. Following Marx and others, historians have tended to view classes as groups whose shared consciousness and collective identities emerge organically amidst the modern capitalist reshaping of economy and society. More recently, however, a group of scholars including Gareth Stedman Jones, Dror Wahrman, Daniel Walkowitz, and Sarah Maza have begun to apply the insights of the so-called linguistic turn to the history of class formation. In their eyes, class is a socially constructed category, and in their work they have drawn attention to the overlooked role
of public language in constructing the social meaning of class. According to these historians, class identities emerge not simply from the common bonding experiences of social groups but also from the way classes are publicly defined and discussed. As a result, a historical understanding of class formation requires consideration of both the social reality of human lives and the representation of social classes in public discourse.

In particular, these historians argue that the language of class in the historical record must not be treated as mere description. As British historian Geoffrey Cossick has put it in the case of Victorian England, “Historians have too readily taken the language [of class] at face value, for the words used by Victorians to describe their society were no mere reflection of external reality, but an intervention within it.”11 The language of class was potent and powerful, intended to sway the social imagination and to influence human behavior. Combining close readings of texts with analysis of social change, these historians assess the dynamic relationship between public language and social reality. “The social experience of class has both a material element and a discursive element, and one is always giving shape to the other,” concludes American historian Stephen Rice.12 These insights inform the present investigation into the explosion of references to a social middle in Japan in the years from 1890 through 1930. In this historical era, a series of upheavals took place, including the acceleration of industrial and corporate capitalism, an increase in geographic mobility and urbanization, an efflorescence of periodical publications, and the expansion of post-elementary educational institutions. Coinciding with these trends was an eruption of what Dror Warhman has called the “middle-class idiom,” or the rhetoric used to describe a middle class at a particular historical moment. Examining the dynamic interplay between changing social conditions and shifting linguistic formulations of a middle class offers new perspectives into the social crucible that produced Japan’s version of a modern middle class.

To describe the social position of the people who shaped the public image of a middle class and also the people associated with membership among its ranks, I eschew using the term “middle class.” That is because I do not want to presuppose the definition and composition of a middle class that was in fact contested, fluid, and under construction in Japan’s early twentieth-century years. As a result, I employ the term “elite” to refer to the public definers and presumed
members of a middle class. A relatively narrow portion of the population, Japan’s prewar elite was composed of persons of privileged status, as measured by educational credentials, economic resources, social influence, and urban residence. Such status required graduation from secondary educational institutions (at the very least middle school for boys and girls’ higher school for girls); male salaried employment (in a corporation, bureaucracy, or educational institution); presence in an emerging network of urban institutions (including the print media, schools of higher learning, and department stores); and residence in a city (one that could be considered a regionally and nationally influential center of political, social, and cultural activity). Of course, not all elites in prewar Japan were the same. In the years between 1890 and 1930, the size of Japan’s elite population swelled and its composition changed. According to historian Minami Hiroshi, economic and educated elites numbered only 2 percent of the population in 1890; by 1930, the increase in the number of salaried, white-collar workers and professionals expanded the prewar elite to 10 percent of the population nationwide and 25 percent of the population in the cities. As a result, by the beginning years of the Shōwa era, people with significantly different backgrounds and resources might be described as elites.

