

MARRIAGE IN JAPAN

*Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*¹

By Anne E. Imamura



A Mirror of Japanese Nobility by Tōyōhara Chikanobu, August 1887.

Image source: MITOPENCOURSEWARE, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Web site at http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/throwing_off_asia_01/emperor_02.html.

The changing institution of marriage in Japan may be understood in the context of its economic, political, and individual functions. Although the emphasis on one of these functions over the others may be stronger at a given historical period, all three are present in each period and interact to shape the current and future institution of marriage. This article will focus on later twentieth and early twenty-first century marriage in the context of the broader trajectory from the Meiji Period (1868–1912) forward.

FOR THE HOUSEHOLD AND THE STATE

From the Meiji Period through the end of World War II, the family was the model and the fundamental building block of the state.² The family, prescribed by law, was a hierarchical household with a legally designated head who was responsible to the state for accurately maintaining the household registration documents. Marriages were arranged, or at least approved, by the head—the goal of marriage was to continue the family line. In-marrying spouses (usually the daughter-in-law) were expected to produce heirs, contribute to the economic endeavor of the household, and learn and transmit to the next generation the traditions of that household. During this period, marriage was for the household and ultimately for the development of the state. Economic and political functions outweighed individual benefits. That being said, an individual could benefit from marrying into a good family that provided economic security, and in some cases increase the social status of that individual. To succeed in such a family, the individual would be expected to scrupulously carry out prescribed roles based on hierarchy, gender, and household custom.

EARLY POST WORLD WAR II

Establishing a Home

In contrast to the extended family of the Meiji Period, the post-war legal system recognized the nuclear family rather than the extended family, and stipulated that marriage was a union of individuals with equal rights in marriage and divorce.³ During this period, Japan moved through years of strong economic growth, and the ideal of the salaryman family (salaried worker husband and full-time housewife) emerged. The goal of marriage for the salaryman family was to establish a home (*katei*). Although in principle and by law individuals chose their own spouses and decided whether to marry, family approval and support was seen to be essential for success of the marriage. Marriage was also seen as necessary for men to attain adult status (*shakaijin*) and it was assumed that women's happiness lay in marriage. Thus, in spite of legal changes, social expectations reinforced many of the pre-war norms. The model assumed strict gender roles with strong support for the principle that men worked outside the home and women were responsible for the household.

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Pre-war Japanese family. Source: Cornell University Library at <http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/hist233.html>.



Post-war wedding portrait. Source: Hawai'i Community College at <http://www.hawcc.hawaii.edu/nursing/tradjapan2.htm>.



A newly married couple getting a rickshaw ride and posing for the family photographers. Image and text copyright © 1999 by Christian Bauer <http://www.cebix.net/photos/japan2/>.

These strict gender role expectations and the connection between marriage and the economy also were emphasized during wedding ceremonies.⁴ Representatives of the groom's company made speeches about the role the wife would play in supporting her husband's work, which in turn would benefit the company and provide security for the family. Similar speeches were made at weddings of farm or family business couples. The common thread was to emphasize the complementarities of the roles of the new husband and wife, both within the family and within whatever part of the broader economic order they fit. Additionally, regardless of how the couple actually met, it was considered more respectable to classify their marriage as one based on introduction (*miai*) because love was seen as too fragile a foundation for such an enduring relationship. Wedding ceremonies included a "Go-Between" couple who were middle aged and married for many years, both to symbolize a successful marriage and to serve as future consultants for the young couple. If there was no actual Go-Between, a teacher, professor, businessman, or other role model in some way connected to the couple would be asked to serve as the honorary Go-Between and felt some obligation to counsel the couple when asked to do so.

During this period, although marriage was for the individual, it was still very much an economic unit where the wife was dependent on her husband's income (or the family farm or business). It was also the foundation that allowed the husband to work full time, without being concerned with domestic duties. This unit provided a supply of cheap temporary and part-time labor in the form of a housewife who worked for low wages and was supported by the husband.⁵ This large supply of reliable, cheap labor was one of the cornerstones of Japan's economic success.⁶ Laws and policies, including protective labor legislation, supported the male breadwinner family system. Thus, al-

though the family was no longer the basic unit of the state (in the same way as the pre-World War II household), the family was the fundamental economic unit and contributed to the growth and development of the state.

LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

New Families, New Dreams

In the 1970s, young couples began to look for love and companionship in marriage. These couples watched their parents' generation and saw the distance that developed between spouses who spent most of their married life in separate worlds: he at work, she in the home and community. As women's education levels and work experience increased, and as the employment laws in Japan changed (from the mid-1980s to the present), more women returned to the work force (as part-time or temporary workers) after their children were in school. The male breadwinner was still the center of the family, but women's options had increased. Wedding ceremonies reflected the changing views. Christian ceremonies emphasizing love became popular. Destination weddings were also popular, and in many cases were cheaper than being married in Japan. A wide array of wedding patterns developed. Some couples sponsored their own ceremonies and, in rare cases, even had receptions funded by contributions of the guests.

These marriages did have economic functions, but the individual expectations, especially on the part of the wives, were quite strong, and the couple orientation led to the label "new family"; however, a few years into the marriage, the couple looked similar to those of the previous salaryman generation. The husband focused on his work, the wife focused on the children. New patterns emerged once the children were grown. Wives were not as willing as the previous generation to look after their husband's aged parents, nor did they plan to look after their

husbands in their old age (if they were no longer companions). Some wives laid plans for years, saved the money they earned by part-time work, and once the children were grown, divorced their husbands when they retired. The function of marriage for the individual was stronger at the beginning and at the end, rather than during the middle years when, on the one hand, couples were focused on work and family, and on the other, the economy was most dependent on them as workers. Demands from Japanese women and criticism from abroad caused policymakers to support more liberal labor laws. At the same time, family and corporate policies continued to assume the model of a male breadwinner family with a wife available for part-time or temporary employment when she was not required to engage in child or elder care.

CURRENT SITUATION LATE

TWENTIETH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

Challenges: Can the Dream be Supported?

From the 1990s to the present, economic, political, and individual concerns are changing marriage patterns.⁷ Economic reforms in the late 1990s removed legal barriers to women's equal access to employment.⁸ However, because of prevailing societal attitudes, the percentage of Japanese women in management track positions continues to be miniscule. At the same time, the collapse of the economic bubble, and its impact on the Japanese economy, reduced the number of secure "permanent" positions available to both women and men.

ness, whose household structures are multi-generational, find it particularly difficult to marry. Japanese women do not want to live under the control of their mothers-in-law, and ultimately many of these men seek foreign brides.¹⁰

Marriage is now viewed as being based on individual choice, and marriages based on love have become the norm. The number of couples who indicate they met by introduction is declining, but there is growth in dating services—both in person and online.¹¹ Mate selection based on the individual is supported by these services, yet a quick perusal of the ads indicates that dating services tout academic and job related characteristics of their clients, reflecting values similar to the early salaryman period. These values include educational attainment, respectable employment, and the probability of a solid income, and thus relate more to establishing a home and family than to individual happiness.

On the political side, the Japanese government began to focus on population decline and the challenges of an aging society. The increased focus of the younger generation on the individual is seen as problematic, and selfish women who do not want to marry are blamed for not fulfilling their roles as mothers.¹² Examples of this view include the 2004 recommendation of a panel on constitutional reform that Article 24 of the Constitution, which guarantees equality between the sexes, should be revised because it promotes egoism in postwar Japan, leading to the collapse of family and community. A comment by

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In addition, at about this time, social analysts and critics began to discuss the phenomenon of *freeters*—people who work in temporary or part-time positions just long enough to earn money to support their consumption habits. Freeters quit their jobs when they save enough to travel or support themselves for a while, and again seek work when they need more money. Currently an estimated sixty percent of freeters are women.⁹ A second development are the so-called Parasite Singles—young adults with jobs who live with their parents and spend all of their earnings on themselves. For these young Japanese, single life is (for the time being) good. In contrast to older generations, they do not make long-term commitments to work or sacrifice their freedom for the company or family. As the number of secure jobs decreases, there is more demand for temporary workers—thus, the short-term desires of the individual and needs of the economy match.

