Marriage-hunting:
Markets, Morals, and Marriageability in Contemporary Japan

by

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Dedication

To my parents, Ewa Tomaszewska-Woźny and Paweł Woźny,
and my grandparents, Maria and Dionizy Tomaszewscy

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the entanglement of moral and market values in the commercial heterosexual dating services in Japan known as "marriage-hunting." In Japan, marriage is widely regarded as a precondition for reproduction and hence the national government has endorsed this industry to counteract ongoing population decline. This research draws on multiple types of qualitative data collected over nine months of multi-site fieldwork in Japan between 2018 and 2020: 1) ethnographic observations of dozens of marriage-hunting events, including educational seminars and group dating events; 2) nearly 130 interviews with professionals organizing spouse-seeking activities and their clients; 3) documentary evidence including contracts, marketing materials, self-help books, and advice columns.

Engaging macro- (structural), meso- (institutional), and micro- (individual) level analyses, I examine how political and economic transformations spawned diverse marriage-hunting services and, in turn, how individuals respond to the demands of marriageability as filtered through the market. The first empirical chapter shows why and how institutions mediating marriage in modern Japan have evolved in relation to shifting structural conditions, new ideals of family and personhood, and women's improving social standing. Chapter 3 then turns to marriage-hunting professionals' gendered conceptions of marriageability and shows how they cast marriage-hunting as a means for self-betterment. Chapter 4 analyzes the varied

modalities of mediation that marriage-hunting services provide. Intensive mediation supplants clients' *cultural fluency* by orchestrating and disambiguating all steps of the courtship process, moderate mediation enhances their ability to enact courtship scripts, while weak mediation requires participants to mobilize their own cultural fluency. The final two chapters consider how everyday people respond to ideals of marriageability: Chapter 5 demonstrates that marriage-hunting necessitates performances of hybrid masculinity and femininity, which, despite appearing progressive, ultimately reproduce hierarchical gender relations. By centering the voices of sexual minorities and individuals marginalized in the market, Chapter 6 further analyzes moral boundaries drawn around marriageability and probes the limits of the state-market nexus in shaping intimate lives and subjectivities.

Marriage-hunting: Markets, Morals, and Marriageability in Contemporary Japan sheds much needed light on how intimacy, markets, and politics intersect. First, it demonstrates how new dating industries become a means of moral regulation by implicating personal goals and desires in state reproduction. The marriage-hunting industry mobilizes ideals of individualism, free choice, competition, and meritocracy to encourage everyday people—especially women—to partake in spouse-seeking activities. By providing a fine-grained account that fleshes out statistical representations of Japanese men and women which can be found in the demographic literature on marriage, my ethnographic approach allows me to demonstrate diverse self-making projects as individuals negotiate, resist, or strategically incorporate state and market discourses. Second, by attending to the different ways women and men are valued and expected to move through the market I reveal the gendered cultural logics that underpin new dating technologies. Specifically, I develop a theoretical framework for understanding *hybrid femininities and masculinities* and consider their significance for the broader gender order. Finally, my research

contributes to scholarly debates surrounding the commodification of intimacy. By attending to experiences of those both at the center and on the margins of the marriage-hunting market, I demonstrate that the peril of commodification lies not in its potential to corrupt intimate bonds. Rather, when individual life chances are tethered to commercial services to which no equal access exists, intimate markets become a mechanism of social and symbolic exclusion.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Marriage-Hunting Economy

"This year, I'm really going to go for it.[1] I won't find someone sitting at home, so I'm going to go out more. I'd like to find a partner before the Tokyo Olympics" Maya declared over incessant chatter in a crammed Starbucks near Shibuya Station.[2] She was an attractive 39-year-old I met at a matchmaking event a few days prior. A polished bob, a small golden drop pendant around her neck, and billowing pants in bright magenta accentuated her petite frame. Maya was recounting her relationship experiences from over the past decade. To ensure that I followed her story, she sketched a periodized timeline on a piece of paper with shaded areas and symbols representing different episodes from her romantic life. She paused occasionally to demonstrate her age on fingertips adorned with tastefully manicured nails.

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[1] Maya used the onomatopoeic expression *gatsugatsu suru* which suggests doing something ravenously, eagerly, ardently, avariciously.

[2] Throughout this dissertation, unless I quote market professionals whom I refer to by their last name and honorific "-san," I refer to my interviewees through a pseudonymous first name. During my fieldwork, I typically addressed my interlocutors through their last name followed by "-san," as it is customary, except for situations in which we developed rapport that facilitated a more informal register. My interlocutors called me Anna-san.

No sooner had Maya turned thirty than people around her began asking when she would marry. She had experienced two long-term relationships with men she had strong feelings for; she lived with one of them for several months. Both, however, lacked the "desire to marry" (*kekkon ganbō*) and skirted the topic whenever Maya broached it. "I felt like marriage wasn't an extension of love for them," she said. After the second breakup, Maya, then 37, found herself in what she called a "conflicted state." On the one hand, she enjoyed her job as a music editor and planned to continue working even if married. On the other, she liked children and considered marriage the only socially legitimate arrangement to become a mother.[3] Timidly, Maya speculated she could even enjoy being a housewife. As far as she could tell, her younger sister—a mother of three and a full-time homemaker—led a happy life.

Maya also felt conflicted about possible ways she could find a partner. She described her ideal as meeting someone "naturally," such as through work or a shared activity. "For example, if he helped me with something, then I could learn about that person's many good qualities in real life, which would make me like them. And then we start dating and that leads to marriage. That would be ideal," she characterized this coveted trajectory. Another option was to be introduced by people in her networks. Nevertheless, she was aware that at her age the odds were not in her favor. To make things more complicated, Maya hoped to experience a fulfilling relationship based on genuine affect. As she put it: "People say love and marriage are different. But when marriage comes first in all this process, it somewhat stops me. … It takes time to develop feelings. So, I thought that if I didn't care about age, I should date. But if I was concerned with time, I should do marriage-hunting."

[3] In Japan, childbirth occurs predominantly within marriage. The approximately 2 percent of children born to unwed mothers are more likely to experience poverty and be subject to social stigmatization (Hertog 2009).

And so began Maya's travails in Japan's vast marriage-hunting (*konkatsu*) industry. By the time we met, she had used marriage-hunting services of all stripes. She participated in dozens of dating events, from a singles' night at Haneda airport to a matchmaking event at a Buddhist temple. Swiping through countless messages on dating apps, she filtered out those inquiring how much she charged per night or gauging her interest in joining religious organizations. Through drama therapy and relationship seminars she learned how her "past experiences and traumas obstructed [her] ability to marry." By reading online blogs and self-help manuals with titles such as *Becoming a Heroine in Your Forties* she trained herself how to behave on dates and enhance those characteristics that would make her marriageable. She even enrolled in a marriage agency where a professional counselor introduced her to several eligible men. Most of these activities were not free. Including money spent on clothes and makeup, Maya estimated spending thousands of dollars on spouse-seeking over the years.[4]

Yet, Maya detested marriage-hunting. "It's not that my standards are too high," she said. Still, the men she was meeting seemed tawdry or socially awkward. Their stained, wrinkled suits suggested a lack of a "sense of cleanliness" (*seiketsukan*). Maya resented the behavior she felt compelled to enact during the dates. (She demonstrated spectating her counterparts' soliloquy by making herself compact, palms neatly folded on her lap, nodding her head with silent enthusiasm.) She described feeling exhausted by the uncertainty and relentless decision-making that characterize marriage-hunting: whether to respond, whether to show up, whether to meet for the second time, whether she could find someone better. But above all, the experience had her questioning her own *worth*. Wondering out loud if she might be "one of those people who cannot

[4] In the following chapters, monetary amounts in Japanese yen are converted to US dollars at an approximate rate ¥100= $US1. The actual rates varied throughout my fieldwork.

get married," Maya hinted at the looming specter of social marginalization she anticipated: "In Japan, if you are over 45 and not married, they say it's *yabai* (terrible)."

* * *

New dating technologies are a defining feature of social life in the twenty-first century. Although commercial services facilitating various types of relationships have long existed around the world, in recent years they have gained a new degree of visibility and social legitimacy. They are rapidly becoming the main conduit for the formation of new intimate relationships.[5] Despite their ubiquity and the potential they offer for meeting partners beyond traditional networks, users like Maya criticize these technologies, describing uncertainty about dating protocols, safety concerns, rampant sexism, racism, ageism, and the anxiety these courtship experiences engender (Berkowitz et al. 2021; Curington et al. 2021; Komporozos-Athanasiou 2022). Others note the dehumanizing effects of repeatedly transforming, packaging, and selling oneself as though a commodity on a market (Essig 2019; Illouz 2007).[6] Indeed, although both social scientific and popular discourse often use the metaphor of a "dating market" in reference to a pool of individuals looking for a mate (Becker 1973; Bruch and Newman 2019; Laumann et al. 2004), the emergence of these dating industries made it newly apparent that they are also legitimate "markets" in the economic sense, with economic exchanges underwriting courtship encounters.

[5] As of 2017, the majority of both opposite-sex and same-sex couples in the U.S., meet online (Rosenfeld et al. 2019). In Japan, the number of on- and off-line services assisting individuals in the search for a partner has more than tripled since the early 2000s (Yu and Hertog 2018). In a recent estimate by the company Recruit Bridal (2019), 1 in 8 people who married in 2018 found their spouses through marriage-hunting and 1 in 4 singles aged 20-40 who intended to marry relied on marriage-hunting services (Recruit Bridal Research Institute 2019).

This dissertation examines the values, ambivalences, and contradictions as they manifest in new dating economies through the lens of the Japanese marriage-hunting industry. I argue that individuals who pursue romantic partners via these arenas negotiate bonds not only to one another, but also to broader society, and, indeed, the state. Theorizing the marriage-hunting market as a mechanism of governance, I demonstrate how participation in dating economies emblematizes the changing nature of modern social membership. I argue that the marriage-hunting market acts as an instrument of moral regulation, which requires pursuing intimate relationships as freely choosing market actors and autonomous, responsible consumer citizens. I demonstrate how individuals become compelled to participate in marriage-hunting not through coercive or punitive measures, but by moral suasion. I trace how values such as independence, free choice, and competition become mobilized in cultural processes through which the state-market nexus shapes (and is shaped by) intimate relationships.

This dissertation also demonstrates how new dating economies reflect and reproduce social inequalities. I argue that the marriage-hunting market systematizes entrenched social expectations of marriageability into quasi-scientific, rational market *standards*. Marriage-*ability* in this context is not simply the socially defined eligibility to marry but a meritocratic achievement entwined with one's social location and capacity to participate in the market. Simultaneously a cultural, economic, and moral category, marriageability is closely affiliated with normative ideas about middle-class respectability and normalcy, especially as they pertain to "proper" forms of marriage and household.

