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“The Waste of Society as Seen through Women’s Eyes:”: waste, gender, and national belonging in Japan

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Chapter 4

Waste Reduction, Citizenship, and the Housewife Identity: Recycling Volunteers in Tsukuba

“This feeling that, because it’s *mottainai* [wasteful], we have to do something – if this feeling went away, I think this [recycling] business would also disappear.”

Shōno Takako, recycling volunteer (interview by the author, April 1, 2015)

As discussed in the previous chapter, the housewife identity can be viewed as a marker of both community and national belonging for Japanese women. Although many of the housewife’s traditional tasks are performed in private, inside the home, some of them take her into the public view. Properly separating household waste and putting it out at the proper time, often at the same time as other housewives, is one such public expression of the housewife role. Another is engaging in volunteer activities.

Volunteering in Japan tends to be performed by women, particularly those who identify as housewives. Due to the nature of Japanese working culture, which encourages excessive working hours among full-time employees, housewives are more likely than men or women working full-time to have the free time to engage in volunteer activities. According to a government survey carried out by the National Social Welfare Association in 1995, 80 percent of volunteer group members are women (Nakano 2005, 2). The vast majority of volunteers in Japan are middle-aged housewives and men of retirement age. A government survey in 1996 found that volunteer rates were highest among women in their 30s, at 35%; for men, the highest rates of volunteering were among men in their 60s, at 31% (Nakano 2005, 3).

Most volunteer activities in Japan tend to take place at the grassroots, community level. Traditional community organizations such as neighborhood associations and local women’s and children’s organizations have maintained relatively high membership rates, estimated to be over 90% in most areas (Haddad 2007). This was also true of the neighborhood association I visited in an outlying area of Tsukuba (see Chapter 3). In addition to traditional membership organizations like neighborhood associations, housewives also tend to belong to grassroots advocacy groups focused on issues related to

motherhood and the housewife identity: parent-teacher associations, consumer safety groups, food co-ops, and local environmental groups. Noguchi (1992) notes that in the early 1990s, the prevalence of housewives in grassroots environmental group was notable: “The environmental movement in Japan [...] has tended to remain in a grass-roots stage, with virtually no large, well-financed organizations acting on a national level. [...] What is perhaps most striking about this vast number of tiny organizations is that so many are run not out of offices by paid professionals but out of homes by volunteer housewives. [...] In fact, when Suda Harumi, the head of the staff at the [National Center for Citizens’ Movements], was contacted for information on environmental groups led by housewives, his response was, ‘Oh, that’s easy. Almost all environmental groups are run by housewives’” (Noguchi 1992, 339-340).

Volunteer groups related to waste and recycling are not uncommon in Japan. As early as 1990, the Japan Recycling Citizens’ Center (Nippon Recycling Undō Shimin no Kai), “a loose network of recycling groups,” had as many as 40,000 supporters, and included “many local groups that recycle a variety of materials from cooking oil to used batteries and milk cartons” (Holliman 1990, 285). It is difficult to estimate the exact number of community recycling organizations in Japan today, especially because many, including the Tsukuba Recycle Market (Tsukuba Risaikuru Maaketto), which will be discussed in this chapter, are not registered non-profit organizations or indeed officially registered in any way. This type of community-level, unofficial volunteering unrelated to a national organization or policy aim is characteristic of the type of public activism undertaken by housewives that LeBlanc terms “bicycle citizenship:” “In ruling politics out of their consideration of possible solutions to social problems, volunteers shaped what might have been citizenship into something else – something that looked like energetic citizenship in nearly every aspect except its rejection of political routes to social change – bicycle citizenship” (LeBlanc 1999, 91).

From 2015-2016, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork with two volunteer waste-reduction organizations in Tsukuba, interviewing the volunteers and participating in the groups’ volunteer activities. As noted in Chapter 3, Tsukuba is relatively unique among Japanese cities as it was established from the top down by the national government as a planned “science city” for governmental and private research centers. This situation created tension between the original residents of the towns that merged to form the new city and the middle-class professional newcomers who migrated there with their research centers. It also caused loneliness and isolation for the families of the (mostly male) researchers, who were separated from their preexisting networks in Tokyo or other cities and forced to start anew. In her ethnographic study of the “pioneer housewives” who came to Tsukuba in the 1970s and 1980s, Larzalere (2006) observes that “The urban researchers’ wives who first came to Tsukuba were not prepared to live in the remote outreaches of the Ibaraki countryside. Unlike their researcher husbands who had a readymade workplace with an established network of colleagues, the women arrived with little connection to the

locality. For the most part, they did not know each other or their Ibaraki neighbors. The housewives found themselves isolated and out of place in a new town with an infrastructure still under construction” (Larzalere 2006, 81).

The feelings of loneliness, isolation, and being “out-of-place” (*bachigai*) sometimes manifested as physical symptoms, especially stomach pains, which prompted many to seek medical advice. This feeling of malaise was termed “Tsukuba syndrome” by doctors at Tsukuba Hospital (Larzalere 2006, 97). There was a spate of suicides among both researchers and housewives; by 1980, “the suicide rate among Tsukuba researchers rose to the highest in the nation” (Hamilton 1992, 572). Larzalere recounts one of her housewife informant’s experience with “Tsukuba syndrome:”

I have been here for six years. I came here from Tokyo in 1983. When I first came to Tsukuba I felt very lonely because the city was very inconvenient. And, I didn’t have any friends here. I had never experienced living in an apartment-style group of buildings. I felt very lonely and got sick. Every morning I felt very bad. I didn’t get up very early in the morning. At night, I used to cry a lot and couldn’t sleep. Later I felt so bad one morning that I went to the hospital. The doctor said, “You have the Tsukuba-syndrome.” He told me that other people had similar problems as myself and had gotten sick like me. I felt like that for two or three months. Later I got a job and made many friends doing interesting work. First, I worked at a part-time job in a mechanical engineering library. Just doing office work photocopying things and serving tea. After that, I got a job at the United States Pavilion. That was very interesting. But, at the same time, I got pregnant. So I had a hard time dealing with the job. But I had a good experience there. [...] I think that getting a job and meeting people helped to make me better. (Larzalere 2006, 97-98)

Larzalere notes that membership in groups, especially semi-mandatory membership groups like parent-teacher associations and resident or neighborhood associations, helped Tsukuba women make contacts and eventually form groups or associations focused on their particular interests. She describes groups created by women to explore their shared interests or hobbies – an English conversation circle, a storytelling club – as well as volunteer groups in which women “are motivated by their desire to better Japanese society” (Larzalere 2006, 111). Membership in these groups allowed women to experience a sense of community and shared purpose, as well as establish a role for themselves within the context of the group and express their individual identities.

This chapter will focus on two such volunteer groups created by housewives in Tsukuba, both of them founded out of a sense of housewives’ responsibility for reducing waste and promoting recycling. The first, NPO Tsukuba Creative Recycle (NPO Hōjin Tsukuba Kurieitibu Risaikuru), is a non-profit

organization that operates a “recycle shop” where people can donate unwanted goods which are then sold at a low price. The second, Tsukuba Recycle Market, is a flea-market-style event held four times a year in which people can directly sell their unwanted goods to others who might find them useful. Both groups were based on the idea that ordinary people, especially housewives, can take small actions in their everyday lives to reduce waste.

The founders of both groups framed their activities around their housewife identity: although the garbage problem was a large-scale municipal problem, it was also one directly related to the housewife role, and one which even small actions undertaken by housewives could help to solve. Shōno Takako, the founder of the Tsukuba Recycle Market, recalled that after seeing Tsukuba’s garbage problem firsthand through a visit to the city’s sanitation facilities, asked herself “What can I do on my own?” to solve the problem, and came up with the idea for housewives’ group recycle market. Similarly, Terada Kumiko, the founder of Tsukuba Creative Recycle, decided to do something about Tsukuba’s garbage problem after learning about the issue, and began a recycling club with her friends, which eventually evolved into a large-scale non-profit organization operating several recycle shops in Tsukuba.

In the following sections, I will describe the history and current operations of these organizations, and analyze how the groups’ housewife founders and volunteers used waste reduction and recycling activities as a social outlet and source of community that also reinforced their identity as housewives.

Creative Recycle: Tsukuba’s Volunteer Recycle Shop

The first example of this type of community volunteer organization founded and run by women I will examine in this chapter is Tsukuba Creative Recycle, a non-profit organization based in Tsukuba. Its principal activity is operating a second-hand “recycle shop;” it also donates clothes and other items to those in need in Japan and overseas. The organization is one of only a few non-profit recycle shops in Tsukuba (other recycle shops, such as the large chain stores Wonder Rex and Off House, are run as for-profit companies).

Creative Recycle has existed in various forms since the early 1990s, and was officially registered as an NPO in 2003. Currently, the organization runs a single recycle shop, located in Tsukuba’s Chūō Park in a building owned by the city which the group, as an NPO, is able to use rent-free. The shop receives donations of clothes and other used household goods and sells them at extremely low prices. The shop, which is open for only 2.5 hours five days a week, is staffed by volunteers, all of whom are women (although there were also men volunteers in previous years).