In this current situation, women are beginning to postpone commitment and marriage. In the past, the timing of marriage had been based on raising two children by the time the salaryman husband retired; now, women are balancing a more complicated calculus. Their expectations of ideal husbands are more varied than previous generations. Some want to marry men with good incomes that allow wives the flexibility of working when they want (and in jobs they find interesting) and stay home while their children are small. Others want to continue to work and prefer husbands who participate in housework and childcare.

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former Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori that childless women are selfish and should not receive pension benefits reflects this political view. Another recognized change is the sexual behavior of singles. Whereas once it was shameful for a woman to have sexual relations before marriage, Christmas Eve has become a time for young couples to spend in a hotel. Young women freely discuss where their boyfriends are taking them; hotels market their luxurious packages, and there is no social protest.

Couples continue these newer types of relationships and seem to feel no particular pressure to marry. At the same time, the current percentage of pregnant brides has increased to about twenty-five percent of all brides. This trend indicates a number of things. First, in about one-quarter of cases, the decision to marry is due to the pregnancy of the bride. Second, it is more important to have couples marry than to castigate women who had sex while they were still single. Third, there has been worry recently over whether marriage based on pregnancy provides the foundation for a good family. These trends and deliberations illustrate both the move toward individual decision-making about marriage and the perceived weakness of marriages based on individual decisions.

In addition, the age of first marriages continues to rise, and while the birth rate for all women is below replacement,¹³ the birth rate for married couples is 2.2 children.¹⁴ The challenge, then, is to get people to marry. However, it is clear that social pressure and expectations alone are no longer sufficient to ensure that virtually everyone marries in their twenties. To encourage young people to marry, the government is beginning to focus on developing a society in which the "dream" of having children and working can be realized.¹⁵

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DEALING WITH CHANGE

In grappling with a strategy to encourage earlier marriage, the government must consider changes that have occurred in the lives of men and women. During the period of slow economic growth, families increasingly needed two incomes to maintain a middle class lifestyle. Yet, women said they would like to be full-time housewives when they marry, but only a handful of men employed in “permanent” positions could support a full-time housewife. In addition, questions arise as to how many postponed marriages are due to women’s career ambitions and how many are due to men’s job instability.¹⁶ A 2006 Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry White Paper indicates that the changing employment system relates to the postponement of marriage, and cites a poll that shows fifty-nine percent of men in their early thirties who are on regular payrolls are married, compared with only thirty percent of men with part-time or temporary jobs.

As women place greater demands on men to be more involved in the family and with their children, men begin to experience the stress not only to succeed in the (not so family-friendly) workplace, but also to take time for daily involvement with their families.¹⁷ The men’s movement developed in the late 1990s, and part of the agenda is to encourage men to take fatherhood seriously, to teach men about fathering, and to survey companies and determine how father-friendly they are.¹⁸ As men carve out their roles, older men are retiring and may become prime candidates for divorce. Men who worked long hours for decades have no real “space” in their home. Thus, some men’s groups have started to work to avoid divorce by encouraging men to be loving husbands and to establish good relations and common interests with their wives before retirement.

In contrast to the salaryman period, marriage has become far less standardized. Weddings reflect this. Couples who postpone marriage may opt for ceremonies such as House Weddings that reflect their maturity and affluence.¹⁹ House Weddings are held at a location that provides the atmosphere of a private residence modeled after a luxurious European or American mansion—complete with garden—so that guests may mingle freely, rather than at a wedding hall or hotel, where space may be limited to one room. Wedding dresses also reflect the increased age of brides, and for brides who are pregnant, there are wedding dresses designed to mask the pregnancy.

At the same time, divorce has lost its label of shame, and younger couples who find themselves incompatible may divorce with far fewer worries than couples of their parents’ generation. In 2007, legal changes increased the amount a divorced woman may claim from her husband’s pension, but at this writing, there is no data on whether or not this will increase the number of “retirement divorces.”

Approximately one in four marriages now includes a divorced partner, and new issues are emerging that relate to stepchildren.²⁰ In the pre-war household, children belonged to the household in which they were registered. In practice, this meant that a woman who divorced also left her husband’s household and the children. Under the current legal system, husband and wife have equal rights, and custody of the majority of minor children goes to the mother. Thus, the step-parent is more likely to be a stepfather than a stepmother. The individual (rather than household) base of the current legal system raises new issues related to parental authority and adoption.