These market-based marriageability standards are profoundly gendered. I show how they classify people as either "men" or "women," assign value, and expect them to move through dating economies in different ways. To approximate these criteria, individuals must produce

hybrid gender performances that combine elements associated with traditional masculinity and femininity. By situating this hybridity in broader structures of intimate governance, I demonstrate how ostensibly progressive gender norms aid in state reproduction. Taken together, I show how the marriage-hunting market fosters social hierarchies and divisions of citizenship, distributing social advantage in ways that reinforce inequalities around gender, sexuality, class, age, and nationality.

THEORIZING DATING ECONOMIES

Among sociological theories explaining the rise of new dating economies in contexts spanning from the United States and Western Europe to Japan and East Asia, two main approaches can be distinguished. The first foregrounds the marketization of intimate relationships in late capitalism, emphasizing alternately the market's corrosive or liberatory potential. The second focuses on technologies of the state and how they shape social membership by mobilizing gender and sexuality. This section provides a succinct synthesis of these literatures by drawing on examples from across a variety of sociopolitical and historical settings.

Placing Japanese and non-Japanese practices side by side may at times appear discordant; this is intentional. Western representations of intimacy in Japan tend to render it the strange, mysterious Other. Exoticization often bespeaks moral judgment "used to differentiate kinds of people, societies, and civilizational orders" (Povinelli 2006, p. 5; see also Said 1978). The aim of this dissertation is to do the opposite. By focusing on everyday practices, desires, and subjectivities, I hope to de-exoticize perceptions of Japanese courtship and to offer more general lessons about governance through modern dating economies.

Marketization of Intimacy

Although popular culture usually presents pecuniary interests as anathema to genuine affect, courtship is an arena of social life thoroughly entangled with market exchanges.[7] Historians have documented how the specific form of courtship known as "dating" emerged in the early twentieth century United States in the context of industrialization, rapid urbanization, and expanding consumer culture. The spread of wage labor enabled young, single men and women to live away from families. Diverse dating practices, such as "going out" or "treating," initially practiced by working-class and non-white daters, gradually displaced the former practices of "calling" popular among white middle and upper-middle classes. This involved a shift from the private sphere of a woman's house to the public, masculine sphere of movie theaters, diners, and other commercial leisure outlets (Bailey 1989; Clement 2006; Weigel 2016; Zelizer 2005). Marketization was liberatory: it enabled couples to interact away from the watchful gaze of the family and community.

Parallel effects occurred in other sociopolitical contexts. For example, in post-Maoist China market reforms facilitated a successful adoption of new ideals of conjugality and coupling which state policies had previously failed to achieve (Farrer 2002; Friedman 2006; Pettier 2022). In Spain, idioms of personal achievement and expressive individualism that people adopted concurrently with participation in the national labor market redefined their everyday vocabularies of affect (Collier Fishbourne 1997). In Japan, as I will detail in the following chapter, the ascendancy of love marriage based on individual choice coincided with

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[7] For analytic purposes, I define courtship as practices expected to lead to legal marriage. For this reason, this dissertation does not focus on more casual relationships often associated with new dating technologies, such as "hookups" or "situationships" (e.g., Armstrong et al., n.d.), where marriage is not a presumed end. Because of my focus on Japan, where neither same-sex nor de facto marriage is legally recognized, I will focus on a relatively narrow set of relationships between men and women.

unprecedented economic growth and social affluence (Ryang 2006; McLelland 2012). Over the second half of the twentieth century, across these various contexts, market-supplied ideas and consumption practices became synonymous with romance, with leisure activities and specific commodities, such as costly engagement rings and extravagant wedding receptions, symbolizing affect and intimacy (Campbell 1987; Constable 2009; Illouz 1997; Mojola 2014; Zelizer 2005).

Scholarship on new dating technologies tends to place them within these trajectories toward increasing marketization. Swedish sociologist Marie Bergström (2021) notes a historic shift whereby dating applications further remove courtship from personal networks and everyday contexts such as educational institutions and workplaces. As Bergström writes: "Meeting partners now is a specific social practice, with its own platforms, clearly delineated in space and time, and with an explicit purpose. The real novelty lies here, in the *disembedding of dating from other social spheres and in its resulting privatization*" (2021, p. 7, emphasis added).[8] Eva Illouz (2007, pp. 84-86; 91) similarly asserts that the sheer quantity of encounters within new dating economies and their repetitiveness move them away from the market logic of scarcity, which enables the novelty and enchantment associated with romantic love, to a logic of mass production, where encounters are products "on an assembly line, to be consumed fast, efficiently, cheaply, and in great abundance." (Illouz 2007, p. 91). Others compare modern dating markets to increasingly precarious labor markets with encounters resembling job interviews. As Weigel (2016, p. 8) quips: "If marriage is the long-term contract that many daters still hope to land, dating itself often feels like the worst, most precarious form of contemporary labor: an unpaid

[8] As Bergström explains, "First, the platforms are accessible from home, and hence they turn meeting a partner into a domestic activity. Second, far from having a public setting, interactions are strictly dyadic, being based on one-to-one conversations that cannot be seen or overheard by a third party. Third and most importantly, online dating operates a clear separation between social networks and sexual networks. Whereas previously people met partners in ordinary social settings and often through people they knew, online dating involves circumventing one's social circles" (2022, p. 10). Rosenfeld et al. (2019) refer to this as "disintermediating your friends" in dating.

internship. You cannot be sure where things are heading, but you try to gain experience. If you look sharp, you might get a free lunch."

These assessments echo prominent sociological theories that examine the changing nature of intimacy in late modernity. Theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman (2003), Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995), Anthony Giddens (1992), and Neil Gross (2005) on the one hand, and scholars of the second demographic transition (Cherlin 2004; 2020; Lesthaege 2014) on the other, have long suggested that the unprecedented centrality accorded the individual in modern life has transformed both the forms and meanings of intimate relationships. The attention here is on the recoding of intimate relationships as vehicles for personal fulfillment and self-actualization, as opposed to, for example, advancing social standing. Marriage, once considered one of the "cornerstone" events in a life course, evolved into a "capstone" event that follows educational attainment, financial stability, and other signifiers of socially defined adulthood (Coontz 2006; Cherlin 2004). Increasing individualization also means that the shared—albeit not necessarily consensual— social conventions, cultural rules and norms, and sexual scripts (Simon and Gagnon 2003; Green 2008) around courtship have broken down. With the unmooring of stable social identities and attendant norms around gender and sexuality, rules governing intimacy have become increasingly fluid, their outcomes less predetermined. This "normal chaos of love" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) has been especially evident in global conversations in the wake of the #MeToo movement. Where definitions of key interactional elements including consent and bodily integrity are contingent on individual understandings, local circumstances, and power relations those who engage in dating assume personal responsibility for appropriate conduct (Illouz 2019; Lamont 2020; Wohl 2017)

Although this scholarship fruitfully complicates our understandings of markets and intimacy, it nevertheless rests on and upholds the common assumption of separate spheres. This dissertation moves away from this view. Instead, I build on and extend the work pioneered by Viviana Zelizer, who sees markets and intimacy as intertwined and mutually constitutive (Zelizer 1994; 2005; 2011). This line of scholarship has persuasively shown not only that intimacy can facilitate diverse economic transactions but also, and more importantly, that people rely on these transactions to forge, maintain, sever, and (re)define their social ties (Bandelj 2020; Hoang 2015; Kim 2019; Mears 2015b). Zelizer's (2005) influential analysis of legal disputes surrounding the termination of intimate relationships, for example, reveals how institutions demarcate social ties by distinguishing between different types of economic exchanges. Courts and government agencies differentiate and classify intimate bonds as those between spouses, lovers, or sex workers and their clients, respectively, by defining the nature of economic exchanges between individuals. In this perspective, whether through shared finances, altruistic gift giving, or through quid pro quo exchanges, all intimate relationships are "transactional" (Mojola 2014).

Recognizing the co-constitutive relationship between culture and economy, this dissertation moves beyond questions asked by this scholarship. I am interested not simply in how individuals forge intimate ties through economic exchanges; I also ask about the role of these intimate markets in larger structures of social governance. Turning Bergström's privatization thesis on its head, I argue that under current configurations of capitalism dating economies constitute an arena through which individuals negotiate their bonds to one another, society, and the state. Conducting intimate lives by means of these moral economies brings individuals in interaction with diffuse operations of state power. The Japanese marriage-hunting market offers

a unique analytic lens through which to understand this novel organization of social life and shifting conditions of social membership.

Marriage (markets) and intimate governance

As feminist and queer scholars have long shown, our innermost, ostensibly private desires and identities are tightly woven into larger architectures of the state (Canaday et al. 2021; Cott 1998; Friedman 2006; Morgan and Orloff 2017; Sweet 2021; Ueno 2009; 2011). Indeed, marriage — and the family/household that it spawns—are paradigmatic forms of intimate governance. By determining who is and is not permitted to marry, political and legal authorities draw lines around social membership. Modern states rely on marriage and family to shape desirable national populations. Rules of marriage "stabilize the essential activities of sex and labor and their consequences, children and property" (Cott, 2001, p. 7), defining social roles as well as horizontal and vertical ties between citizens. In fact, legal historian Nancy Cott (2001, p. 3) asserts that "the whole system of attribution and meaning that we call gender" largely derives from the state-sanctioned institution of marriage—it appoints "husbands" and "wives," prescribes behaviors, and reciprocal relations between men and women.

The cultural ideas embedded in legally recognized marriage and family forms display remarkable consistency across advanced capitalist countries, even as access to legal marriage expands to formerly disenfranchised groups (Moore 2011; Ocobock 2020). Across contexts from North America (Smith 1993; Heath 2012; Randles 2016; Randles and Woodward 2018) to Japan (Ochiai 1997; Ueno 2009; Robertson 2018) marriage as a monogamous union between those identified as man and woman—eventually one also based on companionship and romantic love—has become enshrined as the ideal of modern couplehood (Bellah et al. 2007; Coontz

2006; Collier Fishbourne 1997; Donner and Santos 2016; Swidler 2001). It served as the basis for the gendered division of labor with the husband working outside to provide for the family and the wife, occasionally in paid employment, primarily responsible for caring for the husband, children, and the household. Institutionalized in economic arrangements such as family wage and spousal tax breaks this family model minimized individual dependency on state resources (Alexy 2020; Cooper 2017; Canaday et al. 2021; Takeda 2005). We can think of this cultural ideal as a type of national standard (cf. Smith 1993), used to create populations that match administrative grids of government censuses and statistical methods of population management (Foucault 2009; Homei 2022; Patriarca 1996; Porter 1995; Timmermans and Epstein 2012; Timmermans and Prickett 2022). Even though the lived realities of intimate arrangements rarely match official categories, the ideals of middle-class marriage and the nuclear family have become universalizing moral standards by which states evaluate diverse forms of kinship and coupling, shape possibilities for national belonging, and even compete with each other in the international arena (Çiçek 2018; Garon 1997; Povinelli 2006).