The entangled relationship between two groups—established and aspiring elites—is a prominent part of this book’s storyline. Such a division reflects the way in which the privileged population of urban Japan was presented in public discourse: as divided between those who had status and those who wanted it. Established elites of the late Meiji era are the social actors considered in the first three chapters that constitute Part I of this study. This group was a Tokyo-centered collection of crusading reformers, social luminaries, and public intellectuals that included well-known figures such as Hani Motoko (editor of two widely circulated family magazines), Hatoyama Haruko (well-known mother of a prime minister and a professor of law at Tokyo Imperial University), Iwaya Sazanami (Hakubunkan editor and children’s storywriter), Nitobe Inazō (principal of the prestigious First Higher School and author of the 1899 book Bushidō: The Soul of Japan, written and published in English), and Takashima Heizaburō (child psychologist and head of Mitsu-koshi’s Children’s Goods Research Group), among numerous others. More generally, membership ranged to include professors at higher educational institutions, city and national politicians, editors of well-
regarded newspapers and magazines, highly educated women, and well-off families. These people were secure in their educational credentials, well versed in modern forms of knowledge, and firmly established through high-paying salaried employment or inherited wealth (or a combination of both); as a result, they spoke with authority of the need for a middle class and pronounced with confidence their ability to lead it. By social origin, many were the product of middle and lower samurai or wealthy peasant (gōnō) ancestry, two social groups from the Tokugawa era (1600–1868) with a well-developed sense of themselves as a middling stratum located between aristocracy and higher samurai at the upper end and the bottom ranks of the samurai and the majority of the commoners at the lower end. They were also two Tokugawa-era groups known for their highly developed sense of social leadership based upon their self-avowed superior morality and education. Indeed, this historically conditioned sense may have impelled this late Meiji population to initiate the project of forming a new social group intended to function as the stable foundation of a rapidly modernizing Japan. Of course, not all well-off elites in prewar Japan involved themselves in the effort to build a new social center. For instance, families descended from the Kyoto aristocracy and from Tokugawa-era daimyo and high-ranking samurai, in addition to the extremely wealthy families that owned industrial conglomerates (zaibatsu) and the nouveau riche (narikin), played no activist role in the formation of a middle class in prewar Japan. However, these upper elites were a crucial part of the public discourse on a middle class, for they were often disparagingly deemed the “upper reaches of society” (jōryū shakai) and the source of outdated customs and injurious ideals.

In contrast to established elites, aspiring elites (what might be called “social aspirants”) were defined by their recent migration from the countryside to the city (or from small town to larger city), their tenuous economic and social position in the early twentieth-century urban landscape, and their abundance of upward-climbing ambition. In terms of educational credentials, they were graduates of middle schools, girls’ higher schools, normal schools, and professional schools, not from the exclusive higher schools and universities occupied by established elites. By profession, they occupied the lower ranks of corporate and governmental bureaucracies or worked as schoolteachers and journalists; in terms of economic resources, they were relatively humble in background but by no means poor. None-
theless, as Earl Kinmonth has argued, early twentieth-century aspirants were intensely interested in upward mobility and were driven by the quest for wealth, not the quest for public recognition and social influence that inspired established elites of the late Meiji years.\textsuperscript{15} These urban migrants usually hailed from strata of society not wholly unfamiliar to established elites—such as the bottom levels of the samurai class or the ranks of merchants and middling landlords. At the same time they often appeared to established elites as a different breed motivated by different (and baser) concerns. Though aspiring elites were present in the late Meiji years, they became a numerically significant social group in the Taishō era, a time during which the socially aspiring family, including its mother and children, were transformed into the icons of a new meritocratic society and the symbols of a new populist vision of a middle class. That story, in addition to the antagonistic response of established elites to its unfolding, is the subject of Chapters 4 and 5 in Part II.

Although the distinction between established elites and aspiring elites allows the historian to trace important social battles in early twentieth-century Japan, it is also an admittedly imprecise formulation of the social order. First, the composition of these categories was fluid. Numerous aspiring elites of the 1900s achieved upward mobility and occupied by the 1920s a social position much closer to the world of established elites; during the same time period, there were those established elites, albeit fewer in number, who struggled to maintain their status or experienced downward mobility, while a greater number of people clawed their way into the lowest ranks of respectable society through educational achievement. As a result, the boundaries of these categories underwent significant changes, especially as the total number of elites swelled in the 1910s and 1920s and the markers of status proliferated and shifted. Moreover, and most important, Japan’s elite population was not simply split into two camps but was divided into various groups based upon differences in economic, educational, social, and cultural capital. However, compared to the historiography on the European and American middle classes, much more work in the Japanese case—both a reevaluation of existing scholarship and the initiation of new research—needs to be done to map the expansion and fracture of a prewar urban elite and to describe Japan’s prewar middle class as a social group characterized by, in the words of European historian Peter Gay, “an invincible plurality . . . coexisting with a measure of underlying unity.”\textsuperscript{16}
Only then will we be able to speak of the presence of a middle class and middle classes in modern Japan.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{A MOVING MIDDLE}