In this increasingly diverse family milieu, another recent concern is the surrogate mother. Japanese law defines mother as the birth mother, and when a surrogate is used, the child must be adopted. The arguments for and against changing this law reflect the debate over what constitutes a family.

One other essential role of the family has been the care of its aged members. The pre-war legacy has carried over into social expectations that the eldest son and his wife will look after his parents. However, with the increased likelihood that a young couple’s residence will be determined by employment opportunities, they will not necessarily reside with or near the husband’s parents. This results in increased freedom for the young wife to establish her home rather than move into that of her mother-in-law, and, depending on the young husband’s employment opportunities, when his parents need care, they may have to move into or near his residence. This situation can provide additional strain on the mother-in-law/bride relationship that has traditionally been defined as stressful for the bride, who was expected to conform to the requests/demands of her mother-in-law. The hierarchy and control becomes murky if the mother-in-law moves into her daughter-in-law’s home. In addition, as women express their personal preferences (in contrast to societal expectations), for decades they have reported that they would prefer to be cared for by their own daughters with whom they felt they could communicate more freely, but that their daughters would probably not have the financial resources to care for them, and they did not want to depend on their sons-in-law. According to the 2007 *White Paper on an Aging Society*, 78.3 percent of Japanese men want their wives to look after them in their old age. In contrast, only 41.5 percent of women (perhaps reflecting the fact that women tend to outlive their husbands) select their spouse as caregiver. Some 30.7 percent choose their daughter. The most interesting statistic is that only 5.6 percent of men and women choose their son. The concept of family care for the aged is changing. The 2007 *White Paper on National Life* discusses a trend away from family care for the aged and reports that as many as sixty percent of the respondents said that care for the aged was an issue for national or local governments, rather than for the family or the individual.

Throughout these periods, marriage in Japan has been a product of economic, political, and individual influences, and this continues today. From Meiji through the end of World War II, the legal and socially accepted definition of family membership was clear and controlled by the state and the head of the household. During the second half of the twentieth century, marriage tended to standardize along the career path of the salaried worker. As the economic foundations of that standardization change, and new opportunities and gender norms emerge, the family has diversified. The question for the immediate future is what structural changes will take place to deal with both the declining birthrate and the care of the aged, and what will be the impact of these changes? Current policy is framed toward the attainment of work/life balance. Recognizing that less than one percent of fathers have taken paternity leave, the government has mandated that large corporations ensure that their employees use this leave. To deal with care for the aged, Japan has instituted mandatory long-term care insurance, as well as approved nurses and caregivers from the Philippines to come to work in Japan on a trial program. These policies make

long term care an individual entitlement and remove embarrassment when the family needs outside resources to care for its aged members.

What will marriage in Japan be like in the future? It is difficult to say, except that it will likely be more diverse. Individual expectations will be tempered and supported both by economic opportunities and by government policies. Whether all three will work cooperatively, and whether short-term economic needs will conflict with long-term family growth and increased women's participation in the labor force policies, remains to be seen. ■

