

Article

## “What We Want is to be Happy rather than Marrying”: Exploring Japanese Single Women’s Perceptions on Marriage, Childlessness and Being Single

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Japan has experienced significant demographic shifts and is regarded as an aging society with a significant low birth rate. Two decades ago, Japanese women who lived outside marriage and did not engage in child rearing were seen to be “good-for-nothing” and were likely to be socially stigmatized. Terms such as “Christmas cake”, “parasite single”, and “*makeinu* (loser dog)” have become popular and are used to refer to single women with pejorative connotation in Japanese society. Nonetheless, now more and more Japanese women are spending their lives as singles, even though marriage and motherhood are still significantly valued in women’s lives. The subjects of this research are Japanese single women who are over 30 without children. The purpose of this paper is to explore their perceptions of marriage, childlessness and being single. Adopting a qualitative research method, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with forty-three single Japanese women who were over 30, unmarried and without children. Results suggested that women’s intentions of marriage and views on childlessness differed according to age and financial capacity. Family relations, love and working experience affected women’s views in diverse ways. Despite nominal inconveniences in daily life, women generally expressed their satisfaction of living as singles. At the same time, the social environment has changed and seemed to greatly benefit single women, while traditional gender roles are still entrenched and internalized by some women. The author suggests that women staying single is not necessarily resistance to marriage per se, but could be seen as an alternative way to live a happy life.

**Keywords:** Japanese Single Women, Marriage, Childlessness, Single Life

### Introduction

Literature on traditional middle-class Japanese families has found that men are socialized to become *daikoku bashira*, the breadwinner of their household, while Japanese women are socialized to become good wives and wise mothers (*ryō sai ken bo*). A family consisting of a salary man and a professional housewife (*sengyō shufu*) is seen as the “standard family”. From the 1950s to 1980s, it was common for Japanese women to quit their jobs after getting married in order to take care of the family and support the husband’s work. Therefore a Japanese woman’s socioeconomic status has been attached to her husband’s via marriage for quite a long period (Iwao, 1993; Ochiai, 1997).

However, the tendency of establishing a “standard family” and women’s decision on marriage have changed since Japan’s economic depression in the 1990s. As shown in table 1, in 1990, 13.9 percent of women aged 30-34; 7.5 percent of women aged 35-39; 5.8 percent of women aged 40-44, and 4.6 percent of women aged 45-49 were

single. But in 2010, the proportion of single women in each age cohort increased to 34.5, 23.1, 17.4 and 12.6 percent respectively (Sōmushō tōkeikyoku, 2010). Along with this, the average age at first marriage in Japan has been increasing over the decades. Until 1980, the first marriage for women was in their early 20s, but recently in 2014, it was at 29.4 years old for women and 31.1 years for men (Kōseirōdōshō, 2015).

Table 1. Proportion of Single Women According to Age Cohort (30-49)

| Age   | Percentage (%) |      |      |
|-------|----------------|------|------|
|       | 1990           | 2000 | 2010 |
| 30-34 | 13.9           | 26.6 | 34.5 |
| 35-39 | 7.5            | 13.9 | 23.1 |
| 40-44 | 5.8            | 8.6  | 17.4 |
| 45-49 | 4.6            | 6.3  | 12.6 |

According to the Japanese National Fertility Survey by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (NIPSSR, 2010), the ratio of single people who said they wish to marry at some point in their life (*izure kekkon suru tsumori*) declined from 95.9 percent in 1982 to 84.8 percent in 2010 for men. As for women, the ratio declined from 94.2 percent to 87.7 percent in 2010. Nonetheless, the high ratios (84.8 percent and 87.7 percent) indicate that most single people, especially single women, still wish to get married.

If most Japanese women wish to marry, why do they not get married? Since the 1990s, “women’s decision to postpone marriage” has become the subject of much public discussion. “Women’s decision to delay marriage” was blamed for the decline of the family, loss of family values, and the lowering of the nation’s birthrate (Nakano, 2001). Women who are single over 30 years of age and have no children were labeled as “*makeinu* (loser dogs)”, while married women were considered as the “*kachiinu* (winning dogs)” (critiqued by Sakai’s 2003 book). On the other hand, many researchers have conducted research on Japanese late marriages. They have argued that the reasons for the changes in Japanese women’s marital behavior include women’s participation in the labor force; increase in women’s educational attainment; an imbalance in the sex ratio that caused mismatches in the marriage market; increase in the attractiveness of single life; an unwillingness to allow their lifestyle to deteriorate as a result of marriage; and changing gender attitudes more generally (Kojima, 1995).

Given the fact that marriage is still considered to be the mainstream in Japanese society where single women could be facing social stigma due to their single status, it is worth asking the following questions: “How do Japanese single women view marriage?”, and “What are their single lives like?” In this regard, qualitative research based on interviews provides us with some useful insights into how they actually view marriage and their single lives at a personal level. In the following sections, I will first set the social context in terms of marriage and singles in Japan. Then I will provide an overview regarding my fieldwork and the characteristics of informants. Finally, I will elaborate on women’s perceptions of marriage, childlessness, and single lives respectively using informants’ narratives and stories.