The middle class was conceived through public language, but it also emerged as the result of much sustained effort by its would-be members. In their study of the Swedish middle classes, historical anthropologists Orvar Frykman and Jonas Löfgren draw attention to the role of human agents in the construction of social classes. Although they rightly caution against understanding the dynamics of class formation as “a conscious strategy in which blueprints are drawn up and construction platforms nailed together,” they also invite the historian to pay more attention to how individuals and groups self-consciously construct a community of like-minded individuals, deem themselves a social class, and use that label to attain legitimacy and power.\textsuperscript{18} Drawing upon these insights, this book treats the building of a middle class in Japan as a concerted yet contested process, characterized as much by self-conscious building as by unexpected construction problems. The result was the following: from the 1890s through the 1920s, the middle class was a moving middle in its number, composition, and identity.

In the late Meiji years, a collection of established elites endeavored to manage Japan’s transition to modernity through the construction of what they called a “middle core of society” (\textit{chūtō shakai}). The rapid state-led push for modernization had produced a new Japan, perched on the cusp of achieving full-blown modernity with all its attendant glories and difficulties. For example, the building of a party-based political system was also yielding struggles for political participation; the early Meiji influx of Westernization and rapid mastery of things Western was producing concern about Japanese national identity; the onset of industrialization was manufacturing its own social problems, including a volatile group of urban laborers; the acceleration of mobility, both geographic and social, was generating feverish ambitions among the populace and breaking down social hierarchies.\textsuperscript{19} None of these difficulties had given way to full-blown crisis, but late Meiji leaders of state and society were anxious to prevent social instability and unrest. As a result, beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, they initiated a multi-pronged project of social management that was part reactive, part preemptive.
Their efforts to direct society’s growth and shape the social imagination are an important moment in one of Japan’s fundamental modern transformations: the shift from status to class, from aristocracy to meritocracy, from a society where birth determined social position to one where merit determined social place. Of course, in practice, social position in a status-based society was often more fluid than acknowledged, whereas social position in a class-based society was often more fixed. At first glance the transition appears quick and resolute in Japan’s case. Less than a decade after Japan’s modern revolution—the Meiji Restoration of 1868—the national government formally abolished the former ruling status group known as the samurai, taking away both their right to wear swords and to receive a stipend. Restrictions on occupation, travel, clothing, and hairstyles were also lifted. Now, in theory, (almost) everyone was equal, free to pursue their dreams and capitalize on their talents. Striking down status barriers, however, did not immediately produce a world where all felt able (or knew how) to strive toward meritocratic mobility. Such a transition to meritocracy proved difficult, conflicted, and protracted, arguably achieving resolution only at the beginning of the Shōwa era. The 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s were plagued by debate about the desirability of the shift from a stable status-based society to a fluid modern one, in addition to arguments about which group—former samurai, scholars, or country gentlemen—was best suited to lead it. Yet these early and mid-Meiji years were characterized by worries about the shape and ethos of a new meritocratic society, not by the emergence of a meritocratic society itself. There were relatively few post-elementary educational institutions able to function as a well-defined path to social ascent, nor was there a far-reaching print media able to promote meritocratic mobility as either a seeming possibility or a widespread social ideal. Such a state changed by the turn of the twentieth century with the proliferation of urban immigrants seeking to improve their lot, the numerical increase in urban post-elementary educational institutions, and the emergence of a variegated print media committed to selling dreams of social advancement. The rise of an urban world suffused with ambition and fixated on getting ahead in the world (risshin shusse) struck leaders of state and society as both welcome and worrisome. On the one hand, many had long recognized the inevitability and the desirability of establishing a meritocratic society where talent, not privilege, ruled the day. Increasing the ranks of society’s
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A meritorious elite was deemed necessary in order to increase the number of citizens committed to creating a modern society, a modern economy, a modern empire—in short, a modern Japan. On the other hand, establishing a meritocratic society also threatened to open avenues of advancement to all who sought upward mobility and augured the crumbling of stable (and inherited) social hierarchies. How to crack open society’s elite without destabilizing society was a fundamental dilemma of late Meiji Japan.