As a rich sociological literature documents, government programs rely on morally laden conceptions around marriage to confer privilege and recognition (Edin and Kefalas 2011; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Smith 1993). From marriage promotion programs in the United States (Heath 2012; Randles 2016; Randles and Woodward 2017) to housing schemes in Singapore (Tan 2018; Teo 2013) policymakers posit legal marriage and nuclear family as default solutions to social problems and conditions for eligibility for state resources. Legal marriage functions as a primary sorting mechanism in various administrative procedures (e.g., Timmermans and Prickett 2022). Performing sexual respectability grounded in male-female monogamous marital intimacy (Mosse 1985; Nagel 1998; Rubin 2002; Sweet 2021) is often an unstated requirement for access to

welfare. For groups such as domestic violence survivors (Sweet 2021) and asylum seekers (Gleckman-Krut n.d.), "deservingness" is contingent on proving sexual respectability. As this also suggests, states use cultural standards around marriage and attendant ideals of masculinity and femininity to shape public order in ways that draw boundaries between social groups and naturalize social hierarchies. Complex and violent histories of reproductive rights and state-backed eugenic projects demonstrate how states determine which populations and bodies should be allowed to reproduce and which men and women should be rewarded or punished for reproduction (Luna 2020; Murphy 2017; Solinger and Nakachi 2016).

By focusing on repressive, punitive, or disciplinary measures, especially as they target individuals in socially marginalized positions or citizens of illiberal states, this scholarship elucidates mechanisms of social control more readily amenable to scholarly analyses. Nevertheless, as Corrigan and Sayer (1985, p. 180) remind us, "the enormous power of 'the State' is not only external and objective; it is in equal part internal and subjective, it works through us." In liberal societies, for those with relative social advantage and who conform to prevailing standards of gender, sexuality, class, nationality, race, and ability, intimate governance operates simultaneously through more subtle and diffuse means (Foucault 1978; Rose 1996). Diverse cultural conceptions and moral views of an autonomous individual are at the heart of modern governance "through freedom" and "regulated autonomy" (Rose and Miller 2008). Instead of overt interventions or coercion, state power operates through the cajolery and suasion of internalized norms, free choice, and self-responsibility. Relying on individual capacity for self-regulation, it produces different subjectivities and meanings, and delimits what can be conceived, expressed, and enacted.

This dissertation builds on and extends this literature by examining how thus understood state power operates in courtship practices. Through moral regulation of normativities around marriage and marriageability, the dating market governs 'at a distance,' enabling individual men and women to exercise their autonomy, free choice, and affect in ways ostensibly divorced from the political. By situating new dating technologies within structures of modern governance I illuminate the novel ways in which the intimate realm maintains social distinctions and hierarchies. My examination of the interstices between individual freedom and social constraint also foregrounds the tenuous nature of social membership in the age of marketization.

STRUCTURAL CHANGE, GENDER INEQUALITY, AND THE MARRIAGE-HUNTING BOOM IN JAPAN

The Japanese marriage-hunting economy makes a useful case to think about intersections of governance, markets, and intimacy. As the next chapter will explain in detail, from its inception inhering in the 1868 Meiji Restoration, the modern Japanese state enlisted the institutions of marriage and the family—and their attendant presuppositions about gender and sexuality—in ways that reflected its changing political and economic priorities: from nation-building, colonial expansion, and war mobilization to postwar economic growth and recovery from ongoing stagnation. These objectives, reflected, for instance, in population politics (Homei 2022; Ueno 2009; 2011; Takeda 2005) and the delegation of social management to married women (Garon 1997; 2010) have paved the way for the formation of the contemporary marriage-hunting field and its gendered politics of worth.

As was the case in other sociopolitical contexts, one of the modern Japanese state's main objectives was to create a well-managed, robust population. Government elites and bureaucrats understood population and economic power as interdependent. 100 million —a number first

announced by the Population Bureau in the 1940s—became the statistic symbolizing a healthy population size. During the period of imperial expansion (roughly 1870s–1945) statist efforts to increase population included heavy-handed regulation of sexuality and reproduction, culminating in the infamous slogan imploring women to “give birth and multiply.” Although politicians today carefully avoid referencing this past (Schoppa 2020), population concerns are at the heart of contemporary debates surrounding demographic decline and its impending consequences. The Japanese population, presently at 127 million, is projected to fall below 100 million by 2050, with the elderly population exceeding 35 percent (IPSS, 2017). For several decades now, Japan has suffered from extremely low fertility rates, which, in tandem with its restrictive immigration policy, translate to a shrinking population. Uniquely among postindustrial economies, marriage remains a precondition for legitimate childbearing (only about 2 percent of children are born to unwed mothers). As such, policymakers designated the dramatic growth of people who eschew marriage (40 percent of women and 50 percent of men under 39 years of age as of 2015) as a grave social problem (see also Chapter 6). In addition, with marriage occurring later in life and divorce becoming more widespread, a growing number of individuals remain unpartnered at different life stages (Raymo et al. 2023), expanding the pool of potential customers for marriage-hunting services. Whereas scholars have been largely concerned with the causes and potential consequences of these population trends, this dissertation centers on the meanings ascribed to them and the political struggles in which they are being wielded.

These structural transformations matter not only because of their implications for the labor force, but also because they have challenged the prevailing arrangement in which diverse tasks of social management fall on the shoulders of married women. Following the emergence of new urban middle strata and salaried employees in the early twentieth century, the Japanese state

has enlisted middle-class married women's cooperation in improving the quality of the workforce, extracting savings, and maintaining social order through morally laden campaigns oriented at the modernization and improvement of everyday life (see Garon 2007; Gordon 1997; Homei 2022; Takeda 2005). Through what conservatives boastfully dubbed "Japanese-style welfare system" the state avoided developing a fully-fledged system of social support, instead delegating child- and elderly care and its other tasks to married women. This system favored the corporate-centered nuclear family with its archetypal male breadwinner and female homemaker which, as numerous scholars acknowledge, created favorable conditions for the postwar economic "miracle" (Alexy 2020; Brinton 1993; Tokuhiro 2010).

Measures implemented to counter deteriorating labor market conditions post-1990s have ostensibly departed from this familial ideal. Permanent, lifelong employment with seniority-based wage increases — the linchpin of white-collar "salaryman" masculinity— became increasingly rare, undermining men's ability to marry (Cook 2016; Dasgupta 2013; Fukuda 2016; Hidaka 2010; Uchikoshi and Raymo 2021). In the 2000s the Koizumi government implemented sweeping "structural reform," a set of neoliberal policies focused on deregulatory measures and promoting a shift to a dual-income family model. The old system was criticized for fostering "dependency" and the archetypical housewife came under attack, accused of a "parasitical" reliance on her husband's income. According to the new ethos, each individual was expected to contribute to the national economy and the emphasis was placed on individual agency and responsibility, understood chiefly as the capacity to earn one's own wage (Takeda 2018). Today, although Japanese women's participation in the labor force is nominally higher than in many Western countries, they tend to work in part-time and irregular jobs, with few benefits and earning on average 40 percent less than men. These gender disparities unfold

differently over the life course: the World Economic Forum has recently estimated that Japanese women will outlive their savings by two decades.[9] For women who inhabit this landscape of extreme gender inequality, marriage continues to be no less a pathway to economic security than professional success (Kimura 2013 but see also Nakano 2022).

Enter "marriage-hunting." The term was popularized by Masahiro Yamada, a sociologist with considerable pop-cultural presence, and journalist Tōko Shirakawa in their best-selling book, *The Era of 'Marriage-hunting'* (2008).[10] Yamada and Shirakawa argued that Japan had entered "a new era" in which the marriage market has undergone "liberalization" akin to that in the job market. Getting married today can no longer be taken for granted as it was during the period of economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s. Like finding stable employment, marriage, too, needs to be achieved through proactive, systematic effort.[11] Importantly, Yamada and Shirakawa advocated for a reversal of traditional gendered scripts. While in the past it was the men who pursued women, the authors advocate instead that *women* become the "hunters."

[9] The Japan Times. 2019. "Japanese women face retirement savings gap of almost 20 years, World Economic Forum says." June 13. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/06/13/business/japanese-women-face-retirement-savings-gap-almost-20-years-world-economic-forum-says/ (accessed January 15, 2020).

[10] Yamada first coined the term marriage-hunting in an article for a popular magazine *Aera* in 2007. English-language scholarship sometimes translates *konkatsu* as "marriage-partner hunting" or "spouse-hunting." I use "marriage-hunting" which is closer to the Japanese term and underlines that it is marriage that is being sought rather than the ideal partner.

[11] Hence the usage of suffix -katsu, which as Dales and Dalton (2016, p. 2) describe, designates activities "that require dedicated and prioritized effort" and "should be approached with highest levels of commitment." Its usage is not incidental. The suffix often appears in names of activities aimed to increase productivity and self-optimization, such as *asakatsu* (morning activities, similar to "productive morning routines") or *manekatsu* (broadly conceived financial education services). In recent years, different industries helping to facilitate life course transitions emerged with names following similar word formation: *ninkatsu* (activities for pregnancy and childbearing) *hokatsu* (activities aiming to place one's child in daycare), *rikatsu* (preparations for divorce) and another *shūkatsu* (preparations for the end of life). Nakagawa argues that these activities represent "an attempt at endowing individuals with agency in times of shrinking resources and aggravating social conditions. Their appearance testifies to the fact that individuals are taking matters into their own hands, when they learn that they can expect less and less external support" on structural level (Nakagawa 2012 as quoted in Mladenova 2020, p. 105).

Contemporary marriage-hunting exemplifies the long-standing entanglements of state, corporate, media, and academic sectors in Japan. Indeed, Yamada fashioned the neologism marriage-hunting (*kekkon katsudō* shortened to *konkatsu*) after the Japanese term for job-hunting (*shūshoku katsudō* abbreviated to *shūkatsu*), a ritualized practice that college seniors participate in each year. The term struck a chord. In 2009 marriage-hunting competed for "the best new word" title in an annual contest by the publisher Jiyūkokuminsha. Enthusiastically taken up by the media, it quickly became part of the everyday lexicon. Old and new dating services rushed to adopt the buzzword into their names.[12] In addition to businesses and platforms offering introductions to eligible singles and various types of events facilitating romantic encounters, this "datescape" (cf. Brennan 2004) has spawned an ever-expanding range of services, commodities, and self-help materials promising to help enhance those characteristics that make one marriageable (see, for example, Figure 1.1). Lingerie company Triumph International even unveiled a "konkatsu bra" with a countdown clock that stops upon insertion of an engagement ring.[13]

Since the marriage "recession" drives population decline and since unmarried Japanese men and women often attribute their civil status to scarce opportunities to interact with the opposite sex, the Japanese government, with the endorsement of advertisers and scholars, has folded marriage-hunting under its broader "marriage support" agenda. In 2014, the government allocated approximately 28 million dollars to birthrate-boosting programs.[14] In 2016, the Cabinet

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[12] As such, I suggest that the appearance of the term "marriage-hunting" constitutes what Wherry (2014) calls a "discursive inflection point" – a catalyst for field formation that allows different cultural values to crystallize in the market.