## 1. Marriage and Singles in Japan

Regarding Japanese people’s marriage, Edwards (1989) argued that Japanese tend to view themselves as “incompetent” when alone, and only through marriage or other group association do they become competent. Japanese notions of gender make marriage necessary because men need women to manage both their money and their domestic lives, while women need men to provide economic security and proper representation for the family in the public domain. Getting married is a basic mark of adulthood, carrying with it social responsibilities and an achievement of independence as a couple while remaining single carries the severe

implications of immaturity and lack of moral responsibility. Marriage marks the passage into responsible adulthood and implies the forthcoming birth of children.

On the other hand, many studies have proposed that marriage has become less attractive to women because rising levels of education and increased opportunities at work have given women more resources and the option to remain unmarried. At the same time, women view marriage as burdensome (Ōhashi, 2000; Tsuya, 1994).

As the phenomena of late marriage became more and more apparent, popular new vocabulary words have emerged to describe single people and their lives. In the 1980s Japanese women who remained unmarried beyond 25 were labelled “Christmas cakes”, because it was considered that women were of less value after the age of 25 like the Christmas cake after December 25<sup>th</sup> (Takemura, 2010, p. 158). More recently, they have been called “Parasite singles”—singles who are enjoying a comfortable life and consuming luxury products because they are living with their parents without paying rent or household bills (Yamada, 1999). Although Yamada explained that both single women and men are parasites, the term has been used in the media largely to describe women. As to single women themselves, most are unlikely to adopt the terms to define themselves on the grounds that those terms retain sufficient negative connotation (Dales, 2014). However, these catch-phrases existed as categories with particular social meanings which suggest that single women were seen as a specific group in society and were very likely to encounter social stigma in their daily life. For instance, old-fashioned Japanese inns (*ryokan*) may reject single female guests, because “they might commit suicide” (Iwashita, 2001, p. 5). In addition, Tokuhiko (2004) mentioned in her research on Japan’s delayed marriage that many single women revealed many unpleasant experiences because of their unmarried status. On the other hand, the view of single women as parasites is considered highly problematic by some scholars. For instance, Nakano (2011) argued that the decision for a single daughter to live with her parents is negotiated between the two generations; often a single daughter may be chosen among other siblings to care for her parents in their old age. Nevertheless, in her recent work on Japanese single women she pointed out that, as the women became older, they lose values both in marriage and the job market, because these two primary markets that involved women continued to operate on principles that valued women’s docility, youth, beauty, and ability to serve men (Nakano, 2014). While many studies and discourses on Japanese single women generally tended to be negative, I intended to investigate the situation directly from single women. Therefore, I adopted a qualitative research approach and paid attention to understanding these women’s thoughts and life experiences. Before I delve deeper into these women’s diverse perceptions, I would like to give an account of my fieldwork as well as the characteristics of my informants in the next section.

## 2. Methodology and Informants

My empirical data were collected from in-depth semi-structured interviews of a sample of Japanese single women in their thirties, forties or fifties. I started fieldwork in December 2013. In the beginning, in order to get access to Japanese single women, I joined cooking classes conducted by ABC cooking school which is one of the more successful ones in the market. I attended classes in the Shinjuku, Shibuya and Ginza branch schools successively. All these locations were very close to train and subway stations and opened until 10 p.m., to make it convenient for working women to attend. Each class consisted of one instructor and one to five students. After the class finished, students in the same class would eat the prepared dishes, sitting around the same table. That was the time when I tried to introduce myself and my research to other women. I had hoped I could gain some of the women’s interests in participating in my research, but I found that the women there refrained from talking about themselves. It was not hard for me to understand, because after all I was just a twenty-something foreign student whom they were meeting for the first time. I could not recruit informants easily through this approach. After that, I sought assistance from my own personal network. Fortunately, I was able to fix up the first two interviews through one of my Japanese friends’ introduction. Moreover, one of the informants

introduced several more single women to me after she was interviewed. In order to maintain diversity in my sample, I made sure that no more than three people were introduced by one gatekeeper. Using snowball sampling, I interviewed a total of forty-three single women in Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka.

I focused on single women in Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka because these cities are the center of singles' culture in Japan, and have a much higher concentration of single people than the other areas in the country. For instance, in 2010, 36.1 percent of women in Tokyo aged 30-39 were single compared to 28.3 percent nationally, hence the highest concentration of single people in the country. Also exceeding the national figure, the ratio of single women aged 30-39 was 31.6 percent in Kyoto and 31.3 percent in Osaka, occupying the second and the fourth place in the country (Sōmushō tōkeikyoku, 2010).