Map showing the location of Tsukuba Creative Recycle in relation to Tsukuba Station (Google Maps 2017).



The outside entrance to Tsukuba Creative Recycle's shop in Chūō Park (March 25, 2015).

The history of Creative Recycle is deeply intertwined with the history of the city of Tsukuba itself. As discussed in Chapter 3, in 1963 the national government announced its plan to create “Tsukuba Science City,” a planned city that would house the country’s burgeoning national research institutions, which were occupying valuable space in the rapidly expanding capital²⁶. The site chosen seemed ideal for the purpose: a relatively unpopulated, relatively flat area close enough to Tokyo to be convenient but well outside of the metropolitan area and its growing urban sprawl. The first institution moved to Tsukuba in 1972, followed by dozens more over the next two decades.

With the institutions came researchers and bureaucrats, accompanied by their families. Miyamoto Yōko, a current Creative Recycle volunteer who came to Tsukuba when her husband’s research institute was transferred, explained that in that early period, Tsukuba could hardly be called a town, much less a “science city:” “There were no shops, there was nothing; the people who moved here then had to take a bus to Tsuchiura [a city located about 12 km from Tsukuba] just to go shopping. Here [in Tsukuba] there was *nothing*. It was just a place in the mountains” (interview by the author, February 16, 2016). For new residents, many of whom came from bustling Tokyo, Tsukuba’s lack of development was shocking and often disappointing. Mrs. Miyamoto recalled that there was a spate of suicides in those early years (“Leaving the city and ending up in the countryside, it’s lonely... Some people couldn’t accept that environment, you know”). Others, however, turned their energies toward improving their new home.

The nature of employment at Japanese government institutions means that employees are frequently transferred to other locations. The establishment of the University of Tsukuba and other universities in the 1970s and 80s, with the influx and departure of students every spring, increased the number of people whose residence in Tsukuba could be considered transitory. Terada Kumiko, the wife of a public employee at a research institute affiliated with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Monbukagakushō), noticed that large amounts of perfectly good things were being thrown out when Tsukuba residents moved away, and resolved to do something about it.

Mrs. Terada, described by those who knew her as a woman of rare talent and drive, moved to Tsukuba in the 1970s during the earliest wave of institution transfers and immediately began trying to better her surroundings. She started a co-op, personally driving to pick up food from farms and shops and delivering it to members, and was involved in a wide variety of volunteer activities. When she noticed Tsukuba’s garbage issue in the 1990s, she and two friends organized a discussion group to decide what to do about the issue. They began organizing a “recycle plaza” – a place for people to sell and buy used items that might otherwise be thrown away – once a month in a public park. This group became the

²⁶ According to an explanatory pamphlet published by the Ibaraki Prefectural Government, the purpose of the new science city was “reducing congestion in Tokyo, promoting science and technology, and enhancing higher education” (Ibaraki Prefectural Government 2013).

Recycling Promotion Assembly (Risaikuru Suishin Kaigi), and eventually NPO Creative Recycle (interview by the author, February 16, 2016).

Kawaguchi Setsuko, a volunteer who was involved in the group from its early days, said that back then, they sold their own unwanted things, and donated the profits to an international education fund. She remembered that they would simply load all the things into their bicycle baskets and take them to the park, where they simply set items down on a plastic tarp to sell to passersby. In the summer they would set up a tent for shade. The group started out with about 8 or 10 members, but grew quickly as curious housewives stopped by to look at the items and were persuaded to join the movement. Mrs. Miyamoto, who has been volunteering with Creative Recycle for over 20 years, first learned about the organization this way. As more and more people, mostly housewives, got involved, Mrs. Terada moved the “recycle plaza” to her own house, holding it on the veranda. Mrs. Miyamoto estimates they had about 15-16 dedicated volunteers then, and according to an official Creative Recycle pamphlet, by January 1998, a year after the discussion group first started, they had gathered 108 signatures on a petition for the city government to establish a Recycling Department. As the size and popularity of the group’s recycling plazas grew, they decided to establish a more permanent location. They also stopped donating their proceeds to the education fund, and began to focus on supporting their own recycling activities (interview by the author, February 6, 2016).

In October 1998, the group (at this time still known as the Recycling Promotion Assembly) opened its first permanent recycle plaza, called the Numasaki Workshop (the building was located in Tsukuba’s Numasaki neighborhood), in a building that used to be a kindergarten but had been closed due to a lack of students. They received a subsidy from the Tsukuba city government to rent the building, which was extremely spacious. According to Mrs. Miyamoto, having so much space and not utilizing it to the fullest would have been *mottainai* (wasteful), so they began accepting donations not only of clothes and small items, which they had been accepting and selling at the temporary recycle plazas, but also furniture, bicycles, and large household appliances such as refrigerators and washing machines. They rented a truck once a month to transport large donations. The shop was open six days a week from 10:00 to 16:00; there were about 9 volunteers who worked in the shop then, five men (retirees) and four women (housewives). The volunteers were paid about 600 yen per hour. Because the shop was able to sell larger, more expensive items (even if at a considerable discount compared to buying the items new or from a for-profit recycle shop), the organization was able to afford the rent of the Numasaki Workshop building, the cost of renting a truck every month, shipping excess items overseas as charitable donations, and compensating its volunteers for their time.

In 2003, the group went through the somewhat arduous process of registering as an official non-profit organization. At that time, Mrs. Kawaguchi explained, NPOs were very trendy (*hayatta*) and the

Recycling Promotion Assembly succumbed to the allure, becoming the Registered NPO Tsukuba Creative Recycle (NPO Hōjin Tsukuba Kurieitibu Risaikuru). This transition meant that the organization would now have to pay taxes to the municipal and prefectural governments totaling about 70,000 yen per year, but also enabled them to qualify for certain benefits (interview by the author, February 6, 2016).

Capitalizing on its continued success and popularity, in 2004 the group opened a second location called Namiki Plaza. The Namiki location was also quite large, so they could continue accepting and selling large items; at this time, Namiki was just a secondary location, and only 2 volunteers worked there. In 2008, the Numasaki Workshop closed (the space was needed for a kindergarten once again), and after an extended closing sale, Creative Recycle's main operations were transferred to Namiki Plaza.

This was a turbulent time for the organization. Mrs. Terada, the driving force behind Creative Recycle, passed away at the age of 68; others stepped in to make sure the group could continue its work. Yoshida Keiko, a Tsukuba housewife who previously hadn't been involved (partly due to personal differences with Mrs. Terada), took on an active role: she created a website for the group, which helped substantially in attracting customers to Namiki Plaza's somewhat remote location, and led the group in participating in city-wide events like Earth Day. They also held activities like English lessons and arts and crafts workshops. When Mrs. Yoshida moved away from Tsukuba a few years later, these activities fell by the wayside as other volunteers did not have the energy or interest to continue them (interview by the author, February 16, 2016).

During the time that Namiki Plaza was the group's main location, the Home Appliance Recycling Law (Kaden Risaikuru Hō), a national law regulating the recycling of large household appliances, came into effect. Disposal of used refrigerators, washing machines, televisions, and air conditioners now had to be specially arranged through electronic companies and would incur a fee. As the disposal cost would be too high if the items failed to sell, Creative Recycle stopped accepting donations of large household appliances. In 2005, the city of Tsukuba had started charging a fee for the disposal of oversize waste of any kind, so the group also stopped accepting furniture and other large items.

These two policies together pushed Creative Recycle towards financial decline. Most of their income had come from these more expensive, large items; clothes and knick-knacks being sold for 100 yen or less could not compare. By 2010, the group could no longer afford to pay the rent for Namiki Plaza, and moved to a cheaper location at Ue no Shitsu. Despite being tens of thousands of yen cheaper per month, this new location also proved to be unaffordable, and at the end of 2010 Creative Recycle moved to its current location in the Chūō Park Rest House. This building is owned by the city, and the organization is able to occupy it rent-free due to its NPO status (interview by the author, February 6, 2016).

From 2011 until the present, the shop's opening hours have been 13:00 to 15:30, five days a week. Typically, only one or two volunteers staff the shop. Unlike in the Numasaki and Namiki days, the organization can no longer afford to pay volunteers; currently volunteers receive compensation for transportation costs only (and in months when sales are low, they may not even receive this). There are now five or six volunteers who staff the shop on a rotating basis. Mrs. Miyamoto, who has been involved in Creative Recycle almost since its inception, expressed doubt about its future viability, as most of the volunteers, like her, are in their 60s and 70s: "I don't know how long we can do this, you know? ... The others and I, we're not so young... In order to continue, if young people don't come..." (interview by the author, February 16, 2016). Currently, the youngest volunteer is Kaneda Mayumi, a housewife in her late forties.

