

What is behind the delayed marriage in Japan? : Do women postpone marriage because they are traditional or because they are egalitarian?

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### Introduction and Background

The total fertility rate in Japan has been declining since the mid-1970s and it is lower than that of many other industrialized countries (Klitsch, 1994). In 2002, the total fertility rate reached 1.3 (Rindfuss et al., 2004). The low fertility is closely related to today's marriage pattern in Japan. The average age at first marriage in Japan has been increasing over the decades, and it was 27.6 years old for women and 29.4 years old for men in 2003 (Raymo & Iwasawa, 2005). These average ages are the oldest in the world (Raymo & Ono, 2007). The mean age at the first childbearing in Japan is 29.4 years old in the late 1990s, and it is about three years later compared to that of the United States (Bongaarts, 2002). The proportion of births to unmarried women is as low as 1 to 2 % in the past 40 years (Rindfuss et al., 2004), indicating that marriage is essentially the only context for childbearing in Japan. Thus, delayed age at first marriage is directly associated with the low total fertility rate in Japan. Furthermore, past research indicates the incompatibility of work and family, especially for women, in Japan (e.g., Brewster & Rindfuss, 2000).

The low total fertility rate is one of the most serious issues in Japanese society where the proportion of the elderly population is large and has been increasing. It seems unlikely that the fertility rate will rise without a corresponding increase in marriage in Japan. Thus, research has been investigating why individuals, particularly women, postpone marriage in Japan (e.g., Raymo, 1998, 2003a, 2003b, Raymo & Iwasawa, 2005, Raymo & Ono, 2007; Retherford, Ogawa, & Matsukura, 2001).

### Literature Review

#### *Transition to Marriage*

Traditionally, researchers had utilized the specialization framework to explain the association between women's economic resources and the transition to marriage in the United States. This perspective (e.g., Becker, 1974) suggests that gains to marriage are reduced by women's economic resources. More recent studies have tested the economic independence perspective and found that women's economic resources are positively related to the transition to marriage (e.g., Goldstein & Kenney, 2001).

Contrary to the recent trend in the United States, but consistent with the specialization perspective, women's economic resources along with educational attainment, are negatively associated with the transition to marriage in Japan. Women take overwhelming responsibility for household tasks and childcare, which makes it difficult for them to combine work and family (Raymo & Iwasawa, 2005; Retherford et al., 2001).

Prior research demonstrates additional factors uniquely related to delayed marriage in Japan. First, co-residence with parents among Japanese women is associated with later marriage because of their few responsibilities for household tasks and the fact that they have significant disposable income (Raymo & Ono, 2007; Rindfuss et al., 2004; Retherford et al., 2001). Second, increasing prevalence of premarital sex in Japan in the last few decades plays a role in delaying marriage (Retherford et al., 2001).

### *Marriage and Children in Japan*

Children have always been an integral part of Japanese marriage in order to maintain family line and properties. Japanese marriage based on Confucianism involves more than a union between a man and woman, and marriage plays an important role in carrying on the paternal line (Rindfuss et al, 2003). Furthermore, the transition from marriage to parenthood occurs in a fairly short period of time. The first child is born within less than two years of marriage for about 70 % of couples (Jolivet, 1997). Thus, marriage is strongly related to procreation in Japan.

### *Incompatibility of Work and Family*

Incompatibility of work and family in Japan is widely noted. Japanese female labor force participation rates follows M-shaped curve, indicating that labor force participation dramatically declines during the ages between 30 and 34 largely due to childbearing (e.g., Brewster & Rindfuss, 2000). About 41 % of women stopped working upon pregnancy between 2000 and 2004 (Kaneko et al, 2008), and only about one-third of mothers with children under 4 years old were in the labor force in 1999 (Rindfuss et al., 2004).

This distinct employment pattern among Japanese women derives from their heavy responsibility for household tasks and childcare. Although married women typically spend more time on housework and childcare than their husbands in many countries (e.g., Bianchi et al., 2006; Baxter, 2005; South & Spitze, 1994), the gender gap in time spent in household labor is often greater in Japan (e.g., Tsuya & Bumpass, 2004). For instance, married women spent about 19 hours a week, on average, on housework and married men spent about an average of 10 hours a week in 2000 in the United States (Bianchi et al., 2006). On the other hand, Japanese married women spent an average of 33.5 hours per week on household labor compared to husbands' 2.5 hours in 1994 (Tsuya & Bumpass, 2004). Hence, gender segregated performance of housework and childcare between married women and men makes it difficult for women to combine work and family in Japan.

### *Attitudes toward Marriage and Parenthood*

Prior research argues that marriage has become less attractive to educated women (Raymo, 1998, 2003a, 2003b) because married women tend to take overwhelming responsibilities for household tasks and childcare in addition to their outside careers. Young Japanese women are dissatisfied with and rejecting traditional marriage and family life, which explains the increasing delay in marriage and lifetime singlehood (e.g., Retherford et al., 2001; Rindfuss et al, 2004).

