

# Refocusing the *Shôshika* Phenomenon: A Literature Review on the Low Birth Rate in Japan

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## I. Introduction: the limits of the “post-marriage” theory

Japan is an iconic country when it comes to its aging society and low birth rate. Even though it is not the only country to suffer from a critical Total Fertility Rate (TFR, number of children per woman in her life), it was the first country to have a higher death rate than its natality rate in 2005 (IPSS, 2015). However, the *shôshika* phenomenon (low birth rate phenomenon) has been observed since the 1990s, and extensive literature exists on the subject to explain the reasons for such a phenomenon.

Scholars, for instance, have pointed out that the lack of money could be one of the reasons behind Japanese couples' struggle to reach the country's desired number of children. In the last survey of the National Institute of Population and Social Security (IPSS, 2015), 80% of couples between 30 and 34 years old said they could not achieve their desired number of children because of child expenditure. The current desired number of children (*risô kodomo kazu*) is 2.3, which is 0.36 higher than the actual number of children per household of 1.94 (Cabinet Office, 2015). The high cost of living may indeed be an obstacle to have children.

Many scholars have also argued that supporting women's work while raising children could help Japan's fertility rate (Maeda, 2002; Shirahase, 2002, 2005; Kashima, 2003; Kamii, 2003; Ato, 2005). In addition, many of them also proposed that policies that promote a better balance between work and private life for

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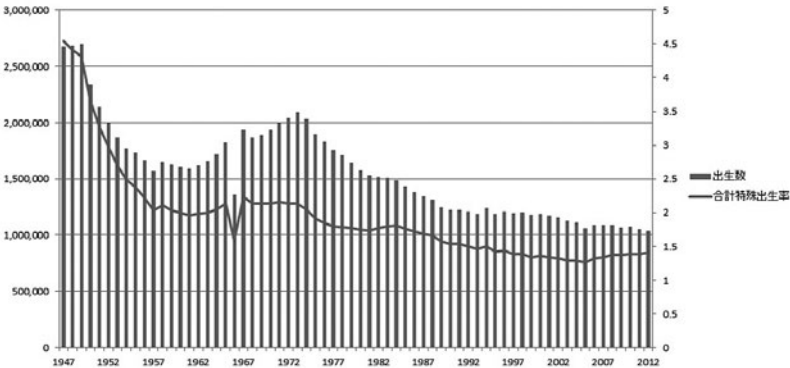
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working women may show some positive results (Yamaguchi, 2005; Mishra et al., 2010; Oshio, 2019).

The government has established policies based on the issues and suggestions previously mentioned. Senda (2015) has observed that most of the actions on this issue have focused on “three pillars.” They include work reform based on the keyword work-life balance, expanding childcare services in the local community, and providing economic support to raising children (Senda, 2015: 8). One can notice that those three “pillars” all focus on already married couples, and most of the measures done since then confirm the government’s intention to continue following the “post-marriage” theory. The theory, proposed by the author of this paper, refers to the idea that the low fertility rate phenomenon is primarily due to the difficulties for married couples having children.

However, these measures, induced by the “post-marriage” theory, have been rather inefficient. Jones, Straughan & Chan (2009) have pointed out that the pronatalist policies in Japan and East Asian countries seem to have failed, as they did not find any evidence that fertility has risen due to those measures. Figure 1 shows that Japan’s TFR has stagnated since the 1990s regardless of governmental efforts.

Figure 1: Evolution of Total Fertility Rate and the number of births in Japan (IPSS, 2019)



In red, the TFR curb shows that it has been steadily declining since the 1970s regardless of the government’s natalist measures.