Fieldwork at Creative Recycle

I carried out interviews with the volunteers and participant-observation fieldwork as a volunteer with Creative Recycle from March-April 2015 and January-February 2016. (As in the previous chapters, all names of informants and volunteers in this chapter are pseudonyms.) I was introduced to Creative Recycle through my observation of the Tsukuba City Waste Reduction Promotion Committee (Tsukubashi Ippan Haikibutsu Genryō tō Suishin Shingikai) in March 2015. A senior researcher at the National Institute for Environmental Studies, where I was based for my Tsukuba fieldwork from January to August 2015, was a member of the committee, and kindly arranged for me to observe one of their meetings and introduced me to each of the committee members. The committee members were representatives of various organizations or businesses with expertise or an interest in Tsukuba's waste management. One of these was Shōno Takako, the representative of NPO Tsukuba Creative Recycle, one of only three women on the seventeen-member committee. (One of the other women was a representative of a different citizens' group, and the third was a representative for a local company.) I contacted Mrs. Shōno after the committee meeting, and she agreed to let me interview her and invited me to come observe the recycle shop the following week. Mrs. Shōno, an energetic and outgoing septuagenarian, became my most enthusiastic and helpful informant. With her support, I was able to observe the recycle shop on multiple occasions, interview the staff, and become involved in the organization's activities.

I first visited Creative Recycle's shop in Chūō Park on March 25, 2015, after meeting Mrs. Shōno at the committee meeting and contacting her by email. Saying she wasn't sure if I'd be able to find it on my own, Mrs. Shōno met me at the city library, also located in the park, and guided me to Creative Recycle. The shop is located in a large concrete building at the edge of a pond, and is approached via a long walkway dividing the pond in two. Handwritten signs identifying the shop as NPO Tsukuba Creative

Recycle and explaining its purpose are displayed in the windows, which also reveal the shop's secondhand goods.

Mrs. Shōno led me through an open door into the dim shop. My first impression was of extreme clutter: haphazardly arranged objects covered every surface, including the counter with the register; the center of the shop was taken up by tightly packed clothes racks. A woman who looked to be in her fifties was behind the register; Mrs. Shōno introduced her as Satō Yumiko. I introduced myself and explained that I was interested in learning about waste and recycling in Tsukuba. Mrs. Shōno showed me around the shop, explaining its typical operations. She unlocked a back door and showed me the shop's storage area, which contained off-season items as well as a variety of items, like signposts and plastic dividers, to be used for an event called the Tsukuba Recycle Market which Mrs. Shōno organizes (Tsukuba Recycle Market will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter). At that time, I assumed that Creative Recycle and the Recycle Market were parts of the same overarching volunteer group, but I later learned that they are entirely separate organizations, connected only by the involvement of Mrs. Shōno and some of the other Creative Recycle volunteers.

After showing me the back room, Mrs. Shōno brought me back into the shop, and brought out a photo album of pictures from past Tsukuba Recycle Markets. She invited me to look through it while she and Mrs. Satō managed the shop. After about thirty minutes, Mrs. Shōno suggested we go to a nearby family restaurant for the interview I'd requested. During our two-hour talk, I learned a lot not only about Creative Recycle and the Tsukuba Recycle Market, but also about Mrs. Shōno's fascinating history as one of Tsukuba's "pioneer housewives" (Larzalere 2006), having moved to Tsukuba with her researcher husband in the early 1980s. Like many of the Tsukuba housewives discussed in Larzalere's study, Mrs. Shōno dealt with the loneliness and isolation of life in Tsukuba by engaging in volunteer activities; her own interests led her toward waste and recycling-related activities like the Tsukuba Recycle Market and Creative Recycle.

The three times I observed Creative Recycle in 2015, I visited only on days when Mrs. Shōno was working, not wanting to bother the other staff whom I had not yet met. Each of these times, I first asked Mrs. Shōno, and the other staff member if there was one, permission to record. Usually, Mrs. Shōno would explain some aspect of the shop to me (how customers have to fill out a form when donating items, how they weigh clothing on a scale to determine the price the donating customer should pay, etc.) during down times when there were few or no customers. When a customer came, she, or the other staff member if one was there at the time, would greet them, and often start chatting if the customer was an acquaintance, which was the case quite frequently. I had mentioned to Mrs. Shōno that I would also be interested in talking with the customers, so sometimes she also introduced me as a foreign student interested in Japanese recycling to customers she knew, and encouraged them to talk with me. When this

happened, I explained to the customer that I was studying recycling in Japan and wanted to know more about why people come to recycle shops like this, informed them that I was using an audio recorder, and then asked them a few questions (how frequently they come here, what they look for here, why they donated these items, etc.). When I was not talking to customers or listening to Mrs. Shōno's explanations, I stood quietly in the corner of the shop and made notes of my observations: the types of customers who came to the shop, what kind of things the staff and customers chatted about, what kind of items were frequently purchased, and so on.

When I began my second period of fieldwork in 2016, I wanted to focus more on the experiences of Creative Recycle volunteers. This time, I asked Mrs. Shōno to ask each of the volunteers, who work at the shop on different days, if it would be acceptable for me to come to the shop and interview them. When the arrangement was made, I went to the shop on the designated day and interviewed the volunteer during the shop's operating hours. This arrangement was preferable, Mrs. Shōno told me while we were working out the schedule, because the volunteers are all housewives and need to get home fairly early to take care of their families. Another volunteer told me in an interview that this is also the reason for the shop's 2.5 hours/5 days a week operating schedule. (For a detailed list of fieldwork interactions related to NPO Tsukuba Creative Recycle, see Appendix 1.)

For each of these observation-interviews, I brought an explanation sheet I had prepared specifically for the Creative Recycle volunteer interviews explaining, in Japanese, the purpose of my research and the topics I wanted to discuss, as well as my contact information, and gave the volunteers time to read it before beginning the interview. I recorded each interview with a digital audio recorder, after asking permission. The interviews were conducted in a stop-and-start fashion during the 2.5 hours of shop operations. Typically, when a customer entered, the volunteer would stop talking to me and greet them, then resume what she had been saying (although one volunteer completely ignored the customers entering the shop while talking with me, which made me a bit uncomfortable). This method of observation-interview turned out to be useful, as sometimes interruptions led to new questions and topics once the customer had left.

Aims and Activities of Creative Recycle: Building Community by Reducing Garbage

According to Creative Recycle's informational pamphlet, the organization's catchphrase is "[Turning] Tsukuba's garbage into a mountain of treasure" (*Tsukuba no gomi o takara no yama ni*). At the recycle shop, people can donate their unwanted items – clothing, kitchen tools, even some smaller types of furniture – which are then sold in the shop for extremely low prices. An item of adult clothing typically sells for 100 yen; children's clothing is 50 yen. Dishes and cups range from 10 to 100 yen,

depending on their perceived quality (the prices are determined by the volunteers). During my observations of the shop, I never saw anything priced higher than 500 yen.

The group typically receives around 10 kilograms of clothing per month. Customers must bring their items to the shop themselves; there are no collection points elsewhere and the group no longer rents a truck to transport items. Creative Recycle donates a portion of the clothing it receives overseas (usually to the Philippines). As this charitable activity involves considerable shipping expenses, the group charges a small fee to accept clothing donations, but there is no charge for donations of other items.

Fees for clothing donations
Up to 5 kg: 300 yen
5-10 kg: 500 yen
10-15 kg: 800 yen
15-20 kg: 1000 yen

(NPO Tsukuba Creative Recycle promotional flier, “Recycle Plaza Chūō Park,” 2015.)

In addition to the overseas donations of clothing, the organization also disposes of unsold clothing (one volunteer told me that about three-fourths of the clothing the group receives remains unsold) by more local routes. The volunteers go through all the clothing twice a year, switching out the clothes to be sold in the shop seasonally and gathering together the clothes they deem unlikely to sell in order to dispose of them. Clothing that can neither be sold nor donated abroad is typically given to a cloth processing company in a nearby city. A volunteer transports the clothing to the factory in her car and is reimbursed by the organization for transportation expenses.

According to the group’s pamphlet, Creative Recycle has the following three goals:

- 1) Widespread promotion of garbage reduction and reuse/recycle activities among regular people in order to establish a recycling-oriented society with a low environmental impact
- 2) Promotion of social participation by elderly people and people with disabilities through our activities
- 3) International support activities for developing countries

The first goal echoes the official national environmental goal of creating a “sound material-cycle society” or “recycling-oriented society” (*junkangata shakai*). The appearance of this official-sounding phrase in the stated goals of a non-profit recycling organization suggests that national and local governmental efforts to promote the concept among the populace have been relatively successfully, at least in the case

of citizen groups with an interest in recycling. Creative Recycle has significant ties with the Tsukuba City government, and receives subsidies and financial support from the city, so perhaps it is unsurprising that they would include a government buzzword in their official pamphlets.

The second goal of encouraging “social participation” is perhaps one of the most important functions of Creative Recycle. During one of my observations, a volunteer had been chatting with an elderly customer; when the customer left, the volunteer explained that this type of interaction was not incidental, but an essential aspect of the shop’s purpose: “This kind of conversation, right, speaking [with people], communicating, is also really important” (interview by the author, February 16, 2016). I noticed this dynamic every time I visited Creative Recycle – the volunteers always made an effort to speak with every customer, and many returning customers became friends with the volunteers. In fact, a few of the volunteers began their involvement with Creative Recycle as customers.

