

Two Major Factors behind the Marriage Decline in Japan: the Deterioration in Macroeconomic Performance and the Diffusion of Individualism Ideology

Akihiko Kato¹

Extended abstract

The average first marriage age has risen rapidly since the first oil crisis, from 26.7 in 1973 to 30.4 in 2009 for men and from 24.3 in 1973 to 28.6 in 2009 for women (NIPSSR 2010), despite it had remained stable during the high economic growth period (1955-1974). According to the census, the proportion of never-married people has increased dramatically between 1975 and 2005: from 48.3% to 71.4% for men aged 25-29, from 20.9% to 59.0% for women aged 25-29, from 14.3% to 47.1% for men aged 30-34, and from 7.7% to 32.0% for women aged 30-34.

It is well known that Oppenheimer and Easterlin paid attention to the impact of young men's declining economic resources in the United States (Oppenheimer et al. 1997; Easterlin 1980). In Japan, young men's economic positions have deteriorated during the "lost decade" after the bubble burst in 1990s, as restrictions on the recruitment of new graduates as regular employees coincided with an increase in the number of non-regular employees. But we can interpret a relative decline in earning capacity of young men as having started in the late 1970s, while high economic growth was ending. Men born in the 1940s got married when wages were growing some 10% annually. In contrast, those born in the second half of the 1950s graduated from school, began to work and reached marriage age when wages were rising 5% annually. Those born in the 1960s did so amid the annual wage growth of 3% and those born in the 1970s did so amid the zero growth.

As a matter of course, descriptive statistics alone cannot exclude possible pseudo correlations. In order to find out whether macroeconomic conditions can be effectively linked to the decline in marriage, we have to use a multivariate analysis to identify a causal path in which economic growth would affect young people's socioeconomic positions and their marriage. From this viewpoint, I have conducted an event history analysis using the data from National Family Research of Japan (NFRJ) implemented by the Japan Society of Family Sociology, and found that a major factor causing the marriage decline has been the expansion of disparities between social classes that has accompanied an economic slowdown and slump (Kato 2001).

¹ Associate Professor, Meiji University (Tokyo, Japan), Guest Researcher, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research (Rostock, Germany)

But marriage can be viewed not only as a rational economic choice made by individuals but also as a social institution supported by social practices, customs and norms. Therefore, the discovery of social and economic factors behind the marriage decline does not necessarily mean that the whole picture has been understood. As revealed by sociologists and folklorists, various marriage practices and customs existed in traditional Japan, which could have worked as a socio-cultural system prompting young people to get married at least until the high economic growth period. In this paper, I would like to incorporate socio-cultural and/or ideological factors into the event history model using the data from NFRJ to achieve a comprehensive explanation of the marriage decline in Japan.

In Europe, Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa argued that the “second demographic transition,” especially increases in premarital cohabitations, illegitimate children, and divorces, came as values shifted essentially from Catholicism to individualism, giving priority to personal freedom, self-determination and self-realization (van de Kaa 1987, 2001). Thus marriage and childbirth values shifted from “altruism” to “individualism.” They believe that the value shift is structural and irreversible rather than temporary, and has been spreading gradually from Northwestern Europe and North America to Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America.

But there are many cautious arguments against the application of the second demographic transition theory to Japan. Actually, fertility rates have declined to very low levels with divorce rates rising in Japan. But the share of children born out of wedlock to the total childbirths has remained stable at 1–2% since the middle of the 20th century. As for premarital cohabitations, those who have experienced cohabitation accounted for 11% of never-married women in their early 30s (in 2005) and 20% of married women in their early 30s (in 2004). But the share for never-married women in cohabitation at present (at the time of the survey) is limited to 2–3%, far lower than more than 40% in North European countries.

Moreover, dating activities in Japan remained very sluggish in the 2000s. According to the Japanese National Fertility Survey implemented by National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, those who had neither lover nor opposite-sex friend accounted for 51% of never-married women and 56% of never-married men in their early 30s in 2005. But their willingness to get married is not necessarily small. In the survey, about 90% of never-married men and women in their early 30s answered they intended to get married in the future. This data

suggest that many never-married people in Japan lack a disposition to individualistically find partners for marriage.

Although individualism-oriented activities have not come true in Japan, the “individualism as ideology” considering self-choice, self-determination and self-realization as progress spread gradually along with love marriage ideology in and after its high economic growth period in the 1960s, and has become excessively widespread since the bubble period that started in the late 1980s. But the diffusion of the ideology has exerted effect on marriage in a quite different way from North European countries.

In Japan, those responsible for youths’ marriages included not only youths themselves but also their families and relatives, their regional communities and their workplaces. To youths who failed to find marriage partners after reaching marrying ages, adults close to them introduced partner candidates one after another, providing matchmaking services. Individuals and couples serving as matchmakers were called go-betweens. If men and women introduced by go-betweens agreed successfully to get married, the go-betweens would play a ritual role in wedding ceremonies. After marriage ceremonies, these go-betweens would form social (constructive) parent-child relations with these new couples to serve as guardians to provide private and public support for the couples. The couples were expected to send gifts to the go-betweens regularly and give some support to them for any troubles. When youths found their marriage partners on their own, they usually asked leaders in their communities or their relatives to serve as their go-betweens.

Although the “go-between parent” practice developed in villages, companies as communities undertook matchmaking services in and after the 1960s when Japan developed industrialization and urbanization. Many companies recruited new female graduates as candidates for marriage partners of young male employees. At such companies, young employees’ bosses served as their go-betweens at wedding ceremonies and guardians for new couples. This was a kind of tacit social parent-child relationship. Marriage worked to maintain solidarity and unity at companies under the Japanese style of management, as well as at villages.

But the diffusion of the individualism ideology since the bubble economy period has worked to redefine marriage as a matter left up to individuals’ self-choice and self-determination. Under this ideology, any proactive intervention in youths’ marriage can be taken as an infringement on personal freedom. As a result, the number of senior people serving as go-

betweens in local communities has declined. Few companies now serve as social parents for their young employees to support their marriage.

In fact, arranged marriages' share of total marriages fell to 10% in the 1990s from about 60% in the 1950s. The share for marriages accompanied by go-betweens remained at around 90% until the mid-1980s and fell fast after the burst of the economic bubble. It came to 51% in the second half of the 1990s. As noted above, the love marriage ideology was enhanced into and spread as the individualistic marriage ideology that places greater emphasis on self-choice and self-determination on sexual relations and marriage. This is an apparent reason for the fast decline in marriages accompanied by go-betweens in the 1990s.

In order to test this hypothesis, I put year-by-year shares for "arranged marriages" and "marriages with go-betweens" as macro indicators of social support levels for marriages into the discrete time logistic regression model with socio-economic variables such as educational attainment, first job, social class origin, and economic growth rate. The estimates indicate that the indicators of social support for marriage boost the marriage likelihood significantly for both men and women. This means that, as the community-based matchmaking system weakens, the marriage probability may decline to cause a drop in the marriage rate. In Japan, the introduction of the individualistic ideology has worked to destroy the community-based marriage system and prevent young persons from finding marriage partners.

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