



Delaying the big day: Stories of couples marrying in their late 30s seem to be becoming the norm, while a Josei Seven poll finds that around one-fifth of Japanese men and women don't want to get married at all. | ISTOCK

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More couples saying, 'I do ... but not yet'

BY [MICHAEL HOFFMAN](#)

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“Just the other day I had a date with a woman. We were planning on seeing a movie but it was such a beautiful day that I said, ‘We can see a movie anytime, let’s watch the sunset instead.’ She was furious: ‘Why didn’t you say so in the first place?’”

She stalked off to see the movie alone, leaving him to stroll off into the sunset alone, more convinced than ever that alone is how he was meant to be. “As of now,” he tells Josei Seven magazine, “there is no one who I’d want to marry.” He’s 41.

Another story from Josei Seven: “I’m a good cook. I’d make a perfect bride, if I do say so myself.” She’s 43. Seven years ago she broke up with the man she’d planned to marry, and has been alone since, caring for her mother, whose infirmity following a stroke is the main crimp on her social life. Another is her workplace, a culture center where “the only people I see are housewives. I’m thinking of having my eggs frozen.”

Never have the sexes been so far apart. As of 2010, 20 percent of Japanese men and 10 percent of Japanese women were classed as “lifetime singles,” meaning they had not married by age 50. That’s roughly double the figures for 1990, and less than half those projected for 2030. Is marriage facing extinction?

It’s not that people are dead set against marriage. Some are, of course — polling 100 single men and 100 single women aged 35-44, Josei Seven finds 23 percent of the men and 22 percent of the women “absolutely” uninterested in it. But 40 percent of the men and 36 percent of the women say they would want to marry “someday,” while 23 percent and 20 percent respectively say yes, definitely, preferably soon.

“I absolutely do want to marry,” says a woman of 45. “I want a partner. That’s why I keep myself young. I go to the beauty parlor, I do yoga.” She too had a boyfriend once whom she thought of as a fiancée, but he found someone else and left her not only devastated but incurably mistrustful of men in general, and “the next thing I know I’m 40,” to say nothing of 45.

And then there’s this gentleman of 45, who confides, “I guess I’m the herbivore type,” meaning he can take sex or leave it and won’t let his libido goad him into sacrificing his comfortable solitude. He can cook and clean for himself, or if he’s busy his mother comes over to help. As a company employee he earns enough to get him through a long old age, if that’s what fate has in store for him, but not so much that he feels like sharing it. Still, “it’s sad to think of growing old and dying all alone. Well, maybe when I’m in my 50s I’ll marry a girl in her 20s” — and live happily ever after? You never know.

Young love is radiant in its innocence. You have to be 20, mentally if not chronologically, to believe that *your* love is not like other people’s love. *Their* love withered, soured, sank into the tired and bored indifference you see all around you, but *yours* never will, *yours* is eternal, etc., etc. It’s a belief that defies obvious facts, statistical and observational — that one-third of Japanese marriages end in divorce, for instance, or that most marriages after a few years grow dull and unfulfilling — but that’s what youth is: bold, defiant. On its wings you soar above grim fact. You can’t do that any more, or at least it’s harder, at 30.

Marriage, once nearly universal, no longer is. It’s no longer young either. Newlyweds in their 30s, once rare, are now the norm, and they bring to this hallowed institution the hard-earned, hard-headed wisdom of their maturity. The starry-eyed poetry of old has turned to prose — reminiscent, in fact, of arranged marriages of the more distant past, though parents no longer do the arranging.

What's it like, marrying deep in your 30s? A common theme emerging from Weekly Playboy magazine's treatment of the subject is the fact — or impression — that men and women choose marriage rather than each other, “each other” being whoever chances to be available. A lately ubiquitous institution is the *gōkon*, or matchmaking party, where availability is put on display.

“She chose me,” smiles 31-year-old “Mr. Takahashi” of the 35-year-old wife he met at a *gōkon* two years ago, “because she was too nervous to go for the really good-looking guys.” He's maybe a little young to be a middle-aged newlywed, but as he explains, “I started going bald in my 20s,” which lent some urgency to the matter. And his lack of experience troubled him; hence the *gōkon* route, which bore fruit, but his wife, as inexperienced as he and older besides, is no less insecure: “She'll say to me, ‘Do I seem like an old lady to you? Do you want to divorce me?’” They spend a lot of time reassuring each other — no bad thing, of course.

“Mr. Kato,” 37, sounds like he could use a little reassurance himself, but his wife, whom he too met at a *gōkon*, has no time for that. Her ¥11 million-a-year income is twice his, and she, it almost goes without saying, is hyper-busy. When they first met two years ago she lied about her job, saying she did ordinary office work. Why? he asked her later after learning she was a top executive with a leading advertising firm. She explained: “I've had guys go for me because of the name of the company I work for.”

He understood: She wanted to be loved for herself. Fair enough. He understood also her fierce commitment to her job. He wishes she'd do a little housework sometimes, but that's minor; he can do that himself. Once he said jokingly that he may as well quit his job and become a full-time house-husband. She was not amused. In fact, she was furious: “Don't you have any ambition?” He'd like a child or two. She doesn't rule it out, but keeps taking birth-control pills.

Mr. Takahashi, meanwhile, is learning that insecurity has its good points. “Once,” he tells Playboy, “I took her to a restaurant for her birthday, and when they brought the cake I'd ordered specially, she was so moved, she cried.” He pauses, reflects, then adds, “I think we'll be all right.”

Michael Hoffman's new book, “In the Land of the Kami: A Journey into the Hearts of Japan,” is out now.

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