The third goal, international support activities, is carried out via overseas clothing donations. In the past, when the organization was larger, they did other support activities, like a phone card collection drive for donation to African countries, but now their main international focus is clothing donations to the Philippines.

The shop is open Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday for only two and a half hours, from 13:00 to 15:30. The timing means that on weekdays especially, the majority of customers are elderly people, housewives, and students. Mrs. Shōno told me that one important function of the recycle shop is as a space for lonely people to come and visit and talk. There is also a hospital nearby, and the shop is located inside a large park, making it easy for casual wanderers to stop by and take a look around.

On the occasions I observed the shop for the duration of its opening hours, all or nearly all the customers were women. The few men I saw came mostly on weekends, and were either elderly or accompanying women I presumed to be their wives. The majority of customers were older women, although young women with small children also came fairly often. Occasionally non-Japanese customers came to the shop, mostly researchers (or researchers’ family members) at one of Tsukuba’s many research institutions or exchange students at Tsukuba University.

It seems that bargain hunting (or “searching for treasure” [*takaramono sagashi*] as one customer put it) at second-hand stores is not an activity for young, single men. Young men, who statistically are likely to be working full-time, are perhaps too busy to indulge in the kind of leisurely searching necessitated by a haphazardly laid out recycle shop like Creative Recycle. Unlike a regular store, at Creative Recycle you never know what items will be in stock (or in many cases where in the store they will be), which makes purposeful shopping impossible and encourages “treasure hunting.” When I asked one elderly woman customer what kind of items she was searching for, she replied “useful things” (*benrina mono*).

There are currently six volunteers who run the shop regularly during its operating hours, although there are others who do different tasks (transporting unsold clothing to a factory) or volunteer at the shop only occasionally. The volunteers are not paid for working at the shop, but they do receive reimbursements for any commuting expenses (in fact, most come to the shop by bicycle). Each volunteer works a different day of the week (Mrs. Miyamoto is the only one who works two days a week). There is a regular schedule, but if a volunteer can't work on her day for any reason then another volunteer will step in. The typical schedule for volunteers, as of 2016, was as follows:

Tuesdays: Mrs. Miyamoto

1st and 3rd Wednesdays: Mrs. Satō

2nd and 4th Wednesdays: Mrs. Ōhashi

Fridays: Mrs. Kaneda

Saturdays: Mrs. Miyamoto

1st, 2nd, and 3rd Sundays: Mrs. Morita

4th Sundays: Mrs. Shōno

The volunteers are all full-time housewives, except for Mrs. Satō who works part-time at a local newspaper. Most of them are in their 60s or 70s; the youngest, Mrs. Kaneda, is in her late forties. Many of them joined Creative Recycle relatively recently, within the last few years. Mrs. Miyamoto is the longest-serving volunteer, having been involved in the organization almost from its start. She started when the group was still holding their “recycle plaza” on a tarp in the park; she was encouraged to join by an acquaintance who was already in the group. Ōhashi Sachiko began volunteering about five years ago, around the time of the move from Namiki to Chūō Park. She was urged to join by Mrs. Shōno, who by that time (after the death of Mrs. Terada, the group’s founder) had become the de facto leader of Creative Recycle. Mrs. Shōno and Mrs. Ōhashi had been acquainted for years, ever since they both participated in organizing a local festival. Mrs. Ōhashi had never heard of Creative Recycle or visited the recycle shop before Mrs. Shōno encouraged her to first visit (she was very impressed with the low prices) and then join as a volunteer. Mrs. Kaneda also joined about five years ago. Her first interaction with Creative Recycle was as a customer – she lived nearby, and often walked around the park and stopped in the recycle shop on her way to the library. She came frequently to buy inexpensive clothing for her children and became friendly with the volunteers, especially Mrs. Shōno. When she mentioned that she had noticed that there did not seem to be many staff members, Mrs. Shōno asked her if she would be interested in becoming a volunteer.

It is clear that the main impetus for volunteering at Creative Recycle, at least for current members, is social pressure from friends and acquaintances (rather than, say, a preexisting interest in recycling). Most of the women are or have been involved in other types of volunteer activities, like the parent-teacher association at their children's school (Mrs. Kaneda told me that at her children's school, parents are actually required to participate in the PTA), teaching CPR classes, being a school lifeguard, or helping at a group for disabled children. Notably, Mrs. Shōno organizes the Tsukuba Recycle Market four times a year, and Mrs. Ōhashi is one of the volunteers for that event. Tsukuba Recycle Market, and its relationship with Creative Recycle, will be explained in more detail later in this chapter.

A typical day at Creative Recycle begins when the volunteer whose turn it is to staff the shop comes to unlock the doors. She then wheels a moveable cart displaying clothing, stored in the shop's entranceway while it is closed, outside, where it will attract customers (and where there is room for it). She also puts out a bright red banner saying "open" (*eigyōchū*). When customers enter the store, the volunteer will typically greet them, and sometimes chat with them about the weather or another topic. When a customer buys something, the volunteer enters the price of the items into the cash register, tells the customer the total, then takes the payment and gives back change if necessary; the cash register generates a receipt for the customer and the volunteer puts them money in the cash register.

When not helping or speaking with customers, volunteers sort through any donations that have been received but not yet processed. The volunteer decides the price of the item, enters that number on the price labeling machine, stamps out a sticker with the price on it, and attaches it to the item, which is then placed on the appropriate rack or shelf. The volunteers have complete discretion over pricing, which can sometimes lead to disagreements when two volunteers are working at the same time. As Mrs. Shōno told me, staff members (particularly newer versus older volunteers) have different opinions about the value of particular items, which can be difficult, especially when they must decide what to keep and what to throw out during the twice-yearly shop reorganization.

Volunteers also tend to be good customers of Creative Recycle. On several occasions that I observed, a volunteer going through recent donations would notice something she liked, pay for it (after determining a reasonable price, either on her own or in discussion with the other volunteer if there was another present), and take it home rather than put it out for sale. Volunteers also sometimes noticed and bought things already placed out for sale on the shelves. The items that caught the volunteers' eyes ranged from useful items for a specific purpose (a collapsible tent for a camping trip) to small gifts for loved ones (a thin brown scarf for Mrs. Shōno's husband, a decorative teacup for her mother).

At the end of the shop's opening hours, the volunteer prints off the total sales for the day from the cash register, and fills out a form with the day's total. The cash from the day's sales (the store does not accept credit cards) is placed with this form in an envelope with the date and name of the volunteer

written on it. About twice a month, Mrs. Shōno takes all of these envelopes and forms to deposit the money in the organization's bank account and to file the forms in a record book she keeps in her home.

In order to provide an in-depth picture of the daily workings of Creative Recycle, I will describe in detail one of my observations of the shop, which took place on January 12, 2016. I had arranged to meet Mrs. Shōno at Creative Recycle at 13:00, when it opened for the day, and I arrived five minutes early. She and another volunteer were already there setting up: propping the door open, bringing out a wheeled shelf of items to display outside, starting to sort through some previously donated items which had not yet been priced (Mrs. Shōno explained that they had been very busy before closing for the New Year's holiday so the volunteers hadn't had time to go through everything yet). That particular day, January 12), was the first day back open after the break; Mrs. Shōno and the other volunteer, Mrs. Miyamoto, greeted all the customers with a "Happy New Year" (*akemashite omedetō gozaimasu*), and gave me and the first few customers to arrive a small packet of hard candy, which she jokingly called a New Year's gift (*otoshidama*; this gift, typically given by parents to children, is almost always money). Mrs. Shōno also mentioned that around this time they would start going through their clothes inventory to determine what to keep and what to throw away or donate overseas. (Other household items, which typically sell much more quickly than clothing, are all set out for sale in the store and not stored in the back room.)

The shop was much busier that day than the times I had been there previously, in the spring. This may have been due to customers wanting to divest themselves of unwanted items after the traditional New Year's house cleaning (*ōsōji*). Three customers brought donations (and then all of them also stayed to browse), and during the two hours I was in the shop about seven customers came. This may not seem like a high number, but each customer tended to stay for a while (about 20-30 minutes), browsing through all the items, so there were not as many periods of the shop being empty as there had been when I'd come previously, especially for a weekday (it was Tuesday).

The main activity occupying the volunteers was sorting and pricing the new donations. This involved taking each item out of the box, unwrapping it if it was wrapped, as was the case with the many dishes and glasses they sorted that day, determining its price, labeling it, and placing it on a shelf or rack for sale. When both Mrs. Shōno and Mrs. Miyamoto were in the shop (Mrs. Shōno stepped out a few times to take phone calls or to chat with an acquaintance), they would suggest a price for the item they were looking at, and wait for agreement from the other before labeling it. When they discovered a box of 10 packets of bath powder (a powder that dissolves in the bath which purports to have a skin-softening or similar effect, and often adds color as well), there was a brief discussion of how to best divide and price them. Perhaps they should sell them individually for 20 yen each? Or all together for 100 yen? They decided to split the difference and divide them into two packs of five, for 50 yen each. I helped the

volunteers put the packets into small clear plastic bags and tie them with ribbon, before labeling them and placing them on the shelves. (The shop has a shelf full of packaging materials – bags, newspaper, ribbons – which donations had been delivered in, and which the staff saved to use for occasions like this.)