Regarding my informants in the Tokyo area, all their workplaces were located in Tokyo with most of them living in Tokyo. A few of them commuted from Yokohama, Chiba, and Saitama which were all within an one-hour train ride. Among the informants in Tokyo, over half came from other prefectures, and the time that they have stayed in Tokyo varied. As for informants in the Kansai area, all were local people, that is, born in Kansai. They were living with parent(s) with only two exceptions who lived alone. They commuted or used to commute between Osaka and Kyoto because of work or education.

The in-depth interviews lasted from one to two hours for most informants. The interviews were audio recorded with their permissions and I also took notes at the same time. Most of the women were interviewed in cafés or restaurants near their homes or workplaces. Two were interviewed in their own apartments, and two in their workplaces. All interviews were conducted in Japanese.

Regarding the informants' marital status (Table 2), all the informants were single without children. "Single" refers to the woman's unmarried status at the time of interview. Most of the informants reported that they were not in a relationship at the time of interview, while some reported that they had boyfriends. I only have two cases of divorced women. In most cases, the informants did not ask questions regarding my own status for instance, age, relationship, or marital status. Instead, several women asked me about the marriage trends in China where I came from, and I told them that it is the same as in Japan, particularly in the big cities like Beijing and Shanghai where people are getting married later and later and the number of singles are increasing as well. Only one woman asked me how old I was and whether I was married directly during the interview. When I told her I was in my late twenties and I was single, she said "Oh, it's still alright (*ja, mada daijōbu dane*)"<sup>1</sup>.

Table 2. Marital Status of Informants

| Marital Status     | Number |
|--------------------|--------|
| Never-married      | 41     |
| Previously-married | 2      |

My Informants' ages ranged from 31 to 56. Over half were in their thirties. (Table 3).

Table 3. Age Range of Informants

| Age | Number |
|-----|--------|
| 30s | 26     |
| 40s | 13     |
| 50s | 4      |

Over half of the informants were living alone. Most were living in rented apartments and only four out of

<sup>1</sup> My informants shared a common sense that a woman in her twenties does not need to feel any urgency to marry. Women's different perceptions according to different age group will be discussed later.

forty-three have purchased their own apartments. It is more common for single women to live with their parent(s) if the natal family is nearby in the same city. I also had two informants who were living with their boyfriends (Table 4).

Table 4. Living Arrangement of Informants

| Living Arrangement        | Number |
|---------------------------|--------|
| Alone (rental)            | 22     |
| Alone (owned condominium) | 4      |
| With family               | 11     |
| Share with friend         | 4      |
| With partner              | 2      |

Most of the informants had at least a university education. Some high school graduates, vocational school (*senmon gakkō*) graduates and short-term college (*tanki daigaku*) graduates were included in the sample as well (Table 5).

Table 5. Education Level of Informants

| Education          | Number |
|--------------------|--------|
| High school        | 2      |
| Vocational school  | 3      |
| Short-term college | 7      |
| College            | 29     |
| MA                 | 2      |

In terms of occupation, most of the informants worked in white-collar jobs. Over half were regular employees<sup>2</sup>. Their income ranged from less than 3 million yen to more than 10 million yen per year. Over half of the informants' annual income was more than 3 million yen (Table 6).

Table 6. Annual Income Range of Informants (Million Yen)

| Income      | Number |
|-------------|--------|
| Less than 3 | 14     |
| More than 3 | 29     |

According to national survey, in 2015 the mean annual income for working women in their early thirties was 307 million yen and was the highest compared to other age cohort (Kokuzeichō, 2016). In this regard, most of my informants seemed to have higher income. In addition, my informants were well-educated women from urban areas, therefore perceptions presented in the next sections may not be able to represent the case of single women who live in rural areas.

In the next section, I will elaborate on my informants' perceptions on marriage.

### 3. Perceptions of Marriage

Speaking of single women beyond 30s, one might wonder in the first place why they have not married yet.

<sup>2</sup> In Japanese *seishain*. Working as a *seishain* is valued because it offers stable income and is associated with social benefits.

That is because, in most people's minds, to marry at an appropriate age (*tekireiki*) is still the right thing for women to do. Not only probing into the question why they do not marry, I also paid attention to my informants' intention to marry, that is, "Do you want to get married? Why?".

### (1) Different attitudes among different age groups: 30s, 40s, 50s

#### 30s

My informants in their thirties generally expressed that they wanted to marry. Among them, Erisa (33, part-time worker<sup>3</sup>) showed a relatively stronger emphasis on her intention to marry, claiming that "Of course I want to marry (*mochiron kekkon shitai*)". According to her, the reason why she now enthusiastically wanted to marry is because she wanted to have children by the age of 35. She just had two years left to first find a partner<sup>4</sup>, then to reach the marriage goal, and finally to have a child. Like Erisa, the urge to have children was raised as the primary reason to want to marry among many of my informants in their thirties. What is interesting is that nobody took having children outside marriage as an option despite the fact that many women said they were concerned about the so-called "biological clock". This echoes the reality that in Japan, marriage and reproduction are still strongly tied to each other, and having a child out of wedlock means perceived social sanctions. The illegitimate birth rate in Japan had been approximating one percent of total births from the 1960s to 1990s. During the 2000s, the figure kept rising slowly and was 2.28 percent in 2014, but it was still very low compared with western countries (Cabinet Office, 2014).