[13] China Daily. 2009. "'Marriage hunting' bra unveiled in Tokyo" (https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/life/2009-05/21/content_7917237_2.htm (accessed June 24, 2023); see also Goldstein-Gidoni (2012).

[14] Ujikane, Keiko and Kyoko Shimodoi. 2014. "Abe funds matchmaking to ease welfare bill." *The Japan Times* March 20, 2014.

Office issued "The [sic] Japan's Plan for Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens." The document sets the objectives of attaining "the largest nominal GDP in postwar history" and "the desirable birthrate of 1.8," in part by enabling more young Japanese to marry and raise children. The government also embarked on an ambitious plan to normalize marriage-hunting in the everyday lives of Japanese citizens. To that end, high school and university curricula began to integrate instruction about marriage-hunting into their "life design" courses.

Figure 1.1 Shelf with advice and self-help books on marriage and marriage-hunting in the flagship Kinokuniya bookstore in Tokyo's Shinjuku district. Photo Anna Woźny, June 12, 2018.

Although "marriage-hunting" is a relatively recent coinage, its constitutive practices boast a much longer history. In the first half of the twentieth century, arranged marriages were the most common way of meeting a spouse in Japan. Under this system, designated matchmakers facilitated matches based on concrete criteria including family lineage and socio-economic standing. Following post-World War II democratization, love marriages emerged as the most desirable relational ideal.[15] As mutual affect and individual agency in partner choice became increasingly valorized, matchmakers' (and familial) influence diminished and opportunities for interaction between prospective brides and grooms acquired less deliberate character. Parties, social gatherings, sightseeing tours, and other group activities with no express designation as matchmaking opportunities gained in popularity as legitimate ways of meeting a romantic partner (e.g., Blood, 1967; Kitamura and Abe 2007; McLelland 2012). Cultural legacies and differential valuation of these various services have laid the foundation for the contemporary marriage-hunting industry.

Studies of marriage-hunting by both Japanese and Western scholars have shown how cultural ideals of family, class, and gender embedded in this market contribute to, for instance, divergent partner preferences, marital outcomes, and anxieties around the market's competitive nature (Alpert 2022; Dales 2022; Endo 2019; Miles 2019; Nakamine 2021; Yu and Hertog 2018; Brinton et al. 2021; Oda 2020). Nonetheless, this research does not consider how spouse-seeking implicates personal goals and desires in state reproduction. This dissertation contributes to studies of marriage-hunting and courtship in contemporary Japan in three ways. By historicizing marriage mediation practices and focusing on moral regulation through market standards, I

[15] As I discuss in the following chapter, although love matches supplanted arranged matches in the mid-1960s, and the latter gradually diminished in numbers, both systems have persisted. For example, in the immediate postwar decades many had difficulty distinguishing whether theirs was a love or arranged union given that various third-party actors continued to introduce and legitimate prospective matches (Blood 1967).

demonstrate the role of marriage-hunting in social governance. Through a textured, interpretative approach I trace state and market discourses as they travel and morph from official institutions to everyday practice. By documenting diverse self-making projects as individuals negotiate, resist, or strategically incorporate market and state discourses I flesh out the statistical representations of Japanese men and women found in the demographic literature on marriage and challenge popular representations of intimacy in Japan.

DATA AND METHODS

This dissertation relies on a methodological approach that aims to simultaneously capture a) macro-process related to Japan's political economy, demographic patterns, and shared culture, b) meso-level state and market institutions and organizations, and c) micro-level everyday practice, courtship interactions, and individual sensemaking. During nine months of multi-site fieldwork between 2018 and 2020, I collected ethnographic, interview, and primary material on the marriage-hunting industry and marriage support initiatives by local and central governments. Some chapters draw more on certain data sources than others, but the dissertation in its entirety integrates each of these sources to demonstrate different facets of my overarching argument.

I strategically chose the Greater Tokyo Area as the main location of my fieldwork. With nearly 36 million inhabitants (representing almost a third of Japan's population), the capital is its most populous city and boasts the highest concentration of dating services. I conducted supplementary research trips to Hiroshima, Kyoto, and Ishikawa Prefectures to explore the role marriage-hunting is expected to play in areas affected by depopulation and characterized by more conservative gender norms.[16]

[16] Marriage-hunting was also conceived as a way to revitalize local economies in depopulating areas by bringing in clients to restaurants and other establishments (Quah and Kumagai 2015).

Interviews

To understand how the marriage-hunting market is organized and experienced I conducted a total of 127 in-depth interviews with market professionals and their clients.

a) The first set of in-depth interviews with 49 "marriage support" professionals included diverse actors, including employees of marriage-hunting companies (in addition to other enterprises holding marriage-hunting events), event organizers, app developers, local state officials, public intellectuals, journalists, and other experts. I asked them about specific goals and challenges their businesses face, their interpretations of the Japanese demographic situation, and whether they see marriage-hunting as a viable way to increase marriage rates. Over the course of my research, I also interviewed a number of volunteers for public and private marriage support organizations, who go by different names such as "marriage-hunting cheerleaders" or "advisors". Interviews with these diverse experts illuminated the entanglements of the state and the market, as the same actors often simultaneously worked or advocated for several (public and private) agencies. They also revealed how non-marriage is constructed as a "social problem" (cf. Bourdieu 1980; see also Ueno 1998) and the extent to which the notion of demographic crises compels everyday people to become invested in marriage support.

b) I also interviewed 78 men and women including current and former clients of marriage-hunting services. Since attitudes towards marriage can shift over time and with relationship experiences, I interviewed both unmarried and married individuals. My

sample evenly comprised men and women with different experiences of marriage and intimate relationships. In line with the characteristics of users of dating services, individuals in my sample were slightly older, more affluent, and more educated when compared to the general population (Brinton et al. 2021; Yu and Hertog 2018; METI 2005). Many were brought up in families which espoused traditional gendered division of labor. Reflecting gendered patterns in economic inequality, the women I interviewed earned just over half of men's income (World Economic Forum 2023). Table 1 presents basic demographic information about the sample.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Interview Participants

	Men	Women
n	39	39
Age, median	33	29
Age range, years		
29<	9	20
30-35	21	12
>36	9	7
Income (USD)	81,600	43,200
Education		
High school or two-year college	1	3
Bachelor's degree	17	24
Graduate or professional degree	19	12
PhD	2	n/a
Marital Status		
Married	15	13
Unmarried	24	26

Interviews lasted 80 minutes on average, with the longest stretching over four hours. I asked about my interviewees and their friends' experiences with marriage-hunting, expectations for intimate partners, courtship behavior, and the role of money in intimate life. Although the

interviews were loosely structured around a set of key questions and topics, I made sure to leave my interlocutors plenty of latitude to approach the topics the way they saw fit. All but five were digitally recorded and transcribed with the help of two native-speaking research assistants. I use pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of my interlocutors, except when quoting interviews with public figures who were speaking with me in their official capacities.

Participant Observation

Concurrently with the qualitative interviews, I conducted participant observation of diverse marriage-hunting services, such as group dating events, free consultations offered by marriage agencies, seminars on interpersonal skills, seminars for parents supporting their children's spouse-seeking, and one two-day-long annual "National Conference on Marriage Support." All events were publicly listed and required prior registration. After consulting with the organizers about the nature of my research, I observed the events in the capacity they designated for me. Typically, I assisted the organizers, but occasionally, when the number of attendees was uneven, I was asked to join the participants, thus gaining a dual perspective on those events.

During the second stage of my fieldwork, over a period of six months in 2019-20, I observed one to three events per week on average. In addition to event participation, I often helped with preparations and stayed late to chat informally with the attendees and organizers. During the observations I took notes on my smartphone, or in the case of more formal seminars (which emulated the format of academic lectures), on my computer or in a notebook. I developed extensive field notes immediately after each event to capture as much detail as possible.

Primary Materials

Along with ethnographic and interview data, I amassed a sizable archive of primary materials, including both documentary evidence and multimedia products. I collected hundreds of news reports and opinion pieces, advertising materials, mission statements, and contracts of marriage agencies and other organizations within the field (see Appendix A). I followed diverse marriage-hunting companies on social media and analyzed YouTube videos, podcasts, and other media content they created. I saved posts from blogs and discussion forums debating advantages and disadvantages of different marriage-hunting services as well as customer reviews of various companies. While traveling to and from my research sites, I took photos of advertisements of marriage-hunting events and dating applications on subway walls. These various evidence types shed light on a wide range of substantive issues, including pricing, demographic trends, and behavior norms, and elucidated the multiple and overlapping cultural logics circulating in the market. These textual and pictorial data facilitated my inductive analysis (Charmaz 2001) and provide a rich background against which to understand the experiences of my interlocutors. In the pages that follow, I use this rich evidence as concrete examples of the morals and valuation systems that circulate in the marriage-hunting economy.

Without prior connections in the marriage-hunting industry and as a foreigner, gaining entry was no easy task. Several marriage-hunting entities denied my research access citing privacy concerns and claiming their services are exclusively for the Japanese. Despite these difficulties, being a foreigner with several years of lived experience in Japan offered several analytic advantages. The foremost was my freedom to ask about cultural phenomena and aspects of courtship that the Japanese take for granted. Even without trying to appear uninformed, my interlocutors often presumed my lack of familiarity with Japanese ideals, gender norms, value

hierarchies, and interactional protocols. Their explanations enabled me to probe their "common sense understandings" (*jōshiki*) of these shared cultural phenomena. The participants were also interested in a Western researcher's perspective on marriage-hunting. While the organizational actors often used the interviews as an opportunity to showcase their work and inquire about scholarly solutions to population decline, their clients were frequently more interested in dating customs overseas and how they compare to marriage-hunting, which they considered uniquely Japanese. Some even asked for dating advice based on my research findings. As a non-American, I expressed interest in how my interlocutors perceived marriage-hunting vis-à-vis Western dating practices. Marriage-hunting services, they reasoned, were necessitated by Japanese timidity and reserve. Similar services, they imagined, were unnecessary in the United States, where men and women alike are more forthright and accustomed to fraternizing at social gatherings and house parties. Such transnationally informed comparisons helped to further illuminate courtship norms and contextualized the marriage-hunting interactions I observed.