The two main aspects of the Japanese government's actions should be more closely scrutinized. First, the budget set aside to address the *shôshika* phenomenon is still insufficient. Indeed, only 1.35% of Japan's GDP in 2015 was for social aids for families, compared to 3.20% in France and 3.75% in Sweden (CAO, 2019). Consequently, the government's lack of commitment to help families preoccupies the population. 60% of Japanese males and females between 20 and 50 years old feel that neither the quality nor the quantity of the social services for the families is satisfying (*Ibid.*). However, investing money to help families is not necessarily effective against the low fertility rate. Bradshaw (2003) had compared the TFR of 22 developed countries with the amount of money their governments have spent and are spending on child care support. Findings demonstrate that there is no direct relation between TFR and financial expenses in child care support. Therefore, giving money directly to the household is neither practical nor useful, and the government should find other ways to encourage people to have children.

The second critic regarding government measures is that they focus on families and married couples only, in other words, on "post-marriage" elements. Even though helping couples get to the desired number of children by facilitating a "work-life" balance may be relatively valuable, the number of children per married couple is still around two, and has only slightly decreased by 0.26 since the 1970s (figure 2). What negatively impacts the total fertility rate is not married couples but people who remain single. In a country where almost all children are born after wedlock (only 2% of Japanese children are born outside a marital union [OECD, 2018]), one can identify the difficulty of finding a marriage partner as the main reason to explain the Japanese natality crisis.

Figure 2: Number of children per married couple in their lifetime in Japan  
(IPSS, 2015):

図表Ⅱ-2-1 各回調査における夫婦の完結出生児数  
(結婚持続期間15～19年)

調査(調査年次)	完結出生児数
第1回調査(1940年)	4.27 人
第2回調査(1952年)	3.50
第3回調査(1957年)	3.60
第4回調査(1962年)	2.83
第5回調査(1967年)	2.65
第6回調査(1972年)	2.20
第7回調査(1977年)	2.19
第8回調査(1982年)	2.23
第9回調査(1987年)	2.19
第10回調査(1992年)	2.21
第11回調査(1997年)	2.21
第12回調査(2002年)	2.23
第13回調査(2005年)	2.09
第14回調査(2010年)	1.96
第15回調査(2015年)	1.94

注:対象は結婚持続期間 15～19 年の初婚どうしの夫婦(出生子ども数不詳を除く)。

In a comparative study of every region of Japan, Ohashi (2013) shows that singlehood is a significant pattern in areas with a low fertility rate. Indeed, places with low TFR are likely to be those that have both a high percentage of single men and women above the average marital age (*bankonka*) – 30.5 years old for men and 28.8 for women – and a high proportion of single men and women after the age of 50 (*shôgai mikonka*) (Ohashi, 2013). Understanding the reasons for this celibacy may be crucial in applying efficient measures against the low birthrate phenomenon.

Thus, one can notice the policy flaws in tackling the natality crisis. In essence, they all focus on child caring, better work-life balance, and economic support for parents or employment stability. They concentrate on people who are already married and who already have children and, thus, follow the “post-marriage” theory. Therefore, very little has been done to help single people find a marriage

partner and form a family.

In other words, the 30 years of political measures have been almost useless in countering the decreasing birth rate. The Japanese government seems to struggle with understanding the fundamental causes of the phenomenon. In order to take appropriate initiatives, one must accord more importance to the dynamics between celibacy and the total fertility rate. This paper deals with the underrecognized reasons for the *shôshika* phenomenon: the difficulties in finding a marriage partner for Japanese single males and females.

In the most recent survey conducted by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, the majority of the 4000 interviewed singles males and females between 25 and 34 years old say that they cannot marry because they “have not found an appropriate partner yet” (IPSS, 2015). Therefore, one can wonder what makes the quest for a marriage partner challenging in today’s society. This paper examines the five central discussions regarding the difficulties of finding an “appropriate partner” for single males and females in Japan.

Each section focuses on one challenge regarding unwanted celibacy for Japanese youth. The first section deals with the high living standards that the economic growth has created in the 1970s, making family ideals hard to achieve in the current financial situation, especially for men. The second section discusses how low income and employment precarity can impact the chances of marrying for women as well. The third section explores the lack of motivation to find a marriage partner. The fourth section deals with the emergence of new gender tropes that struggle to adapt to the traditional marriage market. Finally, the fifth section examines the lack of males and females interaction as the leading cause of *bankonka*. The gap between men and women is becoming deeper, affecting the way people perceive each other.