In response to the question "why do you want to marry", Miho (32, contract worker<sup>5</sup>) said, "Because it is hard if I do not get married (*kekkon shinaito taihen dakara*)". Although she just said "all sorts of (*iroiro*)" when I asked her to explain "hard", I deduced from her explanations that, firstly, "It is hard to have a child if I do not marry", which has been stressed by other women; secondly, "It is hard to live without a husband". Dales (2013) pointed out that financial security should be a compelling incentive for women to get married due to the likelihood of unstable employment as well as the gendered wage gap. Miho, working as a contract worker, possibly felt a sense of insecurity and inequality through her work, because she needed to renew the contract every two to three years in order to keep the job. In contrast, to most people, a husband is still seen as a life-time partner and security. Moreover, compared with women who were in relatively less stable conditions, women working at regular positions with higher income did not link financial issue to marriage during the interviews.

#### Beyond 30s

Compared with informants in their thirties, single women in their forties and fifties did not show any strong intention to marry. In response to the question of "Do you want to marry?", Midori (50, regular worker) said, "If there is a right person, I may marry. But if there is not, I may not (*iihito ga ireba, kekkon shitemo ii. inakattara, shinakutemo ii*)". This sort of statement was common among women in their forties and fifties. Another woman, Aya (46, regular worker)'s response was salient, saying outright that "there is no need to marry (*kekkon suru hitsuyō ha nai*)". Different from women in their thirties, no women in their forties or fifties viewed marriage as a life goal which has to be realized by a certain age. To most of them, marriage is an option rather than a necessity. I suggest that this was made possible by the fact that single women in their forties and fifties, having devoted themselves to work for a relatively longer time, now have a relatively higher economic accumulation. They have earned enough money to support themselves and do not need to marry for financial security. This point can be supported by the two women's cases, because the annual income of Midori and Aya were both over eight million yen. Besides salary, Aya purchased her own apartments, which gives an indication of her

<sup>3</sup> In Japanese *arubaito*, which was the informant's original word.

<sup>4</sup> Erisa just broke up with her boyfriend several months before the time of interview.

<sup>5</sup> In Japanese *Keiyaku shain*. It is categorized as one type of non-regular employment in Japan.

considerable financial assets. I will talk about Aya's story in more detail in the next section.

## (2) Family and Work Influence

Besides age and financial reasons, I suggest that family and work influence are two alternative factors affecting women's attitudes toward marriage.

Aya is 45 years old and lives in Tokyo. After graduating from university in England, she first found a job in a small company in the local industry and worked there for three years. Then she came back to Japan and finally settled in Tokyo. She is now working in the media industry and living alone in the apartment she bought ten years ago in Tokyo. She said that she bought it for investment. Besides the apartment in Tokyo, she also owns one in Hokkaido and another one abroad.

Aya has one elder brother who is not married and living with her mother. Her father passed away two months before the interview. According to her, she did not like her father and she did not have very frequent contacts with him. I asked her for the reason. She explained that her father was a "typical" kind of Japanese father, with what is called *Teishukanpaku* (bossy, domineering) temperament. Her mother is a professional housewife and has little power in the household. Because her father just gave monthly living expenses at a fixed amount and left her mother to arrange everything with the limited money, when Aya was a child she witnessed how hard her mother struggled in the family for financial reasons. As a result, she decided that "I will never be like my mother (*zettaini oka-san no yōni naritakunai*)". After graduating from high school, she wanted to study abroad. However, her father did not show any interest in supporting her, and undoubtedly her mother could not give her any substantial help either. In order to persuade her father to give her financial support, she had to make a presentation to explain why she wanted to go study abroad, and why the family should support her. She said, "I kept doing the stupid (*bakabakashii*) presentation to my father for a whole week. When I got his agreement, I felt like I was liberated. At the same time I decided that I must make money by myself and I would never be like my mother (a professional housewife)". I asked if she wanted to get married and she said, "If there's a good person, maybe I would. But since I can live very well by myself, why bother (*nande wazawaza shinaito ikenai no?*)?"

Based on Aya's story, I suggest that parents' relationship, in other words, salary man and professional housewife model continues its influence on women's perception and expectation of marriage. Some women might have witnessed their mother's struggling within the household, thus they tend to criticize the traditional family model. Therefore, they want to be more independent and have less interest in marriage.

Another woman Hanako, is 35 years old and lives alone in a rented place in Tokyo. After graduating from university, she got a job in a major bank and worked at the Osaka office for 3 years. Then she was transferred to the Tokyo office and has worked in Tokyo until the time of interview.