While conducting my ethnography, I ensured to make my participation in a research capacity transparent. At the same time, I adapted a blurred cultural and professional identity selectively disclosing other elements of my "ethnographic toolkit" (Reyes 2020). As such, I learned volumes from the ways my interlocutors "figured me out." As an example, market professionals often hypothesized how I would fare had I engaged in a serious marriage-hunting pursuit. They appraised my "market value" by scrutinizing my general appearance, height, weight, and age. Some suggested deemphasizing my educational credentials as a graduate of Japan's top university and doctoral candidate and instead recommended I foreground more feminine interests, such as cooking or yoga. Others contrasted my apparently "Japanese" demeanor (e.g., quiet disposition and linguistic mannerisms) with my "Eastern European"

appearance (what one participant termed a "party face") to make thinly veiled comments about feminine respectability. In such situations, I often felt I inhabited multiple liminal positions: as an "insider-outsider" (Adler and Adler 1987) foreigner educated in Japan, as a participant-observer (rather than participant) of marriage-hunting events, as an unmarried woman (my long-term relationship was discounted as non-marriage), and as a doctoral student misfitting the parameters of culturally defined adulthood.

Finally, conducting this research also illuminated the ways in which social and economic valuation of individuals in the marriage-hunting market evolves dynamically over time. When I began data collection for this project in my late twenties, market professionals routinely remarked that my young age would make finding a husband unproblematic. After turning thirty, I noticed a change in attitudes. My interlocutors variedly commented on how factors such as my age and professional commitments would make my marriage-hunting more challenging and more costly. Once, an employee of a matchmaking office offered me a palm reading during which it transpired that both my "marriage line" and "children line" were lacking. Visibly flustered, he grimaced, sucked in air through his teeth several times, and apologetically attempted to console me: "It's ok, for some people it doesn't show up until later in life!" These reactions illuminated the intense pressure women in Japan face around reproduction and the subtle but serious social consequences of not following the well-trodden path. Additionally, as my online searches centered around marriage and marriage-hunting, the social media algorithms pegged me as a potential client. My inbox was soon flooded with advertisements for dating applications, wedding fairs, and personality tests promising to discern characteristics of my ideal partner or reveal which marriage-hunting services best suit my character and lifestyle. Experiencing first-hand this barrage of market discourses around marriage and marriageability

further and more forcefully delineated the implicit standards around gender, class, and age embedded in this field.

THE CHAPTERS THAT FOLLOW

Triangulating between macro-, meso- and micro- levels of analysis, this dissertation analyzes how the marriage-hunting market mediates structural-level social transformations and state discourses and, in turn, how individuals respond to the demands of marriageability as filtered through the market. The first part documents the emergence and organization of the marriage-hunting field and its relationship to the state. The second analyzes how individuals, including market professionals and their clients, experience the market and its standards.

Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of how marriage mediation evolved in modern Japan. I show how the practices leading to marriage reflected the changing political, economic, and social priorities as the institution of marriage became a constitutive force in nation-building, colonialism, war mobilization, postwar economic expansion, and eventually the ongoing "post-growth" revitalization. The chapter documents how changing conceptions of marriage, love and gender relations enabled diverse matchmaking practices to emerge. With increasing aversion toward arranged marriage and while considering feminist critiques of state interventions in reproduction, I argue that commercial marriage mediation practices offered an attractive alternative to state-supported matchmaking. Through a nuanced analysis of marriage mediation within the shifting political economy I theorize how these courtship practices were implicated in social regulation. By contextualizing contemporary marriage-hunting within legacies of both arranged and love marriages, I complicate the simplistic binary between these systems and show how sediments of both underlie the contemporary market.

Chapter 3 shows how marriage-hunting intermediaries shape the market in relation to different conceptions of marriage and courtship and through gendered definitions of marriageability. By linking marriageability with "objective" knowledge derived from population science and government statistics on marriage, market professionals transform finding a spouse into a rational, calculated, and standardized pursuit. They promote what I call a "meritocratic" model of marriageability, framing it as an amalgamation of achieved and ascribed characteristics. For those identified as "men" they emphasize breadwinning, while for "women" they foreground reproductive capacity. Framing marriageability as a meritocratic achievement infuses marriage-hunting with moral valence. Market professionals portray it as an arduous but worthwhile process and as a means not only for finding a spouse, but also for self-betterment.

Chapter 4 draws on ethnographic data to analyze the valuation of three types of marriage-hunting services: the costly services exclusively facilitating marriage, midrange matchmaking oriented at committed relationships, and affordable services facilitating casual dating. I argue that market intermediaries assist clients in navigating these interactions through distinct modalities of mediation that match clients' *cultural fluency*, or knowledge and command of romantic and sexual scripts. Weak mediation requires participants to rely on their own familiarity with courtship scripts, moderate mediation works to enhance clients' cultural fluency, while intensive mediation supplants clients' cultural fluency by orchestrating and disambiguating all steps of the courtship process. Analyzing how these modalities of mediation mobilize different scripts of romantic encounter I demonstrate how they are tethered to broader hierarchies of desirability that valorize unpremeditated, "chance" encounters and relationships based on affect and common interests.

The final two chapters analyze how individual women and men navigate the marriage-hunting market and its state-sanctioned standards. **Chapter 5** analyzes individual strategies for succeeding in the market. I argue that to fit into the market standards of marriageability, men and women must mobilize *hybrid gender performances* that combine characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity. Despite appearing progressive, the expectation for complementarity of hybrid masculinity and femininity perpetuates gender asymmetries. I conceptualize these hybrid performances as strategies developed in response to the shifting conditions of social membership. As individuals assemble gender performances that remain within the bounds of middle-class normalcy and respectability, they actively (if unwittingly) participate in processes of state reproduction.

Fitting or misfitting gendered standards of marriageability is not a difference of kind but occurs within a complex gradient of social membership. **Chapter 6** provides an in-depth look at experiences of individuals who veer towards the boundaries of the marriage-hunting market: women seen as past reproductive age, men without access to stable employment, and sexual minorities. I show how their desirability in the market evolves with their shifting intersectional locations, in particular as they age and negotiate the markers of a middle-class life course. Documenting their efforts to remain *culturally intelligible*, I show the uneven, gendered distribution of social membership as it becomes circumscribed to market-based and state-sanctioned standards of marriageability.

This dissertation brings together cultural, political, and economic sociology with gender and feminist theory to build a framework for understanding how social membership becomes intertwined with intimate markets and their moral economies. By focusing on intimate

governance in the Japanese marriage-hunting industry, my analysis captures the operations and effects of diffuse state power as it is absorbed into everyday practices of marketized courtship. In doing so, it reveals the reality of intimate governance as not emanating from stable entities, such as ‘the state’ or ‘the market’, but from shifting patterns of power that work through social relations and cultural practice. Without such focus, we compromise our ability to fully understand the political reality of new dating economies.

Chapter 2

From Arranged Marriage to Marriage-Hunting:

Marriage Mediation at the Nexus of the State and the Market

Modes of intimate governance emerge from context-specific historical and cultural circumstances. The marriage-hunting market is no different. The ways previous political projects have defined marriage and marriageability, along with conceptions of personhood, gender, class, age, and nationality, continue to reverberate in the contemporary marriage-hunting market. The first step towards understanding the role that marriage-hunting plays for the state is thus an account of how marriage mediation practices evolved within the ever-shifting political economy of Japan.

This chapter traces various marriage mediation practices through three historical layers of prevailing marital arrangements and ideals. The goal is not to provide an exhaustive modern history of marriage and matchmaking. Rather, I want to underscore the continuities in key elements such as the role of various third parties and the increasing commercialization of marriage mediation, the expanding role of married women in diverse governance projects, and the exclusionary criteria of marriageability within the changing contours of Japan as a modern polity. My main contention in this chapter is that marriage mediation practices evolved from a

system resembling traditional “traffic in women” (Rubin 1975), with women exchanged between patriarchal households, to a political-economic arrangement in which the marriage-hunting market compels independent, entrepreneurial women to “traffic” themselves as marketable subjects. This shift was neither linear, nor predetermined. Drawing inspiration from Michael Rodriguez-Muñiz (2021), I adopt Reinhart Koselleck’s (2018) theorization of historical time as multiple and overlapping, akin to geological *sediments.* I will set the stage for the chapters to come by mapping the three sediment layers in which the shifting nexus of the state, market, and intimacy have interacted to produce particular social orders. Table 2 provides a schematic analytic summary of these layers.

Table 2. Cultural, Economic, and Political Sediments

	Governance and family form	Politico-economic goals	Gender relations	Marriage and courtship
First layer	male-headed household (individual not recognized); the household considered the mirror of the state	state- and empire-building; creating a large, robust population	formal inequality; strict sex segregation	arranged marriage mediated by matchmakers; no courtship before marriage
Second layer	nuclear family; recognition of individual rights; social management through married women	postwar recovery and economic expansion; increasing population quality, reproductive policies to prevent population surplus	formal equality; consolidation of the male breadwinner-female homemaker marital ideal	love marriage; courtship before marriage; workplace acts as a matchmaker, proliferation of matchmaking services
Third layer	towards governance through individual	reviving the economy and reversing population decline	formal equality; marital ideal of two independent but compatible individuals	love marriage; renaissance of matchmaking services which adopt the label “marriage-hunting”

The first and the oldest layer spans roughly the inception of the modern Japanese state and empire to the end of World War II (1868–1945). As Japan endeavored to prove itself a

“modern,” “civilized” nation, regulation of socially appropriate interactions between men and women became a focal point. With the institutionalization of the patriarchal household as a microcosm of the nation, arranged marriages facilitated by go-betweens became widespread while intimacy and reproduction were redefined as matters of state intervention. Although the segregation of middle-class women and men prevented “dating” (understood as consumption activities outside the house), women’s increasing participation in public life and eventual home front mobilization during the war began to complicate the entrenched distinctions around class, gender, and sexual respectability that underpinned who was deemed marriageable.

The second layer encompasses the postwar period during which the previously marginal ideal of love marriage between a male breadwinner and female homemaker became widespread and consolidated into the putative standard nuclear Japanese family. The state’s relationship to married women became central to various projects of social management, including national savings campaigns (Garon 1997). In an increasingly affluent industrialized society, various commercial matchmaking services proliferated to facilitate desired relationships while public-sector matchmaking services responded to novel social problems, such as rural depopulation and bride shortages.

The third layer emerged with economic stagnation and demographic decline beginning in the early 1990s, which frayed the social contract based on the nuclear family and gendered division of labor. The neoliberal reforms designed to remedy this situation elevated the self-reliant individual as responsible for personal and national well-being, while growing cohorts of young women began participating in paid employment. The marriage-hunting market crystallized against this background, suggesting the task of spouse-seeking as tantamount to searching for a job.