Turn-of-the-century leaders of state and society, eager to manage Japan’s transition to meritocracy, sought to guide the increasing number of urban social aspirants and to channel their ambition toward desirable ends. Their initial solution was to call for the formation of a middle class, or what they called the “middle core of society” mentioned above. After all, they noted, one look at the world’s powerful nations revealed a key ingredient to national strength: the presence of a sizable and strong middle class. “England has been crowned the global power, in part, because the families of its middle core of society are numerous and well developed,” argued Takakusu Junjirō, scholar of Buddhism and president of the Tokyo Foreign Language School, in 1909.23

The late Meiji calls to create a “middle core of society” were thus part proactive—an attempt to build a modern nation that resembled and rivaled Western powers—and part reactive—a response to the disorientation and anxiety engendered by the appearance of the social aspirant and the spread of social mobility (both actual and feared). Part I of this book spans the late Meiji years and examines the project of social management initiated by three allied groups of established elites—family reformers, scientific experts, and well-educated women. Together and simultaneously, they worked to build a middle-class society able to anchor the growth of the urban world, preserve stable social hierarchies, and function as a widening foundation for national strength. Reform-minded elites employed institutions (higher educational institutions, print media, and department stores), ideologies (the moral family and the scientific family), and individuals (the ryōsai kenbo, or “good wife, wise mother,” and the shōkokumin, or “little citizen”) to produce a vision of the middle class with the family as its defining institution and with women and children as its defining members. It was also a hierarchical vision of a middle class, with highly educated, financially established families as the class’s leaders and aspiring elites as their dutiful followers.
It was an elitist vision of a middle class intended to brake social change without halting it. From the perspective of its promoters, this vision validated the dreams of social aspirants and sanctioned their desire to join ranks with those of higher status, yet also tamed the aspirants’ ambition by offering them a permanently subordinate place within the so-called middle class. It was a pyramidal vision of a middle class, with established elites at the peak, aspiring elites at the base, and the gulf between the two set in stone.

In Taishō-era Japan, the project of building a middle class took an unexpected turn. Although the Taishō still remained centered upon the activities of family, woman, and child as the defining emblems of middle-class life, who represented the middle class and who controlled the construction project shifted. As detailed in Part II, a host of institutions and individuals—including new segments of the publishing industry, elementary schools, the Ministry of Education, the “self-made woman” (as will be discussed in Chapter 4) and the child known as the superior student (yūtōsei)—combined to reconfigure the social imagination and to remake the public definition of what it meant to be middle class. The middle class was no longer conceived as a pyramid but as a ladder, one upon which everyone was able to climb up or slide down. Social hierarchies were presented as fluid, not fixed; mobility, not stability, was the new defining ethos of a middle class. Furthermore, it was not the established elite but the aspiring elite who now represented the middle class. These social aspirants no longer appeared as the obedient followers of the late Meiji years. Within a society claiming to have achieved what I call “meritocratic modernity,” aspirants scraped, tugged, and elbowed their way upward via competitive striving, primarily through training their children to pass the entrance examinations to secondary school and beyond. Aspiring elites held no special regard for society’s higher ups and challenged the well-off to outwork and outperform their children in the new meritocratic world. Their ambition was sanctioned by a new populist vision of a middle class championed first by newly influential segments of the mass media and ultimately approved by the nation-state. During the 1910s and 1920s, the broadening of the middle class, both in its public image and its actual numbers, brought not only a widely embraced vision of a new social order but new conflicts as well. Established elites and others vituperated against aspiring elites for their brazen ambition and promoted the “childlike child”
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(kodomorashii kodomo) as an alternative to the yūtōsei; despite these efforts, they were ultimately powerless to prevent the new populist definition of a middle class and the vision of the child as yūtōsei from taking permanent root in modern Japan. The early 1930s therefore marked a moment of closure in the battle to define and build a middle class for twentieth-century Japan.