The sorting process became a lively activity – one of the volunteers would exclaim over a particularly beautiful or interesting item, and the other volunteer and sometimes the customers would look at it and discuss it. When Mrs. Miyamoto was unpacking a box of shoes, one of the customers came over to help, unwrapping the shoes and commenting on them (“Aren’t these dancing shoes? Like for tango?”) and chatting with the volunteers. The work of the shop became an opportunity for friendly interaction between the volunteers and the customers.

Even when the customers weren’t helping the volunteers, they still frequently chatted with them – while they were shopping, while they were paying, and after they paid and were lingering in the shop to continue the conversation. Most of these were regular customers and well known to both Mrs. Shōno and Mrs. Miyamoto; their conversations were friendly and touched on news about family members and mutual acquaintances. One customer that day even brought the staff a gift of homemade bread. This type of gift-giving by customers is common; I observed it many times during my fieldwork at Creative Recycle. (I was also often the recipient by association of such largesse. The first time I visited the store in 2015, I was given some of the candied orange peels a customer had brought for the staff; on one memorable occasion in 2016 I was given a cabbage.)

Mrs. Shōno took several phone calls while the shop was open, all of them related to Creative Recycle. The shop does not have a landline telephone, and Mrs. Shōno’s cell phone number is listed as the shop’s official contact number. The calls she took were questions about whether Creative Recycle was open again, and how to get there. She stepped out of the store about an hour before closing to talk with a friend; during this time, I continued helping Mrs. Miyamoto sort donations and help customers (I got a bag off a high shelf for an elderly lady and helped a foreign customer by translating her questions).

By 14:45 – 45 minutes before the scheduled closing time – all the customers had left, and Mrs. Miyamoto and I continued unpacking and shelving items until about 15:10, when Mrs. Shōno returned. She asked if Mrs. Miyamoto could manage closing up by herself, and invited me to get coffee with her and her friend. Mrs. Miyamoto assured us that she was fine, so I left with Mrs. Shōno, and Mrs. Miyamoto closed up the shop. The day was fairly typical of my experiences volunteering at Creative Recycle, although it was slightly busier than usual.

My observations over several months left me with the strong impression that the most vital aspect of Creative Recycle is the opportunity for community interaction and socialization among customers and staff, most of whom are older women. I witnessed numerous conversations between customers and staff that indicated years of friendship or at least friendly acquaintance; one woman who came to the shop from

another city said she used to live in Tsukuba and had moved away a few years ago, but still returned to the shop occasionally to donate items and talk with her friends among the volunteers. For both customers and volunteers, Creative Recycle represents an important outlet for long-term social interaction and a valuable site of community building.

Tsukuba Recycle Market: A Housewife's Effort to Reduce Waste

A second example of a community-oriented volunteer recycling organization founded by housewives in Tsukuba is the Tsukuba Recycle Market (Tsukuba Risaikuru Maaketto). The Recycle Market is a flea-market-style open-air buying and selling event that is currently held four times per year in Tsukuba's Chūō Park. It differs from most flea markets in that professionals and small businesses are not allowed to sell: it is exclusively for people wanting to sell unwanted items that would otherwise be discarded, hence the name "Recycle Market."

I was introduced to this waste-reducing sales event, and its organizing volunteer group the Association to Promote Recycling (Risaikuru o Suishinsuru Kai), by Shōno Takako, the same volunteer whom I met at the Tsukuba City Waste Reduction Promotion Committee as the representative of NPO Creative Recycle. Mrs. Shōno is currently the primary organizer and contact person of both recycling organizations, but her passion is for the Recycle Market, which she founded in 1993.

Mrs. Shōno moved to Tsukuba in 1981, when her husband was transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries' (Nōrinsuisanshō) new research institution in the developing science city. At the time, her two children were in fourth grade and kindergarten, and she was occupied with their care and with creating a new home in an unfamiliar city. But as her children grew more self-sufficient, she poured her considerable energies into a variety of volunteer activities and charitable projects. She had always been interested in consumer issues, especially those related to food and waste, and her volunteer activities tended in these directions even before she moved to Tsukuba.

The idea for the Tsukuba Recycle Market was born from Mrs. Shōno's determination to help solve the city's garbage problem, specifically to find a way to help that would be easily accessible to housewives like herself. After a study visit to Tsukuba's incineration facility, at the time known as the Sanitation Center (Eisei Sentaa), in the early 1990s, Mrs. Shōno was struck by the overwhelming volume of waste and the poor state of the facilities. At the time, she recalled, the Sanitation Center was very dirty and overrun with trash, and she left the tour wondering "What can I do on my own?" to help resolve the problem:

The city Sanitation Center, that is, you know the Clean Center? It used to be the Sanitation Center. Well, as part of a consumer living class (*shōhi seikatsu gakkū*), I went on a study tour of

the Sanitation Center. ... Then, well, there were quite a lot of things that could still be used laying around there. Ah, it wasn't like the nice Clean Center we have now. Before, it was a really dirty place. So then I thought, I want to do something – what can I do on my own? And then you know, housewives probably can't do anything with things they don't need anymore except throw them away, right? They don't have much knowledge [about recycling]. So, on the other hand, what can be done with unwanted things... wouldn't it be good to open them to everyone? To show them at someplace like a market, and have them taken by people who want them? ... That was the start of the Recycle Market. (interview by the author, March 4, 2016)

After coming up with this idea, Mrs. Shōno set about making her idea reality. Approaching the problem explicitly from her position as a housewife, she contacted four or five of her friends in Tsukuba, all housewives, and asked them to help her implement a kind of open market for unwanted goods. They presented their plan together as a “housewives’ group” (*shufu no dantai*) to the city office and asked for institutional and financial support for the idea. Their idea was approved, and although they did not receive direct monetary support from the city, several city government employees donated items for them to sell, and the group was able to list the city as an official sponsor on their promotional materials. The group called themselves the Association to Promote Recycling (Risaikuru o Suishinsuru Kai)²⁷; this name was printed for the first time in the Tsukuba City Newsletter’s announcement of the second Tsukuba Flea Market in November 1993.

The first market event was held in the spring of 1993 at a commercial plaza next to the RightOn clothing store in the center of Tsukuba. The group advertised the event in local newspapers and resident information bulletins well in advance, asking those interested in selling items to register before the event. Ninety-eight people signed up to sell their unwanted goods at the first market, which attracted dozens of buyers and sellers not only from Tsukuba but also other towns in the area.

At the time, they called the event a “flea market” (*furii maaketto*), but the name was changed to “Recycle Market” in 1997. According to Mrs. Shōno, the reason for this change was to emphasize that the market was for used consumer goods, not for vendors selling new products or crafts. They made this change and began explicitly barring “professionals” from the market because once it began growing and attracting more attention, businesses selling new products and individuals selling handicrafts began

²⁷ The Association to Promote Recycling (Risaikuru o Suishinsuru Kai), which organizes the Tsukuba Recycle Market and was founded by Mrs. Shōno, is a different organization from the Recycling Promotion Assembly (Risaikuru Suishin Kaigi) started by Mrs. Terada which became NPO Tsukuba Creative Recycle. A volunteer involved with Creative Recycle from its inception told me that while Mrs. Shōno and Mrs. Terada were aware of each other’s efforts, the two groups did not interact much as a result of personal differences between the two founders.

applying to participate, which detracted from the event's main purpose of decreasing household waste (interview by the author, March 4, 2016).

In the first few years of the Recycle Market's existence, its location changed several times depending on the availability of commercial spaces and the group's finances. Over the years, the event was held in commercial and public plazas, parks, and even parking lots. Typically the group had to pay a rental or usage fee to use the space, although often at reduced rates in recognition of the event's charitable purpose. Although they received some financial support from the city government, they sometimes struggled to raise enough funds. Mrs. Shōno explained that when they couldn't afford the rental fee, they simply canceled that season's Recycle Market. The Market was also canceled in the event of rain, which meant that although the group aimed to hold a Market four times a year, in the early years it typically happened only two or three times annually.