## **II. The underrecognized issues of Japan’s low birthrate phenomenon: the challenges in finding a marriage partner**

### **Challenge 1: Mismatch between high standards of living and men’s financial situation**

Japanese people in marriage-age want to build a particular life standard that they desire but feel difficult to achieve. This level of life was created during the Post-War economic growth and developed a standardized image of family success. Yamada (2016) argues that, from 1955 to the oil shock, living conditions could only get better. People who grew up in the post-war period could experience significant improvements in their adulthood due to economic growth. Young people could also benefit from good wages and a high purchase power (Yamada, 2016: 81). Those improved living conditions allowed people to enjoy new ways of living and the freedom to build their own family outside their parent's household.

However, it quickly shaped into a standardized image of a successful life inspired by the American middle-class narrative. Ochiai and other scholars describe the “perfect” household as one with 2 or 3 children, where the parents would meet at the university or the office when they were around their twenties. Then, after working a few years, the mother would quit her job and focus on caring for the home. The father would be the only breadwinner until all the children have graduated (Ochiai, 2004; Yamada, 2016; Ato, 2005). People started to marry around 27 years old for males and 24 years old for females (IPSS, 2015). This perception of family success is represented by the image of the *salaryman* (Dasgupta, 2003). The whole Japanese society started to follow a similar and standardized path of living.

However, these elevated standards heavily relied on a stable economy that does not exist anymore. From the first oil crisis in 1973, the “lost decade” of the 1990s, to the Lehman's shock in 2008, this ideal of life became more challenging to achieve for the middle-class (Yamada, 2016: 67). Many young men, who are still expected to be the sole breadwinner of their households, feel that they cannot realize the living standards created during the post-war economic growth. Today, 30% of single Japanese men between the ages of 25 and 34 years old report that they are not married because they lack money. In 1997, 22% had the same rationale behind marriage (CAO, 2019). Thus, men are subject to increasing pressure to find a stable and well-paid job before starting a family. The average

income is still decreasing, leading to men delaying the time they marry or even reducing their chances to get married sometime in the future (Miyoshi, 2013; Mizunokami, 2014). However, even though low income mainly affects men's opportunities to find a marriage partner, research shows that it is also delaying marriage for women.

## **Challenge 2: Job precarity contributing to unwanted celibacy for both men and women**

Nakamura & Sato (2010) have analyzed various profiles of single people in which the celibacy<sup>(1)</sup> rate is high. They found that people with a low income had more difficulties finding a partner, no matter their gender. Nagase (2002) had a similar observation. According to her, professional instability for both young men and women impacts finding a marriage partner, especially when they are under 24 years old. Sakai & Higuchi (2005) also confirm this hypothesis. Both men and women who experienced a period as “*freeter*” – people who lack full-time employment – just after graduating are more likely to delay their age to marry regardless of sex. In other words, both men and women have to postpone marriage because of the current economic stagnation.

The idea that professional instability also impacts women's chances of finding a husband may be surprising. The last section has argued that men is the only breadwinner in the Japanese ideal household. One can wonder why women would have to find a job before meeting someone.

The reason is that the workplace offers a formidable opportunity to meet a marriage partner. If one follows the ideal image of the Japanese household as Ochiai described it, it is at university, but also at the office, that a woman can find someone to marry before quitting her job. In a recent governmental study, 34% of single males and 40% of single females stated that their ideal place to meet a marriage partner would be at work (CAO, 2019). Motegi (2014) had found that the majority of married women had met their husbands at the office (29.3%) or

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(1) In this context, celibacy refers to the state of not being married. Single Japanese people may still have sexual intercourse out of wedlock.

through family and friends (29.7%), confirming that the workplace is still an excellent way to meet a future marriage partner.