She is the middle daughter in her family. Her two sisters who are both single live with their parents in their hometown. Her parents' marriage is also the so-called salary man and professional housewife model. According to Hanako, her parents' relationship is harmonious and her father is caring. Her mother handles everything perfectly within the household, so the house is always clean and whenever they feel hungry, food will be served. Her father always goes to bed before her mother in winter in order to warm the bed for her mother. Although Hanako goes back to her hometown on long holidays such as the New Year and Obon<sup>6</sup>, she frequently contacts her family, especially through long phone calls with her mother.

I asked whether her parents worried about her single status, and she said they did not show much concern for her. Instead they worried about her two sisters because her father once said to her, "(Rather than your

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<sup>6</sup> The traditional Japanese Festival of the Dead. The starting date varies because it is based on the lunar calendar. However it is most commonly celebrated around the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, during which Japanese people go back to their hometown to visit and clean their ancestors' graves.

sisters) you are alright, aren't you? In any case you can feed yourself (because you have a good job)". According to Hanako, she is not worried herself in the case that she could not find any one. It is not only because she earns a good salary, but also because she knows that her parents and her family would always welcome her. "No matter what happens I always have a place for me to return (*Nani ga attemo itsu ni nattemo kaereru basho ga aru*)", she said. However, she stated that even if she wanted to get married, she does not have the confidence to build such a good relationship like her parents'.

Whereas the parents' relationship negatively affected Aya's attitude toward marriage, why did Hanako not receive positive influence from her parents' happy marriage? In other words, why did Hanako have no confidence to succeed in marriage like her parents? In order to understand the reason, let us have a look at Hanako's work. As stated earlier, Hanako is working in a major bank in the Tokyo head office. What is noticeable is that she is a career-track employee (*sōgōshoku*). Her work is very demanding and intensive. According to Hanako, on weekdays, she usually gets up at 7 a.m. and starts work from 9 a.m. Overtime work and *nomikai*<sup>7</sup> is very common, so she usually gets home around 11 p.m. and sleeps at 2 a.m. On weekends she spends one day going out to nail and hair salons, or having meals with friends if someone asks her out. On other days she usually just stays at home dealing with chores, and relax. She said she needs to refresh and conserve energy for work for the coming week. Moreover, because work occupies most of her life, there is no chance for her to encounter the right person (*deai ga nai*), and she does not have much energy to consider seriously about developing a relationship.

In addition, another woman Tomoko (44) is also a career-track employee and is now living with her mother. She was sent to a new department and got higher pay just several months before the interview. According to her, she was offered a higher salary than before because she invested in herself to study and got an accountancy related qualification. Her new position makes her much busier than before, but with her mother's help within the household she is managing everything very well. Unlike Hanako, Tomoko is not doing much housework because her mother handles all of it. She is very grateful for her mother's good health, saying that only with her mother's help can she concentrate on her work. She also claims that she does not have the confidence in doing both well, which might be one of the reasons why she is not married.

Broadbent (2003) pointed out that Japanese firms introduce "general employment track (*ippanshoku*)" and "career employment track (*sōgōshoku*)" to deal with women's employment. Compared with general track position, career track position means higher pay as well as more potential demands, such as heavy workloads, and long hours of overtime. In contrast to women's growing participation in workforce, more and more Japanese men are working unstable jobs. Their incomes are reduced compared with their parents' generation, so a lot of Japanese men cannot afford a professional housewife. Working single women are aware of the reality that salary man and professional housewife model is difficult to realize nowadays. If women still need to work after getting married, and at the same time fulfill the traditional gender roles within family, it would be too hard for them. That might be one of the reasons why they do not have the confidence to marry.

### (3) Matters of Japanese men and relationships

In the 1970s and 1980s, the "three highs" (tall, high income, and high education) represented women's expectations of prospective husbands. In recent years the standards have been replaced by the "three Cs" (cooperative, communicative, and comfortable) or "four lows" (low ego, low dependency, low risk, low consumption) for an ideal Japanese marriage partner. However, the women I met did not mention those popular terms when I asked them for their views and expectations on Japanese men. Interestingly, I found that, from their perspectives, Japanese men seemed to have few valuable attributes. When they talk about Japanese men,

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<sup>7</sup> A drinking party after work. It happens in most places of employments and is seen as a part of the corporate culture in Japan.

they tended to talk more about their bad qualities than good ones.

Miki is 31 years old and works as a regular employee in an NGO. She told me she had three serious relationships. Regarding the men she dated she said:

“Yes, they were gentle (*yasashii*), but it was just at the beginning. As time went by, they started to think about themselves only and took everything for granted (*atarimae*). I eventually felt so tired to maintain the relationship that I decided to break up.”