THE MIDDLE CLASS AS SOCIAL FOUNDATION FOR NATIONAL STRENGTH

Historians of America, Europe, and Asia are only beginning to explore the global nature of modernity within the twentieth-century world. Too long confined within and by national borders, scholarship on modern history has tended to overlook the similarity and simultaneity of change across the modern globe. Such contemporaneity is an important part of this book’s two primary stories: the making of modern childhood and the making of a modern middle class in early twentieth-century Japan. For instance, the middle class in Japan shared important components of their identity—a commitment to moral living, the employment of scientific knowledge within daily life, the championing of educational achievement based on merit, the pursuit of leisure, and a flirtation with antimodern sentiment—with similar groups in the United States, England, France, and Germany. That said, the middle classes worldwide also possessed national particularities in addition to global similarities. For example, Dror Warhman documents how the middle-class idiom in early nineteenth-century England was particularly present in the realm of political discourse and was mobilized in times of political crisis, whether the French Revolution, the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, or the Reform Bill of 1832. In the French case, Lisa Tiersten argues for the centrality of taste, consumerism, and culture to the public image of the bourgeoisie in nineteenth-century France, and Jeffrey M. Hornstein draws connections between home ownership and the American sense of middle-classness. In the public discourse of early twentieth-century Japan, however, middle-class identity was associated less with politics or culture or home ownership than it was with the family’s quest for educational achievement. For example, consider the fact that in early twentieth-century public discourse, the adjectival phrase “middle-class” (chūtō; chūryū) regularly appeared alongside the terms for family (katei) and lady (fujin); by contrast, there was no equally popular term for the “middle-class man” or “middle-class occupation.” Such linguistic evidence suggests how the family was publicly
constructed—self-consciously, and at times, unconsciously—as the institutional cradle of Japan’s middle class. Of course there was no explicit decision to define middle-class identity in these terms; however, such a version of the middle class was the product of its times. A family-centered definition of a middle class made sense to early twentieth-century leaders of state and society for a multitude of reasons; most important, these so-called middle-class families were expected to be the fount of future well-educated citizens able to create a modern society at home and to maintain a growing empire abroad. By contrast, a political or economic definition of a middle class held little appeal. Prewar state leaders never publicly associated the middle class with the right to political participation, arguably because they feared the potential instability resulting from an expansion of political rights; nor did they discuss the middle class as an engine of economic growth, as they would in the 1950s, since Japan’s prewar middle class appeared too small to stimulate the prewar economy. In sum, the family, the woman, and the child are essential to an understanding of Japan’s particular case of early twentieth-century middle-class formation.

The history of the middle-class Japanese family makes clear the need to refine the all-too-common division of modern society into a female, private sphere of tranquility and a male, public sphere of struggle. No such separation of spheres existed in prewar Japan, where the family was imagined in terms far different from the ideal dominant in the American and European world of the time: the family as haven from the heartless world. The modern Japanese family was conceived as the building block of the middle class and the nation, and its history reveals the degree to which the private sphere and the public sphere were intertwined, not separated, throughout Japan’s twentieth century. The history of Japan’s modern family shows not only how the public sphere—the nation-state, scientific experts, social reformers—intruded into the private sphere, but also how the managers of the private sphere—namely, well-educated mothers—ventured into the public sphere in order to master its precepts and to import them into the home. The result was a private sphere that operated on principles not unlike those of the public sphere: moral striving, scientific rationality, and competitive struggle.