However, one should note that the professional situation of single males and females is not the only reason for marriage delay and lifetime celibacy. Various cultural behaviors have impacted the chances for young people to find a marriage partner, such as a passive behavior when searching for prospective partners. .

### **Challenge 3: Passivity in searching for a love and marriage partner**

One could think that the delay in marriage (*bankonka*) and lifetime singlehood (*shôgai mikonka*) may be due to a lack of interest in marriage. However, the annual reports of the Cabinet Office (CAO) show that most Japanese single males and females state that they desire to marry. 86.3% of males and 89.4% of females still want to get married someday in their life (CAO, 2019). Even though the numbers have been decreasing since 1982, marriage is still very attractive for young people. However, even though people want to marry, it does not necessarily mean that they are actively searching for a marriage partner or even a love partner.

Many scholars have explored the idea of passivity in the marriage-hunting period for single males and females. Miwa (2010) notes that 60% of single males and females are not purposely doing anything to meet a potential partner. The last governmental survey shows even more significant numbers. According to the cabinet office, 72.5% of males and 55% of females between the ages of 20 and 29 do not take any concrete step to meet a “partner” (CAO, 2019). Interestingly enough, the survey asked participants what they do to search for a “partner” (*aite* in Japanese). It does not specify if it concerns a love partner or a marriage partner. It seems that many males and females in their twenties are passive even in looking for a boyfriend or a girlfriend.

One explanation for this inactivity is that single Japanese males and females do not have a strong opinion regarding romantic relationships and marriage. At the question “If a man (woman) had all the other qualities you desired, would you marry this person if you were not in love with him (her?)”, 35.7% have replied “undecided,” which is the highest rate of all the 11 countries observed (Levine et



al., 1995). In other words, many young Japanese seem hesitant regarding not only marriage but also romantic feelings. Tokuhiko (2010) and Nishimura (2015) also observed that many single males and females in their twenties continue to look for short-term experiences. It can impact their romantic relations and their chance to find a long-lasting relationship that could lead to marriage and a family.

However, studies on young single males and females show that they are still interested in love relationships but give up on them because of the hurdle they represent. Even though some young people state that they are not interested in love relationships, they are only discouraged from pursuing them. Takasaka (2013) has found six patterns in young males and females who say that they do not “wish” to have a boyfriend/girlfriend (“*koibito o hoshii to omowanai*”). They include: denial of responsibility, lack of self-confidence, no apparent advantage in being in a romantic relationship, procrastination, overambitious expectations (p. 292). What Takasaka’s respondents seem to show is not a total lack of desire for love but an indirect feeling that discourages them from expressing their desire for a romantic relationship.

Nishimura (2015) has confirmed this observation in her study. Of the 33% of her respondents who said that they do not wish to have a boyfriend/girlfriend, 60% replied that they think it is bothersome (*mendokusai*) to find one. According to Nishimura, they do not genuinely reject the idea of having a boyfriend or a girlfriend; they give up because of the difficulties of having one. Omori has shown that young single males and females hesitate in taking the first step in love relationships. Because a declaration of love (*kokuhaku*) can result in changes in a friendly relationship, many young people choose to stay ambivalent (Omori, 2016). By overthinking the process of courtship, some youngsters prefer to remain single rather than risking their chances with someone. In other words, the increase in marriage age has appeared not because people do not want to be in a love relationship or get married, but because they feel it is too challenging to find a love and marriage partner. However, one can still wonder about what the obstacles of dating are for the current generation.