In key respects, the historical sediments I examine in this chapter foreshadow the themes that many subsequent actors would conjure or contest during my fieldwork. By examining how marriage mediation has played a pivotal role in social management in modern Japan, this chapter introduces a new way of viewing the complex relationship between statecraft, marketized intimacy, and gender relations.

THE FIRST LAYER: ARRANGED MARRIAGE

Following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the Japanese state embarked on a multi-pronged project of modernization that was to encompass virtually all aspects of social life. Although Japan had avoided the fate of colonized China, political, legal, economic, scientific, and cultural initiatives henceforth were implemented to assert the "civilized" status of the new state, on par with Western, white, and Christian nations. Gender relations were a crucial arena of modernization. As Yukichi Fukuzawa, a leading cosmopolitan intellectual of the Meiji period wrote in his 1885 *On Association of Men and Women:*

> Since the introduction of Western culture into Japan, our people have come to realize the importance of association among themselves.… However, the sad aspect of this new trend is that it is confined to men only, and among women no enjoyment of association is seen at all. Even worse is the association between men and women: there is practically none at all.… This proves that Japan is still unsure of itself and cannot be called civilized. (Kiyooka 1988, p. 103)

The building of the modern state and eventual empire required a robust and pliant national population. Local sexual practices, including the widely practiced "night crawling" (*yobai*) and male-male intimacy (*nanshoku*), came to be seen as backward and a source of international embarrassment.[17] Emergent social scientific disciplines aided state projects oriented

[17] Eradication of diverse forms of nonmarital intimacy was not a straightforward process, however. For instance, different sources confirm that "night crawling," whereby men visited unmarried women in their family homes to have sex, was practiced in rural areas through the 1920s (Ryang 2006).

at regulating sexuality, reproduction, and fertility (Drixler 2013; Frühstück 2003; Homei 2022). The institutions of marriage and the family, meanwhile, were increasingly bound up in the legal architecture of the state as key components of the new social order. The 1898 Civil Code pronounced the patriarchal household (*ie*) the smallest legal unit of society. The law did not recognize the wife and other household members as individuals; instead, they were subordinated to the head of the household's will. Divorce rights reinforced this asymmetry: although men could divorce their wives if the latter could not produce an heir or committed adultery, similar transgressions by the husband did not qualify as valid reasons for divorce. Crucially, all marriages and divorces were to be recorded in a nationwide family registry (*koseki)*. These sociolegal transformations established the ideological foundations of a standard Japanese family. For example, barring exceptional circumstances, only the eldest son could become the heir and be recorded as the household head in the family registry.[18] Concubines, who previously bore rights equal to wives, lost legal recognition, and could no longer bequeath offspring to the patrilineal household.[19]

In the process of rendering society "legible" (Scott 1999) through the household, arranged marriages, previously restricted only to the samurai class, became widespread among all social strata.[20] As indicated above, marriages were undertaken not to publicly recognize affection between individuals, but to perpetuate the household. Since continuation of family

[18] For a detailed discussion of *koseki* see White 2018.

[19] Interestingly, an earlier legal code from 1870 granted the concubine status equal to the wife. This was reversed with the 1898 Civil Code (see Garon 1997, p. 99). On prostitution under the Tokugawa system see Stanley (2012).

[20] The 1898 Civil Code officially abolished the class system of the Tokugawa shogunate, which recognized four classes of people: warrior, farmer, artisan, and merchant. Outside of this system were outcastes or untouchables (*burakumin*), often working in occupations associated with pollution, death, and blood. Although the class system was abolished, discrimination against people of *burakumin* ancestry in the labor and marriage markets has persisted. For example, marriage agencies have background checks in part to eliminate the possibility of marrying an individual of outcaste background.

lineage was paramount, parental (rather than individual) consent was necessary to marry. The couple had little say on the choice of the partner and wielded little power to veto their parents' decision. Families arranged marriages with the help of a matchmaker (*nakōdo),* often a respected figure from their local networks who knew both families and could vouch for their social standing. A central event in the pairing process was the formal marriage interview known as *miai,* that the matchmaker organized. Since marriages represented household interests, it was the matchmaker, parents, and sometimes other relatives who attended these marriage interviews, but not necessarily the bride- and groom-to-be.[21] The couple usually did not meet until the betrothal ceremony and sometimes not even until the wedding. Strict social mores around gender-appropriate behavior also prevented them from interacting with each other. Indeed, as I discuss below, the strict segregation of men and women from good backgrounds into "public" and "private" spheres meant that dating was not a socially approved practice, not unlike the Western countries where ideological dominance of bourgeois respectability dictated separation of the spheres (Foucault 1978; Mosse 1985).

Third-party intermediaries played a number of important roles in the processes leading up to marriage and matched candidates according to prevailing norms. First, they were indispensable in inter-family negotiations. *Miai* meetings carried great weight, the first meeting was usually the final. In case the negotiations went sour and broke off, matchmakers saved rejected parties from the loss of face and safeguarded good relations between well-positioned families. *Miai* meetings were even more important for families who did not know each other, as they could vouch for a family's social status and history as well as marital candidates' sincerity (Blood 1967, p. 5). Go-betweens also brokered the economic aspect of matches, as symbolized

[21] Fuess (2004) estimates that during the Taishō period (1912–1926) 38 percent of marriages were initiated through *miai* and 40 percent were marriages "contracted sight unseen."

by the ceremonial exchange of betrothal gifts. Historical sources show that these multi-stage transactions were arranged such that direct interaction between household representatives could be avoided. The matchmaker transmitted the gifts (typically ceremonial food, sake, and monetary offerings) from the groom's household to that of the bride and received a receipt. He then delivered the receipt to the groom's family, all without any participation of the engaged couple (Edwards 1989, pp. 78–79; Embree 1939, pp. 173, 204). This mediated betrothal ceremony encapsulated dominant conceptions around family and women's personhood and underscored gender asymmetries within the marriage market. As Blood (1967, p. 5) writes "marriage was less the symmetrical linking of two family lines than the recruitment of women into a male line which could not continue without women to bear sons in each generation." Women were recruited into the grooms' households for the benefit of his family and, upon marriage, ceremonially erased from their family registries and added to the husband's registry instead.

Although most go-betweens were sourced from personal networks— typically, relatives or social and workplace superiors were selected as matchmakers—with the rapid urbanization in the first half of the twentieth century and the migration to the cities of large numbers of male workers, dedicated matchmaking companies and marriage agencies (alternatively called marriage consultation centers, *kekkon sōdanjo)* began to emerge. Primarily targeting young women, such agencies were often located in the numerous department stores that had cropped up in Tokyo and other cities by this time, reinforcing the link between women's social membership, consumption, and reproduction (Robertson 2002, p. 203). Significantly, these establishments conducted background checks on potential marriage partners or outsourced such work to detective services.[22] In addition to investigating the family's social and financial reputation, these agencies

[22] The earliest records of these marriage consultation centers-cum-detective agencies date back to 1892 (Fujino 1998).

safeguarded against candidates of prior outcast status or with hereditary diseases. As is the case today, marriage agencies strove to protect clients' anonymity. Office staff substituted names with pseudonyms when presenting clients' dossiers to prospective spouses, who only learned actual names upon the formalization of a *miai* meeting.

Marriage mediation as statecraft

Marriage mediation services began to play an increasingly central role as Japan redoubled its colonial and military efforts. By the early twentieth century, Japan had established itself as a major and unprecedented challenger to Western domination in East Asia, having defeated China (1895) then Russia (1905) and extended its colonial rule over Okinawa, Taiwan, and Korea (complete by 1910). Repealing unequal treaties and asserting civilized status was no longer the primary concern; state authorities now prioritized promoting their own ideals of pan-Asian freedom and independence from Western imperialism, which culminated in the creation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Territorial expansion of the Japanese Empire paralleled domestic efforts to regulate both the quantity and the "quality" of the Japanese population. Total mobilization included reproduction and procreation, as captured in the infamous wartime slogan imploring women to "give birth and multiply." Nascent techniques and knowledges of population science lent scientific legitimacy to these efforts (Homei 2022). In April 1941, the Population Bureau established within the Welfare Ministry issued a mandate setting a national goal of increasing the population from 73 million to 100 million over the ensuing twenty years (by 1960). To this end, it recommended, among other things, lowering the marriage age by three years, increasing the level of taxation on single people, and establishing municipal matchmaking

and marriage consultation facilities.[23] Historians estimate that ministry-run marriage consultation centers in Tokyo alone were attracting over twenty inquiries a day in 1941 (Pennington 2020). In the following year the Tokyo Prefectural Government additionally started offering cash gifts to couples who wed, a practice soon followed by other local governments.[24]

With the escalating military conflict in the Asia-Pacific, the line between market- and state-sponsored matchmaking services at times blurred. This was most pronounced in the case of marriage consultation centers that promoted eugenic marriages (Robertson 2002). Like their Western contemporaries, Japanese political leaders and the general public embraced eugenics as a means of improving population quality and "racial purity" (Frühstück 2003; Homei 2022; Robertson 2002; Ryang 2006; Takeda 2005). In 1940 the National Eugenic Law was promulgated, restricting access to birth control, promoting genetic screening, and limiting compulsory sterilization to those with "inherited mental disease." Eugenic marriage agencies promoted marriage to improve the Japanese nation. Like other matchmaking services, they required clients' personal information, details about their social, educational, and financial background, and a photograph. Additionally, they collected information related to the "eugenic fitness" of spouses, including information regarding candidates' physique (height, chest diameter, health records) and details about grandparents and other primary relatives (Robertson 2002). Shigenori Ikeda, a journalist, and chief promoter of eugenics in Japan, envisaged matchmaking centers eventually creating a database of men and women who were deemed "fit" for marriage based on specific criteria (Ikeda 1928, quoted in Robertson 2002, p. 206). Put in other terms, through these marriage mediation services, public and commercial sectors alike

[23] See Miyake (1991), Pennington (2020).

[24] *Japan Times & Advertiser.* 1941. "Tokyo Marriage Bureaus Being Consulted by Many," October 27.

legitimated “good matches” defined in classed, gendered, and racialized terms and excluded those considered inadequate for marriage.

Marriage mediation additionally aided state reproduction by ensuring the stability of the social contract based on the patriarchal household with its rigid allocation of gender roles. Matchmaking services mediated by civil society organizations such as the Disabled Veterans Association and the Patriotic Women’s Association for men with war-related injuries and disabilities were among the welfare provisions for veterans established in the 1940s.[25] Historian Lee Pennington (2020) describes how staff members of these civil society groups conducted the actual pairing, participated in wedding ceremonies, and provided gifts to brides. Their goal was to reintegrate into society injured ex-servicemen who had proved their utility for the nation. Reflecting prevailing criteria of marriageability, matchmakers with these services considered veterans’ military rank, type and degree of injuries, and degree of functional difficulties (tellingly, similar services were not available to nonmilitary men with disabilities), in addition to information required by regular marriage agencies. The press celebrated brides who consented to these marriages for their patriotism, elevating women’s status as providers of care and reproducers of the nation. Since the household was envisioned as a microcosm of the Japanese nation-state (*kazoku kokka*, literally the “family state”), with the emperor as its father, brides who agreed to enter arranged marriages with veterans did the work of preserving the ideological foundation of this system. At the same time, however, because women had to consent to enter such unions, they also symbolically eroded the gendered foundation of the household.