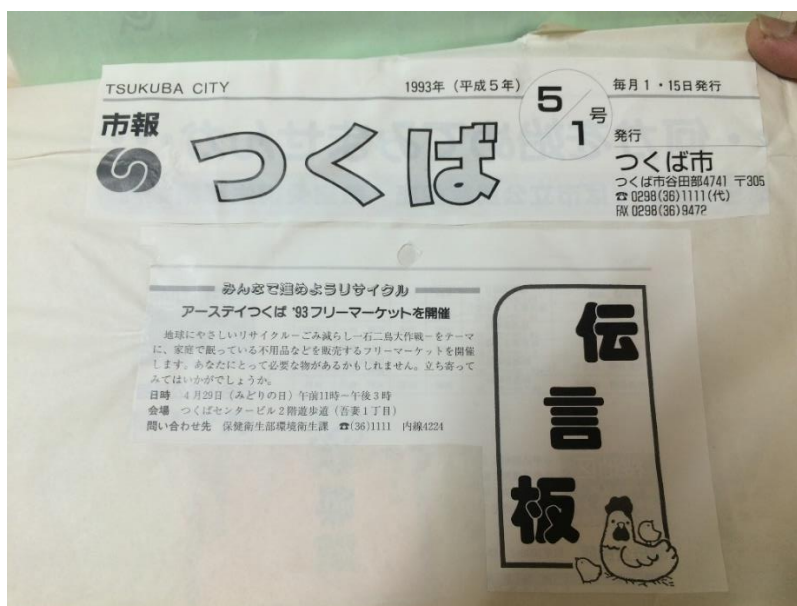
From the beginning, Mrs. Shōno and the other members of the Association to Promote Recycling designated each market by number (i.e., the 2nd Tsukuba Flea Market [Dai 2 Kai Tsukuba Furi Maaketto] was held in November 1993, and the 104th Tsukuba Recycle Market [Dai 104 Kai Tsukuba Risaikuru Maaketto] was held in November 2017), and in this way have kept track of how many times the market has been held. (The numbering system did not change when the event's name changed from Flea Market to Recycle Market.) To mark the occasion of the 60th market, the group arranged a magic show. For the 100th market in 2016, they reduced the fee by half, and posted the following message from Mrs. Shōno on their website:

When I visited the Clean Center in 1993, I saw many things that could still be used that were being thrown away as garbage. My feeling that something should be done about this wastefulness grew, and after thinking about it for a year, the first Recycle Market was held at Tsukuba Center Plaza on May 1, [1993]. Amazingly, 100 sellers came. Because it was the first time, there was a lot of confusion. Now 23 years have passed since then, and with the support of our sellers, customers, and staff, we have been able to continue until the 100th time. Now and in the future, with deepest gratitude, I want to welcome everyone to the Recycle Market.

(Tsukuba Recycle Market website, accessed January 15, 2018)

The group's primary source of revenue comes from the small fee they charge sellers at the market (this fee was 300 yen in the event's early years, and is currently 500 yen). The fee entitles the seller to a selling space a little smaller than the area of two tatami mats (*2 jō*, approximately 3.6 square meters). Sellers needing more space can pay double the fee for twice the space.

Unlike NPO Tsukuba Creative Recycle, the Association to Promote Recycling chose not to officially incorporate as a non-profit organization even during the NPO “boom” in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Although its lack of official status disqualifies the group from certain benefits and the possibility of more substantial financial support from the government, it also allows the group more autonomy and flexibility with regard to its activities, and avoids the tax obligations that registered NPOs are subject to. In an interview, Mrs. Shōno expressed relief that they had managed to avoid such legal entanglements: “But you know, it’s not an NPO, this one. That’s why it’s easy [*raku*]. We could end it tomorrow, you know, the organization. I don’t have any intention of quitting though [laughter]. For that kind of thing, you know, if it’s not easy it’s no good” (interview by the author, March 4, 2016).



A notification in the “Message Board” (dengenban) section of the Tsukuba City newsletter (shihō), announcing the first Flea Market to be held during the Earth Day Tsukuba event on April 29, 1993. (Photograph of a page in Mrs. Shōno’s private scrapbook taken by the author March 4, 2016 and published with Mrs. Shōno’s permission.)

In recent years, the Tsukuba Recycle Market has been held in Chūō Park, at the “Water Plaza” (*mizu no hiroba*, so called because it abuts the park’s large pond), which is also next to Creative Recycle’s single remaining shop location. It is scheduled four times per year, on a Sunday in March, May, September, and November. If it rains that day, the event is simply canceled and not rescheduled.

Prospective sellers must register in advance by contacting Mrs. Shōno by phone or postal mail. The organization now has a very basic website which provides information about the market as well as Mrs. Shōno’s contact details. They also advertise the market with fliers, which are always available to take from the Creative Recycle shop; they also place fliers at the city office, public library, and museums.

Mrs. Shōno told me that there are typically around 80-100 sellers, who pay a fee of 500 yen for a space of approximately 3.3 square meters. Some sellers opt to pay double for two spaces in order to sell more. The spaces are simply marked areas of bare ground (either concrete on the plaza or grass in the outer areas) – the group does not provide tables or booths to the sellers. The spaces are measured by the volunteers and marked off by tape.

Many of the sellers have participated in the Recycle Market over a long period of time; these more experienced sellers often bring their own tables or even wheeled clothes racks to display their items. The majority of sellers simply bring plastic sheets or tarps to cover their spaces. The spaces are not assigned; sellers can choose their own on a first-come, first-served basis. When I observed the market in both March 2016 and March 2018, sellers were lining up and waiting to enter well before registration opened at 9:00 a.m.; those who come earlier are able to choose the better spots along the walkway rather than those on the edges of the plaza.

I participated in the planning and organizational activities for the 98th Tsukuba Recycle Market in March 2016 as a volunteer, during which I made recordings of the meetings and activities and took notes of my observations. At organizational meetings, Mrs. Shōno introduced me to the other volunteers as a graduate student researcher interested in community recycling, and I asked their permission before recording the meetings. When I spoke to sellers and customers at the market, I introduced myself as a graduate student researcher and informed them I was using a voice recorder before asking questions.

The organization of Tsukuba Recycle Market and the Association to Promote Recycling is very informal, more like a social circle than a formal organization. (Although the group's official name is the Association to Promote Recycling and they list this organization name on promotional materials, I never heard any of the members refer to themselves with this formal name when speaking to each other.) Much of the planning work for the Recycle Market I observed was done over casual chats at family restaurants or cafés, and even the one formal meeting I attended the day before the market was run more as a friendly discussion than a structured organizational meeting.

The core group of volunteers for the Tsukuba Recycle Market are mostly good friends of Mrs. Shōno who have been helping with the market for years, some since the very beginning in 1993. (As Mrs. Shōno is the driving force behind Tsukuba Recycle Market, it makes sense that the core volunteers are her friends: some she recruited to help with the market because of their existing friendship, while others became friends with her due to their prolonged involvement with the market.)

The volunteers I saw most often in the weeks leading up to the market were a family named Izawa, consisting of a husband and wife about the same age as Mrs. Shōno (early 70s) and their daughter Ayaka, a woman in her 30s. This family had been helping with the Recycle Market for the past 12 years, since about 2004. Another core member, whom I saw less often because he moved in different social

circles from Mrs. Shōno but was nevertheless a vital member of the group, was Mr. Watanabe, a man in his early fifties who had been involved with the Recycle Market from the start. He participated in one of the first markets in the early 1990s as a seller while a student at Tsukuba University, and began volunteering soon after. He quickly became invaluable to the group particularly because of his computer skills (when I spoke with her in 2016, Mrs. Shōno still did not have a computer in her home and conducted the bulk of the business of both the Tsukuba Recycle Market and Creative Recycle on paper and over the phone). Currently, Mr. Watanabe handles things like creating and printing fliers for the market, and maintaining and updating the group's website.

The other core volunteers I met were older women in their 60s and 70s, most of whom started volunteering due to their acquaintance with Mrs. Shōno. At the preparation meeting I observed the day before the market, the volunteers who attended, in addition to Mrs. Shōno and Mr. Watanabe, consisted of four older women and one older man. I was told that usually they have more volunteers, especially students from Tsukuba Gakuin University, but who could not attend this time because of other commitments (in mid-March students are on break, and it is also a busy time for moving and other life transitions before school or work starts in April; the meeting was also held in the morning rather than the afternoon as usual, meaning that fewer people were available).

Most of the formal organizational meeting held the day before the market was spent preparing for the event: assembling name tags and arm bands, sorting numbered badges to be distributed to the sellers, marking the ground with tape to indicate selling spaces and walkways, and putting up signs around the park. After this work was finished, the volunteers held a meeting to first go over the schedule for the market, and then to discuss other items of business such as what to do to commemorate the upcoming 100th market in November. Several ideas were suggested (holding a concert, making the selling spaces free), but the group decided to make the final decision at the next meeting in May. (I learned later that they decided to reduce the selling fee by half.)

On the day of the March 2016 Recycle Market, I met Mrs. Shōno and the other volunteers at 8:30 a.m. to help set up. It was a cold, cloudy day (fortunately there was no rain in the forecast), and everyone was wearing warm winter coats. One of the volunteers had brought a container of hot tea to share. When I arrived at the Creative Recycle building, a lot of people were already there, moving things from the storage room to the site (the group had been using the Creative Recycle storage room, which held out-of-season clothes and other items, to store signs and other materials for Tsukuba Recycle Market ever since Mrs. Shōno had gotten involved with Creative Recycle). I spotted Mrs. Shōno, carrying things with an air of extreme busyness, and she told me to get the name badge and armband that would mark me as a volunteer. I helped everyone carry things like divider rope, numbered badges, and signs from the storage room to the plaza and the registration desk. We put down a large blue tarp in the middle of the plaza

where the organizers would be stationed; most volunteers would stay here to answer questions and also to sell items. The group, under Mrs. Shōno's direction, put out items from Creative Recycle's unsold inventory, and individual members could also bring their own items to sell in this shared "Headquarters" (*honbu*) station without having to pay a fee for their own selling space. The Creative Recycle and individual sales were kept separate, and proceeds from the Creative Recycle sales were returned to Creative Recycle while individual volunteers kept the money from their own sales.



