

Wrath awaits Japanese women who shun their childbearing 'destiny'



Back in the 1990s, actor Tomoko Yamaguchi often appeared in trendy dramas — TV shows that portrayed the lives of middle-class people who, whether married or not, only worried about what to buy and who to love. Once she turned 35, Yamaguchi was no longer considered suitable for such roles, but trendy dramas became untrendy anyway and she had managed to accrue enough star power to do other things.

Now her name has become associated with something else that, in a way, has some bearing on her past career playing housewives and single women looking for romance.

In a “long interview” that appeared in February in the women’s magazine [Frau](#), she frankly discussed her decision to not have children. Twenty years ago, when she was 31, she married another actor, Toshiaki Karasawa. She told the magazine she has “no regrets” about being childless because she never intended to be a mother.

“I wanted to have a life that’s different from one centered on giving birth to and raising a child,” she said, adding that she knows many people have speculated she was infertile, but it wasn’t the case. She understands that when a person has a child “everything changes and you feel differently,” but she’s happy enough simply making a life with her husband.

On the surface, nothing Yamaguchi said was scandalous, but the media treated the interview as a kind of manifesto. It is almost unheard of for a woman in the public eye to admit she doesn't want children.

Not long after the interview appeared, another actor, Norika Fujiwara, married kabuki star Kataoka Ainosuke. [At the requisite marriage-announcing press conference](#), reporters asked the couple about children. At 44, Fujiwara is past the prime childbearing age, and perhaps it was this difficulty that Kataoka was thinking of when he pointed out that, as a kabuki actor, he can always adopt a boy (it has to be a boy) to take his professional name. After all, he himself was adopted by a kabuki family for just that purpose. But while this statement seemed to let Fujiwara off the hook, she felt compelled to add that "as a woman" she wanted to "have (Ainosuke's) child," and from now on would endeavor to "move toward that goal." Statements like this are expected, even from someone such as Fujiwara, who was married previously and did not have a child.

Yamaguchi's and Fujiwara's respective attitudes are noteworthy since the government and the media now promote childbearing as a national imperative. In that light, Yamaguchi's "declaration," as some are calling it, sounds downright defiant.

Reacting to the Frau interview, one blogger on [the Career Connection News](#) site explained her own situation with regard to having or not having a child. She says she was married when she was 30, and soon thereafter started receiving the usual question: When are you going to have a child? Not "if," but "when." At first, she'd deflect the question by saying something like "There's still time," but after a few years the questions became more delicate, "as if (the interlocutor thought) I was trying to have a child but couldn't."

The truth is she didn't want a child then and still isn't sure she wants one now, but she can't say that out loud, especially in the current atmosphere of social pressure to increase Japan's population. Such a position is no longer simply a denial of her "female destiny"; it is also a disavowal of the privilege of being Japanese. She realized this had become an accepted way of thinking when she heard a female TV personality mention that her brother, who has three children, said he is "raising future taxpayers." The TV personality couldn't tell whether or not he was being facetious.

According to [an April 6 article in the Asahi Shimbun](#), the reactions to the Yamaguchi interview on the Frau website supported the actor's decision, but comments elsewhere on the Internet mostly said the opposite, the general opinion being that if women thought as Yamaguchi did, then "Japan would collapse." The Frau article even inspired a Tokyo symposium organized by artist [Eri Shibata](#), who asked whether childless women should be made to "compensate" society in other ways?

How would children feel if they are told they were conceived in order to “contribute to the state”? As one professor at the symposium pointed out, ever since the Meiji Restoration, the authorities have openly controlled the birth rate in line with the changing needs of the nation. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, birth control was discouraged in order to build an army that could expand Japanese power. In the lean days after the war, birth control was promoted to help save food and resources. Something similar has been happening ever since the government realized that the falling birthrate will have a negative effect on the economy, so it subsidizes fertility treatments.

The notion that Yamaguchi’s interview centered on her decision indicates it was the point of the article, and was probably negotiated as such beforehand, so it seems like a lost opportunity that the conversation didn’t move into other unexplored areas. No one ever queries a mother on why she *did* have a child, and, given the statistical increase in child abuse cases, it’s significant that no one ever asks a woman if she regrets giving birth, as the Career Connection News blogger points out. The question is considered unthinkable.

Attendant to the issue of whether or not a woman should have a child (men are conveniently excused from the discussion) is the more fundamental question of whether the matter is anyone else’s business. Childbearing has only become an “option” in the last 70 years or so, and with freedom comes doubt.

According to the Asahi article, young people are averse to having children because the pressure to procreate makes them think kids are obstacles to fulfillment rather than fulfillment itself. In the end, though, it’s their decision to make and theirs only.