Marriage and Social Distinctions

[25] Pennington (2020, p. 686) estimates that between 1941 and 1942 over one thousand marriages with veterans were arranged by various associations with twice as many marriage consultations.

The arranged marriage system ensured the formation of desirable relationships between individuals of similar status. But though all individuals were matched on the basis of common expectations around shared social, financial, and health status, the remaining criteria for marriageability differed markedly for men and for women. These criteria reflected shared assumptions about gender roles and the separation of spheres. As salaried employment expanded, men—many of them joining the ranks of a new *salaryman* class—were gradually expected to become sole economic providers. As such, in the early twentieth century, the number of men who decided to postpone or forgo marriage because they lacked access to wealth rose.[26] Concerns about the expected rise of unmarried men led many officials and public intellectuals to endorse the system of licensed prostitution as a way to maintain social order (Garon 1997, p. 101). Since most marriageable women were confined to the household (*okusan*, the old-fashioned term for wife, means literally "in the back of the house"), and expected to bequeath an heir and embody the national ideal of "good wife, wise mother," young age and an appearance of "vigor and robustness" along with modesty and "purity"—understood not simply in sexual but also ethno-racial terms—were prized (Blood 1967; Ryang 2006).

The ways that young women transformed their presence in the public sphere in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s began to complicate the opposition between women's marriageability and their public presence. With expanded mandatory education, a growing number of women were becoming journalists, educators, nurses, and doctors. Working-class women found jobs in manufacturing, services, and clerical work. In reflection of these transformations, cultural figures such as the "New Woman" (*atarashii onna*), "Modern Girl," (*moga*), working woman (*shokugyō fujin*), factory worker (*jokō*), and café waitress (*jokyū*) rose to prominence (Suzuki 2010, p. 6).

[26] The average age of marriage for men rose to 28.68 in 1910 (see Garon 1997).

These women's increasing financial independence raised concerns about their ability to marry (McLelland 2012). Moreover, to critics' dismay, the café culture of the 1920s— associated with modernism, individualism, and Western-style romantic relations— explicitly promoted an atmosphere of pleasure and eroticism encapsulated by the phrase "erotic-grotesque-nonsense" (Silverberg 2009). Commentators bemoaned waitresses who "chose their own jobs, concluded contracts directly with employers, and 'abandoned themselves' to 'the pursuit of pleasure'" (Kusama 1937 quoted in Garon 1997, p. 107). Although café waitresses and dancers were not necessarily prostitutes, their fraternization with men of similar age scandalized society. That licensed prostitution existed until 1946 rendered the social distinctions around women's sexuality even more complex. Historian Sheldon Garon (1997, p. 93) estimates that in 1925 slightly more women worked as licensed prostitutes, geisha, and barmaids (180,174) than attended secondary-level girls' schools (176,808). In this context, background checks performed by private investigators and marriage agencies also promised to safeguard men against marrying young women with prior sexual experiences.

Another set of moral distinctions arose around the *type* of relationship men and women entered. As I discussed above, arranged marriage was common.[27] Strict segregation of the sexes prevented high-status men and women from merely walking together without the risk of damaging their reputations, much less from falling in love (These rules did not apply, however, to relationships between well-heeled men and professional sex workers of the "floating world" quarters.) Love matches often crossed lines of class and status, offending a society that seemingly preferred arranged marriages based on patriarchal authority. Some social

[27] There were important variations, for example the 'trial' marriage before the relationship was officially registered, see Fuess (2004).

commentators, moreover, questioned the practicality of love matches, which were regarded as time consuming and laborious compared to arranged marriages.[28] Others regarded love matches as selfish, disrespectful, or improper. Love marriages, in essence, were comparable in their moral valence to extramarital affairs in Western Christian culture, and those who insisted on marrying for love risked loss of social support and standing (Blood 1967; Edwards 1989; Hendry 1981; Wagatsuma and DeVos 1962). As a result, even if a couple decided to marry on their own, they often sought a go-between's help to legitimize their relationship in inter-family negotiations (Dore 1958, pp. 165–167).

During the 1920s, however, a growing chorus of intellectuals, literati, feminists, Christian missionaries, and educators began to champion marriage entered on the basis of love between a man and a woman as the superior ideal. Importantly, the coinage for "love" (*ren'ai*) itself was introduced into the social vocabulary during the nineteenth century reforms (Itō 1996; Robertson 2002; Ryang 2006; Suzuki 2010; McLelland 2012). It was a literary translation of Western terms such as "love," "liebe," and "amour" and popularized to refer specifically to heterosexual love (Itō 1996). In contrast to the term *koi*, which primarily connotated sexual love, infatuation, or erotic passion, *ren'ai* evoked a platonic ideal of love that eventually legitimated love marriages. Moreover, as Michiko Suzuki writes, since love was "viewed as a Western ideal with which to measure individual and national advancements," love marriage too, became entangled with the notions of national progress, modernization, and civilization. The 1920s' discourses around love marriage saw matrimony "as an ideal locus of love, as a microcosm of an advanced egalitarian society in which husbands and wives could mutually progress and complete their characters or personalities." This ideal became particularly important for women "who hoped to achieve a

[28] Hayashi, Fusao. 1928. "Shin ren'ai no michi. Korontai-fūjin no Ren'aikan." (The new way of love. Kollontai's perspective). *Chūō kōron*, July 25-40.

modern self through this expression of agency, equality, and self-cultivation" (Suzuki, 2010, p. 69). As such, different terminologies for love gradually came to reflect the distinctions between marriageable and unmarriageable women. As Sonia Ryang (2006, p. 42) notes, *ren'ai* was associated with "pure virgins," while *iro* and *koi* connoted "carnal love and prostitutes."[29]

Thus, whereas in actuality love matches were exceedingly rare in prewar Japan, popular and literary discourses increasingly cast love marriage between equal spouses as morally superior. These competing ideals came to represent the contradictions of Japan's modernization and Westernization. This tension is encapsulated in Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's celebrated novel, *The Makioka Sisters* (1995 [1957]) which revolves around the titular upper-middle-class family's efforts to marry off its two youngest daughters. The middle sister, Yukiko, shy and demure, embodies traditional Japanese values. Her younger sister, Taeko, is enamored with Western fashion and trends. Financially independent as a successful dollmaker, she lives apart from the family but cannot marry before Yukiko does. The novel is punctuated by Yukiko's multiple marriage interviews as her family strives to find a match within their class. Eventually, she marries a former court aristocrat she "was not displeased with" (Tanizaki 1957, p. 514). Meanwhile, Taeko, having eloped in the past and been seen publicly with several men repeatedly threatens to tarnish the family's reputation. The family disowns her when she becomes pregnant by a bartender. *The Makioka Sisters*, which was first serialized between 1943 and 1948, is widely regarded as a nostalgic meditation over the dramatic changes occurring in social structures in the wake of World War II and in the first years of Allied Occupation. Whereas rebellious and individualistic Taeko succeeds in satisfying her own desires, Yukiko struggles to find a middle

[29] For a sociological study of love see also Tanimoto (2009), for a study of legal understandings of love see West (2011).

ground while respecting both old and new social mores (see also Satoh 2008). As we shall see, these tensions persisted in different forms in the second half of the century.

THE SECOND LAYER: LOVE MARRIAGE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

State interest in managing appropriate relations between men and women did not vanish at the end of the Asia-Pacific War. Rather, it transformed with the spirit of democratization, egalitarianism, and economic recovery that eventually turned into unprecedented economic expansion. Legislative changes instituted during the U.S.-led Allied Occupation encapsulated the novel ideas that were to delineate intimate relationships henceforth. The new constitution, which came into effect in 1947 and remains unamended to this day, instituted *individuals* as legal entities in their own right along with formal gender equality (Article 14) and marriage as "based on mutual consent of both sexes" (Article 24). The new 1948 Civil Code likewise stipulated freedom of choice of the marital partner. By abolishing the prewar entities of household (*ie*) and the household head, it removed the legal support for the patriarch and redefined the family.

The occupation of Japan by the Allies (1945–1952) also fundamentally transformed mores around men and women's interactions in public. With American troops stationed in large cities around Japan, many young Japanese women known as "pan-pan girls" sought out liaisons with GIs that gained them access to sought-after commodities unavailable to everyday people amid post-war shortages. Such fraternization, scandalizing at first, became normalized; newspapers even reported children engaging in "pan-pan play," in which boys impersonated American soldiers strolling the city streets with local girls in their arms (Fukuoka 1949). Physical displays of affection steadily became more common in the urban landscape. In one journalistic account, the moat around the imperial palace was so regularly clogged with used

condoms such that it had to be cleaned out once a week with a big wire scoop (Whiting 1999, p. 14). Challenging contemporary conceptions of propriety, higher-rank U.S. military men, too, were seen walking hand in hand with their wives and even kissing in public.[30] As such, new dating practices and public displays of affection gradually lost their association with sex workers and working-class women. The newly introduced system of coeducation also created opportunities for young men and women to interact in socially acceptable ways.[31] As a result, as cultural historian Mark McLelland writes, "the courting couple emerged as one of the most conspicuous symbols of the postwar period" (McLelland 2012, p. 11, see also Figure 2.1).

[30] Prior to the war, kissing was regarded as a highly erotic act, usually performed by sex workers. See McLelland (2012) for a fascinating discussion of the "kiss debate" in occupation-era newspapers.

[31] Many scholars note the persistence of sex segregation at higher education levels, especially among the prestigious national universities where student bodies have been predominantly male. Women, on the other hand, have historically enrolled in all-female junior colleges. Many college students, moreover, reported having never been on a date before graduation (see Blood 1967, p. 10). Upon graduation, men and women also entered separate tracks within companies, with men given permanent employment but women employed only part-time, given expectations that they would quit upon marriage or childbirth to dedicate themselves to housework (see Brinton 1993; Takeda 2005).

Figure 2.1 Photograph from the 1960s showing affectionate couples on Wadakura Bridge in Tokyo. Photograph by Haruo Tomiyama in Gordon (2003, p. 258).

