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Why marry, or worry, when we can be alone together in ohitorisama Japan?

BY [MICHAEL HOFFMAN](#)

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Maybe humans were meant to live alone.

Two facts militate against that hypothesis: the sex drive and its natural consequence, the birth of children. The family seems an inevitable byproduct. Throughout history it has taken many forms, from tribal and clannish to nuclear. But families there have always been.

Does it follow that there always will be? Certain novelties peculiar to our age sow doubts. One is the primacy of individual happiness. Happiness was always desirable, always hoped for, but it was secondary. Obligations deemed sacred, conventions considered “natural,” came first. They

no longer do.

Marriage traditionally was a matter of course, more or less forced on people who felt unsuited to it. You could resist, but it took very strong character. As recently as 1990, a mere 5 percent of men and 4 percent of women in Japan were “lifetime singles,” defined as people over 50 who have never married. By 2010 the percentages were 20.14 and 10.61, respectively. By 2030, demographers say, they will be 30 and 23. Nearly a third of all men and a quarter of all women, never marrying! The exclamation point seems warranted. From a historical perspective, it’s an astonishing development.

It’s where we’re heading, and there’s no end in sight. Marriage serves its purposes more or less well, protecting children and fostering social stability, but happiness? Maybe, if you’re lucky — but other roads to it certainly look less chancy.

One hardly knows whether to laugh or cry, reading Shukan Post’s article on henpecked husbands. It’s a theme as old as marriage, usually played for laughs. Edo Period (1603-1867) *rakugo* (comic stories) made much of it. Sure, women were submissive; sure, men were domestic tyrants — that’s the myth, but everyone knows who *really* rules, who *really* submits.

As then, so now, only worse, Shukan Post claims — “dramatically.”

The evidence is anecdotal rather than scientific, but husbands do seem to be an aggrieved species, the more so as they age and shed youthful illusions.

“Mr. A,” a real-estate broker in his 50s, leaves the house at 7 a.m. and gets back at 9 p.m. To what? Some well-deserved relaxation? Far from it. There are chores to do — dishes to wash, a bathtub to clean. Which wouldn’t be so bad, but his wife superintends, and she’s a hard taskmaster, never satisfied, always finding fault.

“You call that clean?”

“Do it yourself then,” grumbles Mr. A under his breath.

Why under his breath? Because “If I spoke up, she’d get fired up and there’d be no end to it.”

“I work too, you know,” she’d remind him. She does — from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. You’d think his hours would trump hers, but she doesn’t see it that way, and poor Mr. A is simply too weary to insist.

Wage-earning employment gives a wife dignity and confidence, but housewives seem no less demanding.

“You think it’s easy preparing meals for you every day?” remonstrates “Ms. B.” “The husband next door can cook; he gives his wife a break now and then.” Mr. B. can’t cook, and if the price of home cooking is allowing himself to be led around by the nose, he, like Mr. A, will swallow his pride and

bow his head in shame and submission.

There's the perennial issue of spending money. Japanese wives have traditionally controlled the household budget, husbands surrendering their salary and subsisting on a weekly "allowance." When the economy tanked 20 years ago, allowances began shrinking. They still are.

"Thanks to Abenomics, my bonus went up a little," says "Mr. C," a company employee in his 40s. "You'd think my allowance would too, no?" No. "It went down — don't ask me why.

"I say, 'I can't eat lunch on this.' She says, 'There are cheap ramen restaurants all over the place!' Or she says, 'Give up drinking after work and have a nice lunch instead.' But *she* goes drinking with *her* friends! Well, good, it gives me a nice quiet evening at home. But then at midnight, the phone rings: 'Come pick me up at the station.' 'Pick you up at the station! I have to work tomorrow!' 'You don't care if something dreadful happens to me!' 'All right, all right . . . ' "

On and on it goes. A father can't give his kid a good scolding without Mom taking the kid's side: "That's not how to bring up a child!" "No wonder the kids don't listen to me!" grouses one husband whose efforts to discipline the children end up with *him* being disciplined by his wife — in front of the children.

Men no longer feel at home at home. Where to seek refuge? The toilet is one answer, and Shukan Post quotes a humorous haiku to that effect: "Territorial rights: She gets the living room, I get the toilet." Even that is qualified: "She won't let me read in there — says it makes the books dirty."

Sociologists and family consultants have their explanations for the extreme submissiveness they increasingly see in husbands. One, of course, is the blurring of once clearly distinct gender roles. Another is the fact that men, for all their worldly experience, seem less communicative and less socially sophisticated than women. They don't speak up for themselves because they can't. Maybe they should learn before their downward slide into domestic oblivion goes much farther.

So this is marriage! Not inevitably, not for everyone, but what's a young single adult to think, reading Shukan Post's story? One of two things: "My marriage will be different" — or, "My marriage *won't* be different; to hell with marriage, I'm staying single!"

Last month's edition of Shincho 45 magazine profiled several Japanophile foreigners (BIJ, Feb. 2). What do they like about Japan? One of them, Swiss-born TV personality Haruka Christine, praised "*ohitorisama* culture." "*Ohitorisama*" refers to people living and doing things alone. Japan seems to be spawning the trend faster than other countries — certainly faster than Switzerland, she says, where being alone is seen as pathetic rather than bold and potentially fulfilling. In Japan people dine out alone, sing karaoke alone — and, increasingly, live alone. Thirty-two percent of all households nationwide are single-occupant.

Is Japan evolving into an ohitorisama nation? Time will tell, but for now it's easy to imagine Shukan Post's harassed, aging marriage victims sighing, "If only ohitorisama culture had been around 30 years ago. I might have *lived*, instead of . . ."

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