#### **Challenge 4: Lack of adaptation in new gender tropes**

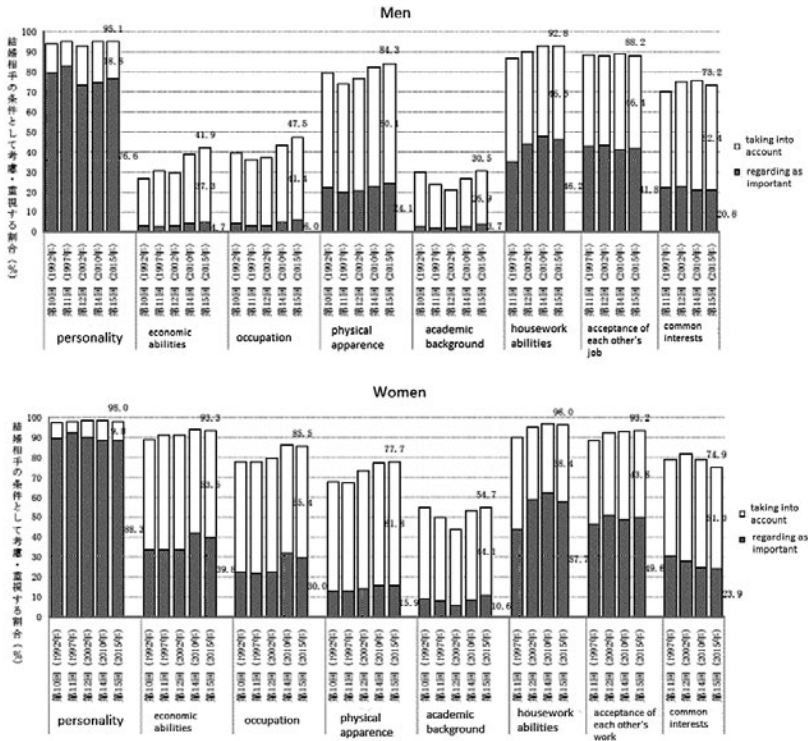
Scholars have noticed that some of the main challenges for finding a partner are the changes in gender tropes that Japanese youth still struggle to handle. Researchers have observed new non-normative masculinities and the difficulties women face in establishing male-female romantic relationships. For instance, the concept of “herbivore-type men” (*sôshokukei danshi*) has received extensive media coverage since 2010. Coined by Fukasawa in 2006, this expression describes men who are passive in approaching women, are not particularly interested in sexual relationships, and are not actively looking to build a professional career (Morioka, 2008, 2011; Charlesbois, 2013; Endo, 2018). This conception of masculinity breaks the traditional view of men embodied by the image of the *salaryman*: the white-collared corporate warrior, devotee to his employer, and eager to build a career, establish a family and be the provider (Dasgupta, 2003; 2013). The “herbivore-type men” struggle to fit in a love market where women still view this traditional masculinity as an ideal (Endo, 2018). Furthermore, more than 60% of single men between 20 to 34 years old consider themselves “herbivores” (Morioka, 2011). The “herbivore” phenomenon indicates that what young men and women look for in a partner are mismatched.

However, one should notice that women are also stuck between a standardized view of femininity and shifting gender tropes. Even though they have not received the same media coverage, one should notice how women’s views on love and marriage have evolved. These notions are trapped between “traditional” perceptions of the family and a more independent image of femininity, making them quite selective in choosing their husband. Fuchu (2016) has noticed that the female participants seem to rely on three criteria in selecting a marriage partner: the presence of romantic feelings, the potential husband’s income, and his desire to have children. According to Fuchu, if only one of these criteria is lacking, the participants would even reconsider having a love relationship with the partner, as it will not lead to marriage.

Secondly, despite the female participants’ wish to have a career and keep a professional activity, they are still looking for a partner with considerable

economic strength. Women seem to continue looking for what Shirakawa (2014) called *Shōwa kekkon* or “Showa era-style marriage,” in which the husband would financially support his wife. In figure 3, one can notice how women judge important both their partners’ acceptance of their wives’ jobs and their economic abilities. In other words, women seem to try to embrace both modern conceptions of family and romantic couple through romantic feelings and financial independence, and the traditional view of marriage by looking for a wealthy husband.

