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THE WAYS OF BEING SINGLE: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF WELL-EDUCATED JAPANESE SINGLE WOMEN IN URBAN AREA

Abstract:

The literature on traditional middle-class Japanese families has found that men are socialized to become the breadwinner, while Japanese women are socialized to become good wives and wise mothers. Family consisting of a salary man and professional housewife is seen as the 'standard family'. During the post war period, it was common for Japanese women to quit their jobs after married in order to support the family.

However, the tendency of establishing a 'standard family' and women's decision to marriage has changed since the Japan's economic depression in 1990s. In 1990, 13.9 percent of women aged 30-34, 7.5 percent of women aged 35-39, and 5.8 percent of women aged 40-44 were single. In 2010, the proportion of single women in each age cohort increased to 34.5, 23.1, and 12.6 percent (Sōmusho tōkeikyoku, 2010). Along with this, the average age at first marriage in Japan has been increasing over the decades. Until 1980, the first marriage for women was in their early 20s, but recently in 2013, it's at 29.3 years old for women and 30.9 years for men (Sōmusho tōkeikyoku, 2013).

In this research I wanted to understand Japanese single women's life from their own perspectives. My research questions are:

- (1) What does marriage mean to Japanese single women?
- (2) As single, how do they deal with their daily life?
- (3) How do they view the future in particular the life in old age? How do they prepare for it?

My methodology is in-depth, semi-structured interviews of a sample of Japanese single women. I've interviewed a total of 38 single in Tokyo and Kansai area including Kyoto and Osaka.

This research found that single women in 30s tend to have a positive attitude toward marriage. On the other hand, some women mentioned that marriage is not a necessity. Working as a regular employee is valued by single women for it's usually associated with stable income and benefit. Besides work, single women are doing different kinds of hobbies for leisure with the purpose of keeping healthy or refreshing.

This research argues that single women are single by choice. Despite of the uncertainty about the future, they generally perceived themselves as 'happily single'. However, traditional gender roles and notion is entrenched. Salary man and professional housewife model continues its influence on women's perception/expectation on marriage.

Keywords:

postponed marriage, Japanese single women, lifestyle