

COUNTERPOINT

Their spirit seems willing but young Japanese are hesitant to get hitched

By ROGER PULVERS
Special to The Japan Times

Back in the days of "there's gold in them thar hills," one of the prospectors' doleful refrains boasted the title "My Girlfriend's a Mule and a Mine." Across the Pacific and some 150 years on, I wouldn't be surprised if an echo of that plaintive air were not about to catch on among young Japanese males — retitled "My Girlfriend's a Modem and a Mobile."

As was reported in The Japan Times on Nov. 26, the findings of a survey by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research reveal some very telling statistics about the attitudes of young people in this country to unmarried and married life.

The institute, which now comes under the auspices of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, began conducting similar surveys in 1940, though the second wasn't undertaken until 1952. Since then, there has been one survey every five years, and their findings are the best guide available to gauge Japanese attitudes toward the institution of marriage.

Given the popular perception of the young Japanese male as being timid and inward-looking, many wouldn't blame unmarried Japanese women for asking themselves: "My toaster smokes, my cat comes home only to eat, and my electric blanket keeps me warm at night ... What do I need a husband for?"

As it turns out, however, the vast majority of unmarried young Japanese females do think they need a husband. The same seems to be true for young males, too, as far as their desire to get hitched is concerned. So it would appear that marriage is back, with a vengeance. Or is it?

Let's look at those statistics.

Out of the more than 9,000 respondents, 7,000 were aged 18 to 34. It is these younger Japanese who provide the most fascinating data.

More than 61 percent of the unmarried males in this group have no girlfriend. This is nearly 10 percent higher than the figure in 2005. Figures for females without boyfriends are smaller in number than those for males, but they still come out at 49.5 percent.

The survey is divided into four sections that probe the trend away from marriage: partnership issues such as relationships and sex; ideal marriage partners; the number of children wished for; and the state of being unmarried as it affects work, lifestyle, etc.

Why get married in the first place?

Reasons given in overseas surveys focus on the financial security of marriage, a strong belief that the married state is better for raising children, and the fact that married people appear to live longer than unmarried ones.

A survey conducted in 2008 by the Australia Temperament Project found that 81 percent of males and 82 percent of females thought they would either definitely or probably get married. While the Japanese survey asked not about this conjecture, but about willingness to marry, the figures for Japan are higher: 86.3 percent of males and 89.4 percent of female responded that they are "willing to marry." And this is even a lower figure than for almost any other year the survey has been taken.

But are these people serious about commitment when they tell pollsters they envision themselves living in blessed wedlock?

People want to marry — or think they will do so — and yet they are not doing it readily. Is this because they have not been able to meet Mr. or Ms. Right? The Internet would seem to be providing a highly expanded venue for just such encounters, or at least encounters leading up to it. In addition, there is, in Japan, the recent phenomenon of the *machikon*, or town party.

For these events, the organizers gather hundreds of young people in a district to cruise restaurants and pubs in order to schmooze with people of the opposite sex. It is safe, reliable and an equal-opportunity matchmaking activity.

What, then, is holding young people in Japan back? The survey lists a number of things.

Unmarried life, it seems, has its attractions — the greatest being "freedom of movement and lifestyle choice" (65.1 percent for males, 71.4 percent for females). Other reasons for staying single, in order of frequency given, were: "financially better off"; "easier because there is no responsibility to bring up children"; and "can keep a wide network of friends."

It's true. Once you're married and have kids, your old unmarried

friends don't want to sit around and hear sob-stories about diaper disasters and the rising price of highchairs.

Many respondents worried that marriage would obstruct their freedom "to keep up my lifestyle, have time to enjoy myself and relax, and spend money with a sense of freedom."

I've known a lot of married people in my day, but none has been able to do those things for long and manage to stay married. The only thing that kept some of them together was the even greater cost of a divorce.

The top "hurdle to marriage" reported in the IPSS survey was "not having enough money to set aside for marrying" — which was cited by more than 40 percent of males and females. This begins with the wedding.

A regular Japanese wedding is expensive. This is because it involves not only every single person the bride and groom went to primary school with (and on from there), but also every client or possible client their fathers — and now, increasingly, their mothers, too — need to cajole.

In planning a Japanese wedding, ask not who you should invite, but who you could possibly leave out without endangering the future of your childhood friendships or the bottom line in your parents' business. Interestingly, this "hurdle," which of course includes post-wedding costs, came out higher than in any previous survey.

The survey found a strengthening in two vital areas. More young women than ever want to marry a man who is "good at housework and raising children"; and they also seek a partner who "has an understanding of (my) employment status."

But the survey begged one intriguing question.

Most respondents — 86 percent of the males and 85 percent of the females — declared that they respectively considered *onnarashisa* (femininity) and *otokorashisa* (manliness) in marriage most important. Yet the survey appears to have failed to define what they mean by these terms.

In our metrosexual era, respondents would surely be entertaining varying concepts of what these highly charged terms mean.

I came away with the conclusion that young Japanese people view marriage as a much more daunting prospect awaiting them, with cramped style and cramped finances, than their counterparts in similar countries.

I say that because the survey results that I have examined from other developed countries indicate that young people see advantages — at

least financial ones — in being married.

Japan is slowly becoming a more family-friendly country in terms of the social-welfare benefits provided by government, accompanied by a gradual liberalization of the corporate culture that still even today generally discriminates against married mothers, single mothers and even employees who strive to be dedicated fathers.

Nonetheless, if this modest trend continues, the IPSS survey of 2015 will surely show both more optimistic results for younger people's relationships and the lowering of perceived hurdles to marriage.

And after all, if you don't get married, who is going to finish your sentences for you?

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