Another woman, Ayumi (33) works in an IT company. She explained:

“They work very hard. I think it is the good quality. But they don't know how to express themselves and tend to be wishy-washy (*hakkiri shinai, sunao janai*). Now many Japanese men are '*kamacho*'. It's short for '*kamatte chōdai*' (means 'please care for me'). For instance in my company, one day we were considering having a *nomikai* after finishing work. The man next to my desk seemed very interested in our conversation, and I was quite sure he wanted to go with us. But, without asking directly whether he can join, he just kept waiting until I asked him 'how about going with us?' Guess how he responded? He showed hesitation on his face, and said 'well...' Of course he finally went with us, however, at that time I just thought he's really tiresome (*hontōni mendōkusai!*)”

When discussing why Japanese men lack social skills (*bukiyō*) and tend to expect women to accommodate others (*tanin ni awaseru*), Kayuko (33) who is a regular employee in a travel agency told me one story:

“It was in winter and that day was very cold. When I was waiting for the traffic lights, I saw a mother and her son standing on the other side of the road. The boy may be a high school student. He stood straight with his hands in the pocket. His mother, who is much shorter than her son, stood on tiptoe to wrap a muffler around her son's neck. At the moment I thought “Oh my god! Is it necessary to do that much for him (*soko made suru hitsuyō aru?*)” I think Japanese men are really spoiled by their mothers as well as their sisters since they were little. Japanese mothers do too much for their sons.”

Being uncommunicative and lacking in social skills were the most common responses when single women express their opinions of Japanese men. At the same time, they also criticized Japanese men for being narrow-minded and shutting themselves within a small world (which usually refers to Japan) (*semai sekai/nihon ni tojikomoru*). Nakano (2011, p. 137) pointed out that Japanese women were more likely to travel while Japanese men were more likely to be tied to their work, which made them have different experiences before marriage. Those differences may be seen as minus points when single women want to develop a relationship with men. However, Kayuko's words gave us an explanation on why Japanese men are used to women offering everything and why they are vague about what they really want. It showed some single women like Kayuko may see the traditional Japanese mothers' roles as problematic, and it implied that they may not do “that much” for men.

Regarding relationships, Hanako, whose story I have elaborated earlier revealed one little episode that happened between her and her boyfriend. Once, her boyfriend's parents were going to visit Tokyo and wanted to stay at his place. But he was travelling abroad for business during that time, so he asked her to send the spare key of his apartment to his parents in advance. In order to do this, she took her lunch time to go to the post office near her workplace and send the key by registered mail. She said, “If it's sent to my own parents I could just put the key in an envelope and drop it into a mailbox by the roadside. But it's for his parents, so I don't want to give them the impression that I'm not reliable (*shikkari shiteinai*).” Another woman Mari (48) was sharing her apartment with a female friend at the time of interview. According to her, they were getting along

quite well with each other. For instance, if one of them helped clean up the living room when she had the time, the next time the other may cook for two of them when she finished work and arrived home early. They do these little things in daily life to show their kindness to each other. It does not take much thinking to do such things. They just do what they can anytime they want. She also had the experience of living with a boyfriend. However, when she was living with her boyfriend, she always thought “I have to cook and I have to clean the room (for him)”, which made her very tired. Both Hanako and Mari’s stories reflect that in their minds relationship with men usually means you have to be concerned and careful (*ki wo tsukau*) and cannot fully relax.

Besides their perceptions on marriage, my informants also shared their views on childlessness.

#### 4. Views Regarding Childlessness

As mentioned earlier, single women in their thirties showed great concerns about having a child in time regardless of their economic status. In comparison, women in their forties and fifties did not mention that they wanted to have children, but generally claimed that children might be impossible for them (*kodomo ha tabun muri deshō*)<sup>8</sup>. They were aware that they would be totally alone someday since their parents were going to die before them. However, it does not necessarily mean pressure on having children in their lives. In fact, pressure comes from the family when single women reach a certain life stage, and then eventually reduces as the women’s age increase.

Chie (45) lives with her mother and five cats in Kyoto. According to her, her mother does not say anything to her about marriage or children, but actually was quite nagging when Chie was around 35. During that period, because her mother kept telling Chie over and over again that she wanted a grandchild (*magō ga hoshii*), one day Chie picked up a little homeless cat, named it as *magō* (grandchild), and gave it to her mother saying “here’s your *magō* (grandson)”. Chie talked about the episode as a joke, and her mother did not take it seriously either. However, her mother stopped asking for a grandchild as Chie got older and remained single.

Growing older reduces the pressure of being a single woman without children, while having married siblings could ease single women’s pressure on producing *magō* for their aging parents as well. Miki (33) lives alone in a rented apartment in Tokyo. She has an elder brother who is married and has a child. She mentioned that although she wanted to have children eventually after getting married, she was not very pressured when her parents said to her that they wanted to see the face of *magō*. “Because they already had one (the brother’s child)!” she said. To get married at an appropriate age and to produce a grandchild for parents is considered as *oyakōkō* (filial piety). The idea is shared by many of the informants. In Japan, family values and behavior received strong Confucian influence, and filial piety is greatly emphasized in the Japanese context (Otake, 1982). It also explained why some women said they wanted to get married because they wanted to fulfill filial piety to their parents (*oyakōkō shitai*).