Figure 3: the evolution of the conditions of a marriage partner by years 1992, 1997, 2002, 2010, and 2015 (retrieved from IPSS, 2015)



The mismatch between the ideal qualities of a husband or a wife and the reality of both sexes’ ability to fulfill them is prevalent. On the one hand, men

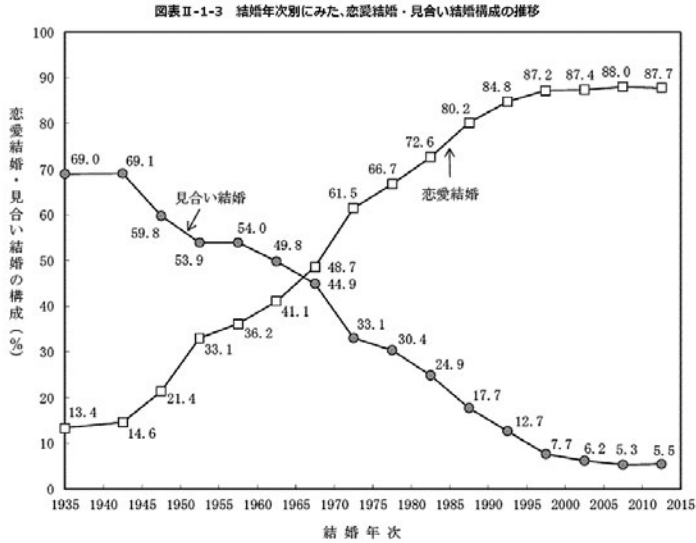
who grew up during the economic stagnation struggle to fit into the “traditional” masculinity ideal that society expects them to have. On the other hand, women are trapped between the traditional conception of wives as houseworkers and a more progressive view of femininity as independent individuals, making them selective when choosing a husband.

This situation may be due to a disconnection between the two sexes leading to incomprehension and unrealistic expectations *vis-à-vis* their ideal love partner. The following section explores the lack of inter-gender interaction and people’s difficulty in communicating with the opposite sex.

### **Challenge 5: Lack of inter-gender interaction and communication skills**

One may think that the rapid changes in marital behavior may be one reason people have difficulties communicating with the opposite sex, leading to the hurdle of finding a marriage partner. Indeed, the progressive decline of arranged marriages (or *miai* marriages in Japanese) that does not require any communication skills or inter-gender interaction may have impacted the lives of young single men and women. While most marital unions were arranged from 1935 to 1965, figure 4 shows that today, almost 90% of marriages in Japan are considered “love marriages” (IPSS, 2016).

Figure 4: The evolution of love-based marriages and *miai* marriages per year  
(retrieved from IPSS, 2016)

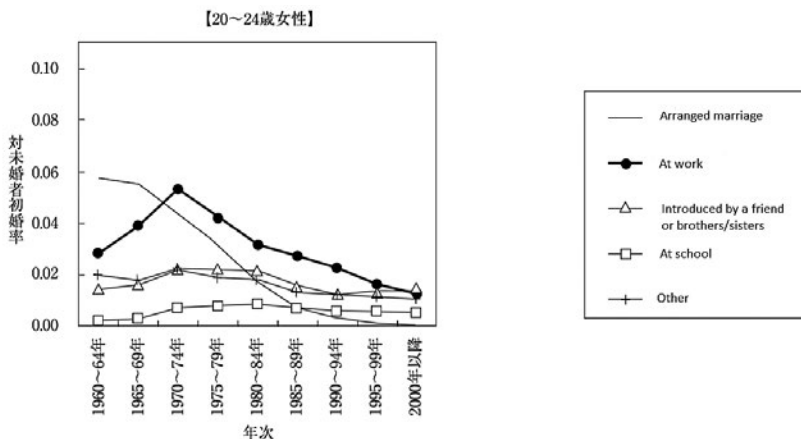


In white: love marriage rate, in grey: arranged marriage rate.

Recent scholars have shown that the transition from an arranged marriage to love marriage habits coupled with a consecutive professional precarity have boosted the *bankonka* and *mikonka* phenomena. Iwasawa & Mita (2005) argue that until 1974, meeting someone at work replaced the traditional *miai* marriage, in particular for women between 20 and 29 years old. However, the first oil crisis followed by the employment precarity prevented them from finding a marriage partner at the workplace.

