

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

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A large number of factors behind the marriage decline in Japan have been cited. A summary of the past arguments is that “there is a complicated mixture of factors behind the phenomenon.” But huge social forces are required to continuously push up the never-married rate for the entire society. This means that there are major and minor factors behind the falling marriage rate.

In fact, an event history analysis using the data from National Family Research of Japan found two major causes. One is the expansion of disparities between social classes accompanying the decline in Japan's macroeconomic performance. Economic growth can ease this trend that causes disparities in marriage opportunities. The easing effect has declined with an economic growth slowdown since the mid-1970s, reviving the potential impact of social inequality to discourage men from getting married. As the marriage rate for men in lower social classes falls, the population size of economically marriageable men has gradually decreased. A squeeze of marriage partners for women emerged, leading to a general decline in the marriage rate.

Another factor causing the marriage decline is the decay of the community-based marriage system due to the diffusion of individualism ideology. The community-based match-making system, including meetings and dates arranged or semi-arranged by families, relatives, local communities, and workplaces, can strongly promote marriage for both men and women. The modern nuclear family (love marriage and conjugal family) ideology, however, was introduced into Japan in the high economic growth period and publicized as a more radical ideology of self-choice, self-determination, and self-responsibility in the 1990s after the burst of economic bubbles, replacing the community-based marriage system. For women faced with a shortage of economically competent men, the decay of the community-based marriage system has meant a further increase in the costs and difficulties of searching for marriage partners. This is the reason the marriage rate for women fell quickly in the 1990s.