However, in one case the woman stated that many women want to have children because they are afraid of aging alone, but the reality is that having a child does not really mean you have somebody to rely on in old age. According to White Paper of Aging Society, the proportion of elderly people who are living with their children reduced sharply compared with the 1980s. In 2014, 55.4 percent of elderly people who are over 65 are living without their children (including those who are living alone) (Cabinet Office, 2016). It could be considered as an indication of what the informant said above. Also, there were women claiming that they did not feel pressured or obligated about having a child just because they did not like children.

Having heard about the informants’ perceptions on marriage and their views on childlessness, I will now move on to their views on being single.

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<sup>8</sup> This point does not vary according to the economic status of women in this age group.

## 5. Views on Being Single

### (1) Freedom

Regarding single life, all women stated that “freedom (*jiyū*)” is the best advantage they get from being single. In terms of “freedom”, Yumi (35) who works as a regular employee told the story of her sister and her:

“I can spend all the time on myself. My sister is married and has a kid. She is also working. She has to deal with the company, asking whether they can shorten her work time because she needs to leave earlier to pick up the kid. After arriving at home, she needs to cook dinner, prepare the bath, and so on. She has little time to do what she wants to do for herself.”

According to Yumi, her sister used to go to yoga lessons with her for a period, but stopped when her husband had some job changes. Because her husband became very busy, Yumi's sister had to take care of their child and deal with lots of things by herself. Yumi commented on her sister's situation:

“There is no alternative (*shikata ga nai*). She (the sister) cannot complain (*monku ienai*). Because it is the balance of a family (*katei no baransu dakara*). But for me, I can do what I want at any time I like. Nobody would interfere (*Daremo kanshō shinai*).”

Another woman Miho (45) who is a regular worker in an advertising company explained:

“When my boss asks me to travel on business, I can just pack my bag and leave without worrying about children or coordinating schedule with a husband. When drinking outside with my friends or coworkers, I need not care about the time. It also allows others not to worry about my situation.”

Maoko (44) who is a pharmacist and works as a regular employee said straightforwardly that marriage and little children cause loss of productivity:

“When I see those married women with little children I could not help thinking that you can never expect them to work exactly the same as before. Whenever the child gets any physical problems, they will leave their work and put priority on their children. After all, you never know when the children would have a high fever.”

The informants' words reflected their perspective that freedom is seen as good for work and having more time to do what they want for themselves. They compare themselves with married women who have little kids and contrast the constraints of marriage with the freedom of being single.

### (2) Inconvenience

As to the disadvantages or inconvenience (*fuben*) of being single, they usually claimed that “there is not any particular inconvenience (*tokuni fuben ga nai*)”. However, some women mentioned that sometimes they could not receive deliveries for they are living alone (*hitorikurashi*) and there is no one who is always at home. Renting an apartment to live in is very common for young people in Tokyo. Usually, the place is not big but sufficient for a single person. For instance, Yumi, the woman mentioned earlier, is living in a rented apartment with an area of twenty square meters. According to her, although she was satisfied with her apartment, she felt inconveniences sometimes. She said:

“I want to live in a bigger place, but I cannot afford a big apartment due to my financial situation. But for couples, they can contribute money jointly and live in a roomier place.”

In contrast, Aya whose story was told in a previous section, is relatively well-off. She purchased her apartment which has two bedrooms. The problem of being single for her is that “the cleaning up of the house is very hard (*sōji ga taihen*)”.

When I asked informants what the advantage of being single (*dokushin no merito*) is, all of them answered “freedom” without any hesitation. In contrast, when I raised the opposite question, asking them about the disadvantage of being single (*dokushin no demerito*), most of them could not come up with anything instantly. They usually thought for a minute or so, then answered it beginning with words such as “nothing in particular, but if I must say something I would say... (*tokuni nai kedo, shii to ieba...*). Those so-called disadvantages mentioned above seemed insignificant, and given the fact that they were raised by women who were living alone, I concluded that what they meant was actually the disadvantage of living with nobody rather than being single.

### (3) Companionship

Despite the fact that my informants generally did not perceive particular disadvantages of being single, some women did mention that in some situations they did wish someone could be right beside them.

“One day I got a terrible cold and was not able to get up from bed. There was nobody at my side. I could not get myself to hospital. I could not call my parents either, because they were far away in my hometown. If I called them it would just make them worry. In the end, I called my college friend who is also single and living alone to come to my place. She took me to the hospital and I was rescued.”

(Miki, 35)

According to Miki, she also has some married friends with whom she is getting along very well. But she felt reluctant to call them in that situation because she thought they have their own families to take care of. Miki's accounts reflect one fact that, friends, especially those who are single, are one of the important resources for them to rely on in their daily life. Besides the moment when they need physical help, in their daily life they also go out together for leisure activities such as meals, events, travels and so on. However, as age increases, friends eventually married and became family-centered. In their minds, female friends no longer become as available as before due to marriage. But how about the male friends?