The "Headquarters" area at the Tsukuba Recycle Market (March 13, 2016).

The market was scheduled to begin at 10:00 a.m., with registration for sellers opening at 9:00, but when I arrived at 8:30 there was already a line of sellers waiting. Since spots were not assigned but were chosen by sellers, those who arrived earlier could secure a better spot. There were 67 registered sellers that day, which Mrs. Shōno told me was fewer than usual. Most sellers brought their items by car (and parked in the park's paid parking lot), and tarps to set up on. Some brought their own tables or wheeled clothing racks to display their items.



Sellers with clothing racks at the Tsukuba Recycle Market (March 13, 2016).

There were also customers lined up to enter the market well before it started at 10:00. In fact, I was surprised by the number of people who came; the informal organization style led me to assume the event would be rather small, but I should have known better. After more than 20 years, the Recycle Market had become an institution with a dedicated following. Some customers come from other cities or even other prefectures. Mrs. Shōno told me that many of the customers who line up early to have first pick of the sellers' wares are "professionals" who buy up the potentially valuable items for resale. Other early customers are just "ordinary" consumers looking for a good deal. The market is open from 10:00-14:00, so many of those who wander in later are people just enjoying a walk in the park on a Sunday who happened across the market. Mrs. Shōno estimated that about 100 customers came that day, which she said was also a bit less than usual, probably due to the cold weather.



Prospective buyers wait outside for the market to begin, while sellers set up their spaces (March 13, 2016).

Once the market opened at 10:00 (one of the volunteers lifted the plastic divider that marked the “entrance”), it was bustling with activity for about two hours. Most of the work for the volunteers was during set-up and clean-up, so from 10:00 I joined a friend who was selling things that day to see the market from a seller’s perspective. The busiest time was right at the beginning, when the serious deal-seekers arrived. My friend, who was moving away from Tsukuba for a new job in April, was selling electronics, small household appliances, and clothing. The electronics and appliances sold within the first hour; one man, probably a “professional,” bought most of them at once. My friend helped him carry the items to his car while I watched the selling space.²⁸

The market began to wind down after the first hour: customers began leaving slowly around 11:00, and then en masse around 12:00. By 1:30 p.m., there were only a handful of sellers and very few customers remaining. This may have been due to the cold weather and increasingly cloudy skies – it looked like it would rain soon. Mrs. Shōno and the other volunteers began cleaning up a little before 2:00 p.m., when the market was scheduled to end. We put all the dividing ropes and cones, badges, and signs back in the Creative Recycle storage room. (Sellers were instructed to return their badges before leaving; Mrs. Shōno told me she would send a postcard asking for the badges back to anyone who forgot.) Once most of the work was done, a few volunteers began leaving one by one. When everything was finished to

²⁸ While theft is rare at the Recycle Market (as it is everywhere in Japan), it does occasionally happen. One seller reported a theft at the market I attended, and while unfortunately the perpetrator was never found, Mrs. Shōno arranged for a police officer to attend the next market in May to discourage further incidents.

Mrs. Shōno's satisfaction, she ended the day by saying "Good work!" (*otsukaresamadeshita*), and the volunteers dispersed with no further fanfare.

After the event, Mrs. Shōno told me that in total this time the group had raised about 31,000 yen (from the seller fees), which would cover the cost of the tape, rope, and other materials, usage fees for the plaza, parking fees for the volunteers who brought equipment in their cars, and the mandatory volunteer insurance (this is required by the prefectural government for any large-scale volunteer event and costs about 300 yen per volunteer).

Mottainai: A Passion for Reducing Waste

Like Tsukuba Creative Recycle, the Tsukuba Recycle Market functions as a site where volunteers, sellers, and customers alike can forge social connections and build community. For the volunteers in particular, most of whom have been participating in the organization for years, this type of active and creative volunteer work can create a shared sense of purpose and community. This community creation has been particularly important in Tsukuba, which as a centrally-planned "science city" was experienced as isolating for many of the housewives who moved there with their husbands during the city's development in the 1970s-1990s. In her study of Tsukuba housewives in the late 1980s and early 2000s, Larzalere (2006) notes that the isolation of starting a new life, devoid of family connections and a deep-rooted community, caused many women in Tsukuba to find an outlet in volunteer work such as parent-teacher associations, government housing associations, or grassroots organizations (Larzalere 2006, 101). This volunteer work served not only to relieve these housewives' loneliness, but also as a way for them to express themselves: "The pioneer women of my study have actively sought out networking with other individuals like themselves to alleviate their isolation and loneliness, gain friendship and security, and create a venue through their networking to express their individuality" (Larzalere 2006, 95). This is certainly true of Mrs. Shōno, who takes a great deal of pride in being an active volunteer and advocate for waste reduction as well as a dedicated housewife. In an interview, Mrs. Shōno expressed her pride in the achievements of Tsukuba Recycle Market and a bit of concern for its future once she is gone, saying "This is my life's work – my whole life!" (interview by the author, March 4, 2016).

For most of the volunteers involved in both Creative Recycle and the Recycle Market, the primary reason for engaging in these volunteer activities was social interaction: most of them joined these groups because they were invited by friends or acquaintances, and viewed their activities as a way to participate in, interact with, and improve their local communities. Many volunteers are also currently involved in, or were previously involved in, other volunteer activities not related to waste and recycling, such as parent-teacher associations, groups to help those with disabilities, or organizing local festivals.

While the volunteers all agreed that the groups' stated aim of reducing waste is a valuable goal, most do not have a particular interest in recycling or other environmental issues.

The most notable exception to this trend among the volunteers was Mrs. Shōno, who founded Tsukuba Recycle Market over twenty years ago because of her passion for reducing waste and solving Tsukuba's garbage problems. When I asked about her reasons for getting involved with recycling and waste reduction-related volunteer work, Mrs. Shōno often brought up the word *mottainai*, meaning "wasteful" or "don't waste," which is commonly used to express regret over something potentially wasteful or to admonish the listener not to waste something.

Mottainai is a phrase one often hears in connection with waste in Japan. Although the exact meaning changes depending on context, it generally means "What a waste" or "Don't let it go to waste!" It can be used in situations ranging from a parent admonishing a child to clean its plate, to a friend chiding one for buying more clothes than one can wear, to a professor advising a student not to pass up an opportunity. In describing the term's recent rise to cultural prominence, Siniawer notes, "'*Mottainai*' thus became a convenient, one-word encapsulation of concerns about resource scarcity, food security, the proliferation of garbage, and a throw-away culture, and the term was used to push back against the perceived prevalence of consumerism, materialism, and environmental degradation" (Siniawer 2014, 166). Siniawer highlights the rise of *mottainai* in popular culture, such as a series of children's books entitled *Mottainai Bāsan (No-Waste Grandma)* and also points out its embrace in more official circles (for example, the "*Mottainai* Campaign" started in the mid-2000s by Kenyan activist and Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai and sponsored by several Japanese companies, which used the term as a "keyword for the global environmental movement") (Siniawer 2014, 176).

The Japanese government has also employed *mottainai* as a buzzword for promoting environmental consciousness, particularly with regard to waste and recycling. A pamphlet published in both Japanese and English by the Ministry of Environment in 2008 entitled "A Sound Material-Cycle Society through the Eyes of Hokusai" emphasises the "spirit of *mottainai*" (*mottainai no kokoro*; *mottainai no seishin*) possessed by the people of the Edo era (1603-1868), and encourages readers to emulate this spirit. The English version of the pamphlet explains that "*Mottainai* is a long-established Japanese concept meaning that it is a shame for something to go to waste without having made use of its potential in full. This expression incorporates a respect for the environment that has been handed down from ages past" (Ministry of Environment 2008, 6). The pamphlet notes that not only farmers and artisans, but even samurai "valued the virtue of *shisso ken'yaku* [simplicity and frugality] and lived a modest life" (Ministry of Environment 2008, 6). Siniawer notes that *mottainai* is also frequently framed as a uniquely "Japanese virtue" (Siniawer 2014, 175), and the Ministry of Environment pamphlet employs a similar framing. A section entitled "Keeping with the spirit of *mottainai*" asserts that "Traditionally, the

Japanese people use goods with care” (Ministry of Environment 2008, 7). Like Susan Strasser’s work on the history of waste in the United States, in which she emphasises how “the traditional stewardship of objects” (Strasser 1999, 262) gave way to a “throwaway society,” the Ministry of Environment pamphlet contrasts the idyllic ‘sound material cycle society’ of the past with a wasteful present. But this shift is attributed not (only) to industrialization, but to the introduction of Western culture: “Although Japan had successfully established an SMC [sound material cycle] society in the Edo era, people’s lifestyle and way of thinking about goods gradually changed as Western cultures were imported” (Ministry of Environment 2008, 8). This framework establishes a binary between *mottainai* as a Japanese value and wastefulness as a characteristic of Western culture, supporting the pamphlet’s overall message that reducing waste and recycling are ways to embrace one’s Japanese heritage.