As this type of family became the purported foundation of the middle class and the nation, the family’s leader also emerged as a leader of class and nation. And in early twentieth-century Japan, the
family had a new leader in the person of the highly educated woman known as the ryōsai kenbo. Again, in many ways unappreciated, women’s history is central to the history of Japan’s twentieth-century middle class. 27 In fact, the making of Japan’s middle class was arguably not only family-centered but also female-led. The Japanese woman—in particular, the highly educated mother—was the public face of the middle class in the early twentieth century, appearing as its preeminent symbol in Ministry of Education pronouncements, a budding periodical press, or speeches at key educational institutions—girls’ higher schools, department stores, and women’s clubs—within an emerging urban civil society. These women were touted as the model mothers of a new Japan and the rearers of the next generation of family, class, and nation. Numerous historians in Japan and elsewhere rightly point to the constraints imposed upon women by the ideology of modern middle-class motherhood; however Japan’s ryōsai kenbo also involved themselves in new arenas of activity and garnered new forms of power as parents. 28 Whether through her acquisition of new forms of education and scientific knowledge, through her ability to marginalize masculine authority within the home, or through her increasing presence in the public sphere, the educated mother of the middle class was a striving and ambitious figure in modern Japan.

For too long, however, Japan’s prewar population of highly educated mothers have been lumped into the single category of ryōsai kenbo without regard for difference in socioeconomic position. With the rapid increase in the number of girls’ higher schools in the 1910s and 1920s, however, higher education became available to women from families of more modest means. These newly educated “self-made women” acted differently from the more established and affluent ryōsai kenbo. The history of Japan’s first generation of self-made women furnishes not only a further glimpse into the story of female ambition and achievement in the modern world but also a new perspective on the underexamined interplay of gender and class in early twentieth-century Japan. During the Taishō era, this aspiring, influential female figure successfully challenged an established elite’s monopoly on educational achievement, threatened the rigidity of the prewar social order, and contributed to a redefinition of the middle class. The most potent power held by this type of mother was the power to achieve social mobility. She realized mobility less for herself than for her children, by training them to become yūtōsei and to as-
cend through Japan’s prewar educational hierarchy. As educational credentials became the recognized prerequisite to social advancement in the early twentieth century, these women employed the educational system, especially the mechanisms enabling the child’s admission into middle school for boys and girls’ higher school for girls, to help improve the child’s future social position. Increasing numbers of mothers pushed their children to seek education beyond elementary school and, as a result, the competition to pass the entrance examination to middle school and girls’ higher school became intense, creating the social phenomenon known (then and now) as “examination hell.” These women were the earliest incarnation of the “education mother” (kyōiku mama), the icon of the middle class in the postwar years.

Finally, in addition to the family and the mother, the child and the child’s life became reflective and constitutive of the emerging public definition of what it meant to be middle class. If to be middle class was to aspire for educational achievement, as it came to be defined by the late 1920s, then the child became the vehicle of that aspiration. In Taishō Japan, increasing numbers of families headed by proto-education mothers reshaped their children’s lives to conform to the newly ascendant ideal of the child in early twentieth-century Japan—the child as yūtōsei. Such a vision of the child appealed both to the family seeking upward mobility and to the nation-state that needed disciplined, educated workers able to further Japan’s capitalist and imperialist growth. The vision of the superior student only increased in popularity across the twentieth century, as Japan’s children matured into the human engine of postwar “high-speed growth.” Although this study stops short of an examination of how the middle-class ideal was both massified and redefined during the key decades of the 1950s and the 1980s, it suggests that the prewar definition of the middle class as a child-centered, educationally obsessed, socially aspiring stratum survived the war and prospered into the years beyond. In postwar Japan, more and more families worked busily to become middle class, to drive their children toward educational achievement, and to contribute to the national project of economic growth. The result for postwar Japan by the 1970s was an increasing GNP, increasing affluence, and an increasing sense of itself as a middle-class nation.29 Alongside these achievements was also an increasing awareness of the underside of Japan’s postwar social transformation. The competition to enter higher educational
institutions only intensified by the end of the twentieth century; similarly, “examination hell” became only more hellish, as shoulder-ing the stress of examination preparation became a defining experi-ence of childhood nationwide, and the family’s and child’s daily life became narrowly fixated on the quest for educational success. In this way, the child was not only the symbol and enabler of Japan’s twentieth-century vision of a middle class, but also its victim.