“In the past I had a very good male friend, and we used to have many contacts. Whenever I wanted to find somebody to have meals or drinks with after work, I would ask him. Now he is married, and I feel reluctant to ask him out for a drink. I am sure if I ask him he will show up, but I do not want his wife to misunderstand (*Okusan ni gokai saretakunai*). When I became aware, those who are still around turn out to be women who are single and men who are gay (*kigatsuitara mawari ha dokushin josei to otoko no gei dake*).”

(Aya, 45)

In summary, in terms of companionship, single women are dealing with the reality that friends, no matter female or male, are likely to become less connected due to marriage. Married friends eventually participate less and less in single women's daily life, while single friends remain in their life. That also gives them a sense of security. Like Midori (51) said, “People around me are all single. I am not special at all (*Mawari no hito minna dokushin dakara, watashi ha zenzen tokubetsu janai!*)”.

## 6. Discussion

Needless to say, Japanese single women have been greatly stigmatized in popular discourse. My research suggests that the social environment has greatly changed women's lives as well as their perspectives towards traditional social norms regarding marriage and their definitions of happiness. In contrast to olden times when dining, drinking and travelling were activities for couples or groups, nowadays in Japanese society someone can easily find restaurants and bars to enjoy eating and drinking alone, and go on solo travel. There are bars setting up special tables for single guests (*ohitorisama senyō seki*), and there are also hotels offering single-women-targeted packages (*ohitorisama shukuhaku puran*). Under the comfortable environment directed by consumption activities, most women claimed that they are happy with their life now (*ima no seikatsu ni manzoku shiteiru*). When I asked them to make suggestions to other single women, many women said “enjoy the moment (*ima wo tanoshinde*)”.

According to the Survey on Attitude toward Marriage and Family (Cabinet Office, 2014), 80 percent of female respondents said that they wanted to find a marriage partner with whom they feel happy and are able to relax (*isshoni ite tanoshii koto to ki wo tsukawanai koto*). Regardless of the ambiguous expressions on what an ideal marriage partner is, the single women I met tended to do calculation when thinking of marriage. They weigh the factors regarding what they could gain from marriage as well as what they would lose due to marriage (*kekkon de tokusuru mono to sonsuru mono*). In their minds, the apparent advantage of marriage is only that it might offer a sense of security (*anshinkan*) because one can have a lifetime partner. But what you lose is freedom and a happy relaxing life. It seemed that the losses are more than gains if marriage happens in their lives. Eiko (51) who spent ten years doing *omiai* (meetings arranged for two parties interested in marriage) activities from the age of 25 to 35 but ended up finding nobody to marry, recalled her feeling of that period, saying “at last I decided it's fine if I don't marry (*kekkon shinakutemo ii to kemeta*). Maybe I just wanted to have a relaxing life (*nonbiri shitetakatta dake*).”

In her research on Japanese career women, Aronsson (2015, p.184) stressed that women in their thirties are reevaluating themselves and share a certain sense of control and stewardship over their lives. Through my research, I suggest that the sense of controlling life, in particular the private life, is much stronger among those single women. As age advances, single women eventually would view marriage and having children as experiences (*keiken*) in different life stages. Some women may have the chance to gain the experience while some may not. Several decades ago women had to marry, both because they would face social stigma if they did not do so, and because they did not have jobs that would support them through life. However, as women increasingly participate in society, and in an age when women's ultimate goal has become “living a happy life”, being single has become one option for women.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored Japanese single women's views in terms of marriage, childlessness and being single. Through women's narratives, I argue that single women's perceptions regarding marriage and childlessness vary according to age cohort and their economic conditions. Consistent response of intention to marry among single women in their thirties suggests that being unmarried is not necessarily an indication of women's resistance to marriage per se. Single women's actual practice during relationships may contradict their thoughts on what and how much women should do for the partner. It reflects that the traditional gender roles were internalized rather than being challenged by some single women. Moreover, the parents' marital relationship and single women's working conditions impact on women's perceptions as well as their life choices. In contrast to the diversity of single women's perceptions on marriage, they consistently expressed their satisfaction with their current lives regardless of the nominal inconveniences of living alone. This is not only

because women's growing participation in workforce enabled them to support themselves, but also because nowadays the social environment surrounding single women has greatly changed and life has become more comfortable for singles in Japanese society.

Given that the number of single men is increasing as well, it is also necessary to examine the perceptions and lived experiences of Japanese single men in order to understand singlehood in Japan as a whole. Although this paper only examined single women in Japan, investigations on single women in other social contexts such as China where single women are labelled as "leftover women (*sheng nu*)" (To, 2013) would provide useful insights on the diversity of women's lives.

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