In figure 5, meeting a husband at work rapidly replaced the arranged marriages during the post-war economic growth. However, it steadily declined after the oil shock of 1973 without being replaced in turn by anything else. In other words, women between the ages of 20 and 24 who were supposed to find a marriage partner from *miai* or at work gradually got deprived of the two best chances to meet someone (work or *miai*), without any new alternatives.

Figure 5: The first marriage by periods for women between 20 and 24 years old (retrieved from Iwasawa & Mita, 2005).



Both curbs of arranged marriages and meeting someone at work quickly declined from the 1970s without letting other ways thrive instead.

The graph demonstrates that marriages in Post-War Japan do not accord a lot of importance to male-female communication. Indeed, both arranged marriages or marriages with a colleague at work seem to involve a “third party” institution (a matchmaker for *miai* marriages, and the company for couples who met at work) to find a partner that does not require particular communication skills, whereas “introduction from a friend,” “at school,” or “others” are mainly based on communication.

It may be surprising to associate arranged marriages with couples who met at work. Still, in the case of Japan, both may be structurally similar, even though the latter is defined as “love marriages.” Indeed, while the institution of *miai* marriages is quite self-explanatory, some scholars have shown how some companies have acted directly or indirectly as a matchmaker for young single males and females, reducing their need to build social skills. According to Brinton (2011), socialization and communication during economic growth mainly took place at work. The companies became the center of human interactions and a formidable place to

find a marriage partner. People learned to interact with each other as part of their work-life (Iwasawa & Mita, 2005; Brinton, 2011:12; Endo, 2018). It was especially true in large companies, where the corporation worked as a third party for human interaction. It assured a stable job and created norms that, if followed, would help the employees find a partner (Brinton, 2011).

On the other hand, from the first oil crisis to the “lost decades,” people find themselves switching jobs and lost the feeling of belonging to one company. This precarity has left people by themselves, normless, with no tools to interact with each other outside the social landscape they were used to, resulting in what Ehara (2004) calls an “anomy in inter-gender interaction.” Even though most young single men and women desire a marriage partner, many of them just do not know how to find one.

Thus, the disappearance of the “traditional” ways to find a marriage partner such as *miai* or at work has created a more profound barrier between males and females. The proportion of single people who do not have friends of the opposite sex has been steadily increasing since the 1990s. While 47% of single males and 39% of single females did not have friends from the opposite sex in 1992, the proportion has respectively increased to 70% and 60% in 2015. Moreover, 20% of those males and females do not wish to have any interaction with the opposite sex (IPSS 2015).

Figure 6: Proportion of singles who do not have friends of the opposite sex  
(cited from Endo, 2018)

Proportion of singles (18 to 34) who do not have friends of the opposite sex				
Sex	1992	2002	2010	2015
Male	47.3%	52.8%	61.4%	69.8%
Female	38.9%	40.3%	49.5%	59.1%

Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2015)

In a compelling study of the phenomenon of “marriage hunting” (*konkatsu*), Endo (2018) has also formidably illustrated the communication disconnection

between males and females. Not only is there a mismatch between the ideal qualities and gender displays, but people seem to lack consideration regarding their potential partner's feelings. In her fieldwork, she met many participants who seemed entirely oblivious to their interlocutor's reactions. For example, she describes her encounter with one participant in a speed-dating event who kept making her guess his island of origin without giving her the correct answer. Even when Endo eventually gave up, the man persisted in his guessing game and did not notice that she did not want to play anymore. By the time he finally answered, the allotted time for a face-to-face conversation was over. Moreover, Endo commented that the fact that they could not have a proper conversation did not seem to bother the participant (Endo, 2018: 17). This participant seemed to not particularly want to make any effort in conversing with the opposite sex, even though she appeared as a potential marriage partner.