Mrs. Shōno has employed the term *mottainai* extensively in promotional materials for both of the volunteer waste reduction groups she is involved in, Creative Recycle and the Tsukuba Recycle Market. A flier for Creative Recycle proclaims “Let’s put *mottainai* into practice!!” (*Mottainai o jissen shiyo!!*). On a website introducing NPOs in Tsukuba, Creative Recycle mentions in the space for the group’s purpose, “It’s *mottainai* to throw away things that can still be used,” and the section for “people we want to recruit” lists “People who like recycling, people with a *mottainai* spirit.” In an interview, Mrs. Shōno explained that one reason people bring their unwanted things to donate to Creative Recycle is that they feel “this can still be used, *mottainai*” - it would be wasteful to simply throw away something potentially useful to others, so they decide to bring it to the recycle shop instead (interview by the author, April 1, 2015).

Mrs. Shōno also used *mottainai* to describe the feelings of the volunteers and the customers of Creative Recycle. Both groups, she said, are motivated by a feeling of *mottainai* – “they can’t [just] throw it away” – if possible, they want to use something up all the way, and if they can’t use it themselves, someone else can. Describing her own motivations, she explained that she feels a very strong desire to prevent things from becoming garbage (*gomi*), and this feeling is what drives her volunteer work. “Everyone thinks so, right? This feeling that, because it’s *mottainai*, we have to do something – if this feeling went away, I think this [recycling] business would also disappear” (interview by the author, April 1, 2015). She joked that some people think she is rich because she does so much volunteering, but that perception is incorrect – it’s not that she’s rich, but only because her *mottainai* spirit is so strong that she is able to do this work: “I do this because the feeling of *mottainai* [*mottainai to iu kanjō*] continues no matter what, it’s not because I’m a rich person” (interview by the author, April 1, 2015).

Mrs. Shōno’s *mottainai* spirit was not only expressed through her volunteer work, but also in her personal life. As mentioned in Chapter 3, I visited Mrs. Shōno’s home for an interview and to observe how she managed her household waste. Clean and well-organized, her home unmistakably showed her

dedication to reducing wastefulness: anything that could be reused would be. In addition to storage containers for recyclables like plastic bottles and cans that are commonplace in Japanese homes, Mrs. Shōno also separated plastic bottle caps, Styrofoam trays, and newspaper for separate recycling, and even saved twist-ties and rubber bands from food packaging for later use. Most notable was a small line hung on her refrigerator where she put used plastic wrap to dry after rinsing it in order to reuse it as many times as possible.



Mrs. Shōno's mottainai refrigerator (March 4, 2016).

Housewife Volunteers, Waste, and Citizenship in Japan

Although some waste and recycling volunteers are motivated by a strong desire to reduce waste and wastefulness, most are involved for the same reasons anyone might join a volunteer organization: to form new social relationships, and to find a sense of community and shared purpose. Larzalere describes in detail how the groups created by Tsukuba's "pioneer housewives" allow them to form their own communities and define their own identities: "From the women's perspective, membership in their circles is much more than a pursuit of hobbies. By participating in their circles and in their commitment to each other, the women become members of a community of their making in which they define their roles. The members exchange ideas outside the context of their expected roles as good wives and wise mothers" (Larzalere 2006, 115). Although Larzalere suggests these group activities are "outside" the housewife role, I would argue that in fact participation in housewife circles and volunteer activities are well within the scope of the housewife role, and in fact serve to reinforce the housewife identity for the women who

take part in them. As LeBlanc (1999) has shown, the role of the housewife is a public role in Japan, and the housewife role can be considered the ideal form of citizenship for women. Women who desire to engage in social activities outside the home tend to frame these activities as supporting or complementing their primary roles as wives as mothers. Perhaps because of this explicit framing, which was employed by the founders and volunteers of the two recycling groups in Tsukuba as well, the type of volunteering undertaken by housewives is often not viewed as “real” volunteering at all. In her study of community volunteering in Japan, Nakano observes that local, community-oriented volunteering is often overlooked:

Community volunteers are often not considered to be volunteers at all, but merely people who are fulfilling their “duty” (*gimuteki*) or taking up local posts (*yakuwari*). Many middle-class friends in Japan told me that what I was observing was not volunteering, but merely “local activities” (*chiiki katsudō*). Community volunteering receives relatively little attention in the media compared to the other forms of volunteering involving the environment, international assistance, disaster relief, or volunteering by youth. I suggest that this lack of attention to and even dismissal of community volunteering reflects the ways in which community volunteers, as middle-aged and older women and men who are marginalized from the workforce, tend to be devalued and ignored by society in general. (Nakano 2005, 3).

Because of the connection between this type of community volunteering and the housewife role, the most common types of volunteer work tend to be those related to the home and to care work. Waste reduction and recycling fall well within the scope of the housewife role, calling to mind the rhetoric of Ichikawa Fusae and other members of the League for Women’s Suffrage in the 1933 Garbage Campaign, which tied women’s role as homemakers, responsible for cleaning garbage inside the house, with a greater public role, cleaning garbage in the city and scrubbing corruption out of local politics (see Chapter 1). For women to want a more prominent role in public life, it seems the most successful strategy is still to present oneself as a housewife. LeBlanc (1999) demonstrates this clearly with her analysis of the election campaign of a female politician, who presented herself as an ordinary housewife simply wanting to make a difference in politics. (This appeal, LeBlanc notes, was unsuccessful; housewives found the politician unconvincing because “real” housewives don’t engage in politics. Housewives, she finds, are apolitical as part of their public identity as housewives [LeBlanc 1999, 73]).

I noticed a similar dynamic in my observation of the recycling organizations in Tsukuba. When I observed a meeting of the Tsukuba City Waste Reduction Promotion Committee, Mrs. Shōno, present as the representative of Creative Recycle, was one of only three women on the committee. She was mostly

silent during the discussion, offering her opinion only when asked directly. During a discussion about how to implement sorted collection of plastic containers and packaging, a researcher from one of Tsukuba's government research institutes stated that it would be very important to factor citizens' reactions into the plan – and turned to Mrs. Shōno to ask for her perspective. I found this exchange striking and instructive. In the context of municipal waste management, “citizen” (*shimin*) can be understood to mean housewives, the female citizens who undertake the majority of household waste separation. By addressing his question to Mrs. Shōno, the researcher conveyed that she was present at the meeting not only as a representative of one rather small recycling volunteer group, but also as a representative of Tsukuba citizens, that is, housewives. In 2016 as in 1933, household waste – a bridge between the private tasks of the housewife in the home and municipal policy in the public sphere – is one way to attain a prominent position in society while embracing the housewife identity.

Conclusion

This reduction and separation [of waste] cannot be accomplished without the conscientious effort of every housewife [*katei fujin*]. From this perspective, we have determined to make every effort to solve Tokyo's garbage problem, and urged the city authorities to cooperate with women, and have undertaken a joint movement.

Ichikawa Fusae, 1933

... Even if [men] have awareness [of reducing waste] it's only women who are doing the activities themselves. ... Well, men who go as far as making ... this kind of thing their job, that's something. No, this won't become a job for us, you know. Because it's not like we're getting paid. But, it is in my consciousness.

Shōno Takako, recycling volunteer (interview by the author, April 1, 2015)

As this dissertation has demonstrated, waste has played a significant part in mediating the roles of women in the Japanese nation-state. Household waste, fundamentally linked to the “feminine” sphere of the home and the kitchen as well as to public sanitation – a fundamental aspect of municipal governance – creates a direct link between the housewife and the nation-state, as shown in Chapters 2 and 3. The state has frequently sought to use this connection to further specific policies – thrift campaigns during the Taishō period (see Garon 1997), garbage reduction in the 1930s (see Chapter 1), scrap collection during the war years (see Chapter 2), and more recently efforts by local governments to use volunteer groups and NPOs to carry out waste reduction education campaigns. Just as the Tokyo Women's League to Purify City Politics chose to cooperate with the Tokyo City Government to enact their garbage campaign, waste reduction and recycling activists today frequently turn to local governments for support in achieving their goals.

This similarity is strikingly apparent when we analyze the two quotations juxtaposed at the beginning of this chapter. Shōno Takako, the housewife founder of the volunteer waste reduction organization Tsukuba Recycle Market, recounted the circumstances that led to the group's creation in terms very similar to those used by the members of the Tokyo Women's League to Purify City Politics in explaining their decision to start the 1933 Tokyo Garbage Campaign. Mrs. Shōno, after going on a study