NOTES

1. Please refer to Anne E. Imamura, "The Japanese Family Faces Twenty-First Century Challenges," *Education About Asia* 8 (2): 2003, 30–33 for a companion piece to this article.
2. For a discussion of this see Joanna Liddle and Sachiko Nakajima, *Rising Suns, Rising Daughters* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2000).
3. See, for example, Joy Hendry, *Marriage in Changing Japan* (London, Croom Helm Ltd., 1981); Suzanne H. Vogel, "Professional Housewife: The Career of Urban Middle Class Japanese Women," *Japan Interpreter* 12 (1): 1978, 16–23.
4. See Walter Edwards, *Modern Japan through Its Weddings: Gender, Person, and Society in Ritual Portrayal* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press), 1989.
5. Tomoko Hamada, "Absent Fathers, Feminized Sons, Selfish Mothers and Disobedient Daughters: Revisiting the Japanese Ie Household." *JPRI Working Paper No. 33*, May 1997 at <http://www.jpri.org/publications/workingpapers/wp33.html>.
6. See Mary C. Brinton, *Women and the Economic Miracle: Gender and Work in Post-war Japan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).
7. For a glimpse into the range of challenges see "The Japanese Nightmare. *Women Who Don't Want to Marry*" (New York, NY: Filmmakers Library, 2002).
8. For a discussion of these reforms, see Joyce Gelb, *Gender Policies in Japan and the United States* (New York and Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
9. Miyamoto Michiko, "Better Work for Women," *Japan Echo*, 33 (5): 2006, 23.
10. See *Women in Japan: Memories of the Past, Dreams for the Future*, North Carolina Visions Documentary Series (Chapel Hill, NC: Joanne Herschfield and Jan Bardsley, 2002).
11. See *A Changing Heart* (New York, NY, Filmmakers Library, 2002).
12. Tomoko Hamada, "Absent Fathers, Feminized Sons, Selfish Mothers and Disobedient Daughters: Revisiting the Japanese Ie Household." *JPRI Working Paper No. 33*, May 1997 at <http://www.jpri.org/publications/workingpapers/wp33.html>.
13. The 2006 birth rate per woman was 1.32, at http://www.stat.go.jp/English/data/handbook/c02cont.htm#cha2_2.
14. Merry Isaacs White, *Perfectly Japanese: Making Families in an Era of Upheaval* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).
15. This was the subtitle of the 1998 Welfare White Paper.
16. Yamada Masahiro, "The Real Story Behind Japan's Marriage Crisis," *Japan Echo* 33 (1): 2006, 20–24.
17. See Ayami Nakatani, "The emergence of 'nurturing fathers.' Discourses and practices of fatherhood in contemporary Japan" in Marcus Rebick and Ayumi Takenaka, eds., *The Changing Japanese Family* (London and New York: Routledge 2006), 94–108.
18. See, for example, Romit Dasgupta, "Cybermasculinities: Masculinities and the Internet in Japan," in Gottlieb, Nanett and Mark McLelland, eds. *Japanese Cybercultures* (UK: Routledge Ltd.), 109–125.
19. According to the Recruit Co. Ltd.'s "Zexy Wedding Trend Survey 2007," House Weddings account for nineteen percent of all receptions in Japan. Here is one English language Web site from a company that provides House Weddings, *Take and Give Needs* at http://www.tgn.co.jp/ir/english/others/faq/faq_hw.html.
20. Shinji Nozawa, Naoko Ibaraki, and Toshiaki Hayano, eds., *Q&A Suteppufamiri-no Kisoku Chishiki. An Introduction to Stepfamilies* (Tokyo: Akashi Shobou, 2006).

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JAPANESE WEDDING CUSTOMS

By Mari Maruyama

WEDDING RECEPTION PROTOCOL

Just as is the case in the US, there is the ceremonial (religious) aspect of the traditional Japanese wedding and then the reception. Typically, in Japan, only family and very close friends, work colleagues, and bosses are invited to this. The reception has a larger group of invited guests. This fact is not particularly interesting. What is interesting is that at the reception, the bride and groom sit at the front of the reception hall and the people who are seated at the tables closest to the bride and groom are their bosses, supervisors, important professors, or teachers. Family members' tables are positioned farthest from the bride and groom. This seating arrangement indicates the people who are important to the daily welfare of the new couple or merit this recognition based on social or political standing. The latter guests are likely invitees of the bride or groom's parents.

WEDDING MONEY

Wedding guests do not bring "things" as gifts. They bring quite a bit of money. Those closest to the bride and groom (family, relatives) typically bring the Yen equivalent of \$500 to \$1,000 cash. Individual close friends bring anywhere between the Yen equivalent of \$200 to \$500. Individual friends who are not as close bring the Yen equivalent of \$100 to \$300. The money needs to be brand new money—giving wrinkled bills is disrespectful—enclosed in a congratulatory envelope tied by an elaborate ten-stranded cord (*mizuhiki*) knot.

A single person who is popular and has lots of friends who are getting married can go quite broke! In return, the bride and groom give every guest a bag of gifts that might include sweets, towels, plates, candy, gift catalog—the value ranging from \$50 to \$300 per guest. (My cousin gave each of his guests an original, framed wood block print. The gifts can vary in value.) All of this is recorded, so when it's the bride and groom's turn to attend the wedding of one of their guests, they will need to give a monetary figure close to what their friend gave them.

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