On the other hand, research finds that the overwhelming majority of Japanese single women expects and intends to marry at some point in their lives (Kaneko et al., 2008). This is similar to the trend in the United States (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Indeed, majority will eventually marry by age 40 in Japan (Raymo & Ono, 2007; Jolivet, 1997) although the proportion who never marry has been increasing (Raymo & Ono, 2007; Retherford et al., 2001; Raymo, 1998). In 1997, 63 % of single women agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “*Women’s happiness lies in marriage, so it is better for women to marry*” (Retherford et al., 2001). This figure is substantially higher than Western nations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden (Retherford et al., 2001).

### Current Investigation

Prior research suggests that women’s rejection of marriage is associated with recent trends toward the postponement of marriage in Japan. However, single women’s traditional attitudes toward marriage and the family have not been explored as one of the factors of delayed marriage.

Findings from prior research lead me to the following research question: Are single women rejecting traditional marriage and the family, or do they actually have traditional attitudes toward marriage and family behaviors?

As described above, the majority of the single women agreed with the statement “*Women’s happiness lies in marriage, so it is better for women to marry.*” Along with the fact that the overwhelming majority of women expect and intend to marry at some point, I expect that Japanese single women have fairly traditional attitudes toward marriage and family. This is partly because they are likely to have witnessed their mothers performing most of household tasks in childhood. If single women are indeed traditional, it is possible to provide an alternative explanation that their traditional attitudes toward marriage and the family (not their egalitarian attitudes) are associated with postponement of marriage. Japanese young single women may be struggling between their career aspirations and their images of “good mothers,” given the difficulties in combining work and family, particularly for women, in Japanese society.

Given the contradictive research findings on single women’s attitudes toward marriage and family behavior, this research investigates if their attitudes are significantly different from others (i.e., single men, married women and men), and how their characteristics, such as, age, birth order, educational attainment, employment status, co-residence with parents, and urban-rural residence in childhood, are associated with their attitudes.

### Data and Method

This study uses the data from the Japan 2000 National Survey on Family and Economic Conditions (Tsuya, Bumpass, & Rindfuss, 2008, N = 4,482). It is a national sample of Japanese men and women aged between 20 and 49.

The dependent variable in this study is traditional attitudes toward marriage and the family. Traditional attitudes toward marriage and the family are measured by 10 items. For example, items measuring traditional attitudes toward marriage and family behavior

include “*A woman can have full and satisfying life without marrying,*” “*A couple should have their first child as soon as possible after marriage,*” and “*Preschool children are likely to suffer if their mother works.*” The response has a 5 point scale ranging from *strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, to strongly disagree.* I recode some items so that higher value indicates more traditional attitudes.

Focal independent variables are gender and marital status. I distinguish among single women, single men, currently married women, and currently married men. By “single” women and men, I mean those who have never been married. I exclude divorced individuals and the widowed because I focus on those who are in marriage and those who have never been in marriage. In addition, I anticipate that the widowed is few in the age range. I include age, birth order, educational attainment, employment status, co-residence with parents, and urban-rural residence in childhood as independent control variables. I will construct age groups such that 20s, 30s, and 40s to examine cohort differences. Birth order is controlled because it may influence on individuals’ attitudes. This is because, as discussed earlier, Japanese marriage has been based on Confucianism which emphasizes filial piety (Rindfuss et al, 2004; Jolivet, 1997), and first-born sons have traditionally provided care for elderly parents. Educational attainment, employment status, and urban-rural residence in childhood are controlled because these factors are associated with egalitarianism (e.g., Raymo, 1998, 2003a, 2003b, Raymo & Iwasawa, 2005).

First, analysis of variance (ANOVA) will be conducted to examine if there are significant mean differences in attitudes toward marriage and family behavior between single women and others (i.e., single men, married women, and married men). I also examine mean differences for each age group (i.e., 20s, 30s, and 40s) within gender and marital status.

Then, I will conduct Ordinary Least Square regression analysis to investigate the impact of individual characteristics, including age, birth order, educational attainment, employment status, co-residence with parents, and urban-rural residence in childhood, on attitudes toward marriage and the family.

## Discussion

Study of the delayed marriage in Japan has significance given the low total fertility rate and the fact that marriage is essentially the only context for childbearing. What has not been explored in prior research is the possible association between single women’s traditional attitudes toward marriage and family life and delayed marriage. This study provides the answer to the question: Are single women rejecting traditional marriage and the family, or are they rather traditional in their attitudes? Thus, this research enhances our knowledge of single women’s attitudes toward marriage and the family in Japan. Moreover, this study provide suggestions for essential macro- and micro-level changes, including gender relationship in marriage (i.e., men’s more involvement in housework and childcare), and social policies supporting Japanese families.

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