This lack of effort may be related to a distorted image of love relationships. Kitamura & Sakamoto (2007) have noted that many single men and women do not see the point of making any effort to communicate with a potential partner. It may be related to the fact that people in the "marriage hunting" markets have immature views of courtship. In their sociological study of group blind dates "*gôkon*," Kitamura & Sakamoto (2007) argue that single males and females seem to believe in love at first sight (*hitomebore*). As a result, they do not necessarily put effort into this search. Thus, they are neither actively looking for someone nor understanding their interlocutor and believe "destiny" should be enough to meet the perfect partner (Kitamura & Sakamoto, 2007: 134). It seems that many single men and women who participate in matchmaking activities cannot appropriately assess what they need to do to get into a love or marriage relationship.

Thus, the lack of inter-gender interaction and communication skills may be one of the primary reasons for the *shôshika* phenomenon. In a society where love marriage has just recently become the norm, the youth struggle to find a balance between expectations and reality, as they do not have the "tools" – an understanding of social norms – to navigate into this new market. While the dissolution of arranged marriages, decided by the parents, and marriages with colleagues,



encouraged by the company, has led to more freedom in choosing a partner, it has also left a heavy burden to find someone by oneself.

### III. Conclusion

This paper has explored various theories that explain the *shôshika* phenomenon, which has been affecting Japan for thirty years. After discussing the “post-marriage” theory, the paper has examined why Japanese men and women remain single even though 90% of them want to marry. Five main discussions have been explored to understand why unwanted singlehood is within the *shôshika* context. The first element is the high life standards stemming from the economic development in the 1970s. Second, a precarious work stability, affecting single men and women’s chances to find a marriage partner. Third, the passivity of young men and women when looking for a marriage partner. Fourth, the emergence of gender tropes that struggle to fit the traditional marriage market. Finally, there is a lack of male and female interaction. All these elements are arguably the leading causes of *bankonka*. The gap between men and women is deepening and affecting how people perceive each other.

The media has pointed out the current economy and new social behaviors (working women and “herbivore-type” boys) as the reasons behind the low fertility phenomenon. However, one should recognize that the new trends are less problematic than society’s lack of adaptation to these particular trends. Many young people miss the tools to access love relationships, which is the current standard of marital union. From the end of the last century, they are enjoying the freedom to choose their marriage partner more than ever, but the ways to actually find someone are still unknown for many young Japanese males and females.

Thus, the lack of intergender interaction and communication skills must be examined in more detail. In a context where love marriage prevails and communication skills are much more meaningful to find a marriage partner (Horike, 1994), the study of male-female relationships should be a key to understand the *bankonka* phenomenon and find accurate measures to address this issue.

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**Refocusing the *Shôshika* Phenomenon:  
A Literature Review on the Low Birth Rate in Japan**

<Summary>

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Low fertility rates affect many developed countries, which struggle to find appropriate measures to counter this phenomenon. Japan has particularly drawn a lot of attention to this issue as one of the countries with the lowest fertility rates globally. Since the “1.57 shock” in 1990, during which the public opinion started noticing the demographic problem, various scholars have discussed the reasons for the “*shôshika*” (low birth rate) phenomenon in Japan, leading to a vast literature on the subject. While some people identified the “work-life balance” difficulties as the leading cause for the low birthrate, others have seen the economy’s deterioration as an important issue. However, those assessments only refer to problems related to married couples, which the author of this paper proposes to call the “post-marriage theory.” Even though one should not ignore the struggles for married couples to have children, they may not be the main aspects that explain the *shôshika* phenomenon. This paper is an attempt to refocus the *shôshika* issue on the pre-marital difficulties of building a family. Based on a review of the academic literature since the 1990s, this paper argues that the leading causes of the Japanese demographic crisis are the difficulties single people face to meet a marriage partner. Although whether the coronavirus pandemic will worsen a situation that is already critical for Japan is yet to be seen, it is crucial to understand the causes of low fertility in the archipelago.