Within the two decades following the end of the Asia-Pacific war, love marriage traveled from a coveted ideal advocated by elites to an attainable goal. The courtship and wedding of Emperor Akihito and Michiko Shōda in 1959 epitomized this new, democratic ideal of coupledom. Not only was Michiko Shōda a commoner (albeit from a wealthy business family), but the couple also met through an unpremeditated encounter. Enthralled by the royal romance, Japanese media fastidiously reported on how the couple had met while playing tennis in Karuizawa, an upscale resort town, and made it explicit that love was the basis of their relationship. On the imperial wedding day, the newlyweds rode a horse-drawn carriage (see Figure 2.2) amid a parade attended by more than half a million people and watched by an additional 15 million spectators

on national television.[32] The media extolled the young princess as a role model for Japanese women. Love marriage appealed to the postwar generation as it stood in ideological opposition to the outdated, hierarchical patriarchal household. Indeed, because of this, Japanese second wave feminism did not scrutinize romantic love as a source of women's oppression to the same extent as it did in the West (Takeda 2005).

Figure 2.2 Wedding parade for the imperial couple on April 10, 1959. The ceremony led to a spike in television sales as everyone wanted to witness the ceremony. Source: https://www.cnn.com/style/article/japan-emperor-akihito-michiko-royal-wedding/index.html (accessed November 17, 2021).

Most social scientists who have chronicled the ascent of love marriage in Japan present it as a linear narrative in which love matches supplant arranged matches in the mid-1960s and go

[32]See Stephy Chuang and Yoko Wakatsuki. 2019. "How Emperor Akihito's 'love match' won over Japan" CNN, https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/japan-emperor-akihito-michiko-royal-wedding/index.html (last accessed June 30, 2023)

on to eventually constitute over 90 percent of all unions. That depiction, however, ignores the fact that various third-party actors continued to mediate marriage-oriented relationships—including those initiated on the basis of affect. It also fails to recognize the complexities of actual marriage mediation practices. The *miai* system did not disappear but has continued to exist in transfigured form alongside love matches (Figure 2.3). As both systems borrowed from each other and as individuals had the final saying in partner choice, the love/arranged marriage classification became increasingly murky. If a formal *miai* was followed by a long courtship and strong mutual affection, was it a love or an arranged marriage? What if the couple had first known each other as neighbors or coworkers but were *formally* introduced by a third party? Or, if they were introduced not as prospective marriage partners but as friends? With these increasingly porous distinctions, even individuals within the same couple sometimes disagreed whether theirs was a love or an arranged match (e.g., Blood 1967, pp. 13–34). As we shall see, these interlacing systems variously imprinted on the matchmaking services that emerged in the postwar era and their key elements continue to be invoked in marriage-hunting services.

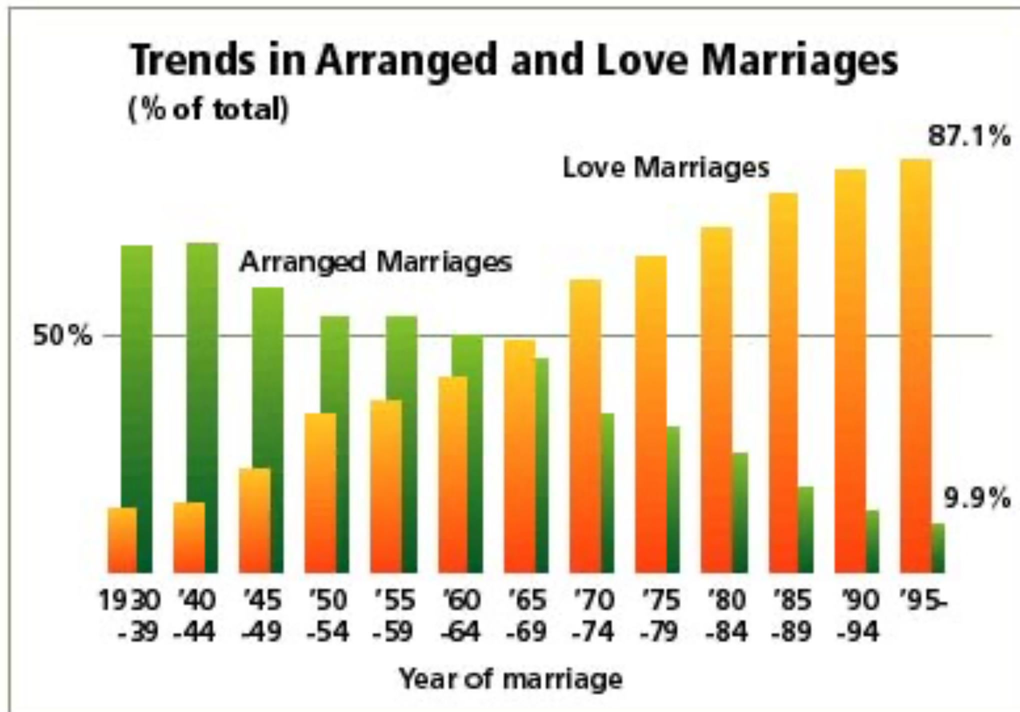

Figure 2.3 Trends in arranged and love marriages based on data from National Institute of Population and Social Security Research. Source https://web-japan.org/trends98/honbun/ntj980729.html (accessed November 17, 2021).

Marriage mediation services in a changing society

Despite the steady normalization of love marriage, avenues for meeting a partner in ways that could lead to a relationship based on affect were limited. Direct contact between men and women continued to be fraught with risk of social censure or embarrassment. In this context, wide-ranging introduction services that emerged in the postwar years—and were still enough of a curiosity to be reported in the press—allowed participants to rely on third party mediation to interact in socially approved ways. In 1950s Tokyo, new social functions, nicknamed "Shibui dances" after their creator, Shibui-san, were organized with the express intent of introducing young single men and women (Figure 2.4). For the price of about $2.50, participants could sign up for an event with dancing and dinner (during which they additionally learned how to eat

Western food).[33] After the event, men were not allowed to ask the women out directly. Instead, they indicated their interest to Shibui-san who arranged the next meeting if the interest was reciprocated.[34] Prominent social figures, including a University of Tokyo professor and a renowned architect from an aristocratic family, likewise hosted gatherings for young men and women to allow them to get romantically acquainted. Michiko Shōda herself reportedly "sipped coffee and listened to classical music" at one such party before marrying the crown prince (Blood 1967, p. 10). Less well-connected individuals could take advantage of mass events, such as the organized stroll along the banks of the Tama River in April 1947, which allowed around 300 men and women aged 20–50 to appraise potential partners. Once again, individuals did not interact directly, but were assigned and publicly wore numbers, so that interested persons could obtain a copy of the former's résumé from the organizer's office.[35] Even more discrete options were provided by marriage introduction magazines and personal advertisements in which, for a small fee, readers received introductions to prospective spouses or lovers (McLelland 2012, p. 123).

[33] Monetary amounts in this chapter are converted according to historical exchange rates. In the remining chapters I use the approximate exchange rate of $1=¥100.

[34] Berman, Eliza. 2015. "See Photos of Love and Courtship In 1950s Japan." *TIME Magazine* http://time.com/3690592/love-japan-1959/ (last accessed June 23, 2023).

[35] Narumigi, Ichirō.1953. "Sekkusu kaihō no ayumi: tenbō 1945-1953' (Steps towards sexual liberation: a perspective 1945-1953)" *Amatoria*, June: 40-51.

Figure 2.4 “Shibui dance” in Tokyo. Note the mixture of Japanese- and Western-style attire and hairstyles and the nametags pinned to participants’ lapels. Photograph by John Dominis for *Life Magazine*, source: https://www.life.com/destinations/love-japan-1959/ (accessed November 17, 2021).

Traditional matchmakers also readjusted their services to fit the shifting conceptions of marriage and individual agency. As before, they paired men and women based on photographs, resumés, and information about education, occupation, and family history vetted through background checks. Formal marriage interviews, however, evolved to accommodate individual preferences—including, now, the ability to refuse a match. In contrast to the past, both parties had to be in attendance, usually chaperoned by the matchmaker and their parents. In fact, studies from this period describe these nuptial negotiations as a *collaboration* between the two generations to find

a suitable partner.[36] Since there was no guarantee the first *miai* would be the last, it discouraged relatives' participation, particularly if they had to travel long distances from rural areas. Although the ceremoniousness and embarrassment associated with *miai* rendered them a common theme in slapstick films of the era, they gradually became less formal. The period of courtship after *miai* also lengthened, averaging two dates before agreeing to marry in the 1950s (Blood 1967). Despite a precipitous decline in the proportion of arranged marriages, *miai* remained a common experience. Even if individuals ultimately married through other modes of partner selection, many pursued both Western-style dating and *miai* simultaneously.[37]

Whereas many professional matchmakers continued to be local, middle-aged "caretaker uncles and matchmaking aunts" (Katayama 2021) with vast networks of social connections, rapid urbanization in the second half of the twentieth century fueled the expanding operations of larger commercial matchmaking services.[38] Many emulated the *miai* model. To use the services of marriage agencies, clients had to furnish a registration fee of approximately USD 80, fees for matchmakers' subsequent services and marriage interviews (about USD 160 per marriage interview), and another USD 160 for successful marriage negotiations (Applbaum 1995, p. 45). The businesslike approach of these establishments translated to their pragmatic approach to marriage. For example, as Figure 2.5 shows, in a newspaper advertisement marriage agency

[36] See Vogel (1961) and Blood (1967). As Blood (1967, p. 11) writes about the role of parents: "Whereas, traditionally, arrangements were initiated and negotiated by the parents before being announced to the child, today the two generations collaborate. Parents *may* still take the initiative, but young people may also ask parents to help find a partner. If parents initiate the process, the child is no longer confronted with a *fait accompli* but given an explicit opportunity to veto the nominee before negotiations are pursued." (emphasis original)

[37] For instance, in Blood's (1967, p. 45) survey, almost half of the respondents had *miai*.

[38] Ezra Vogel (1961) describes the stereotypical matchmaker as "the club-woman type."

OMMG explicitly disassociated its services from lofty dreams and aspirations about romance.[39] While the ad suggested envisioning a stranger on a bench as a potential "better half," it simultaneously reminded the reader to set concrete expectations for a potential partner's characteristics in the "marriage chance test" appended to the picture. With this matter-of-fact approach to courtship, these services were often seen as an option of last resort. Indeed, clients of marriage agencies were often individuals disadvantaged by the cultural legacies of the household system, such as eldest sons (who were unpopular due to the common expectation the wife will live with and take care of the parents-in-law) or daughters from families without sons that desired a male heir (see Applbaum 1995; Edwards 1989, p. 66; Knight 1995).

Figure 2.5 A newspaper advertisement for OMMG marriage agency from 1984. The vertical script (separating the couple on the bench and suggesting they represent two halves) reads: "Marriage is not a dream, it's everyday life." Smaller font in the upper right corner adds: "It might be obvious, but marriage is not submitting a marriage registration or throwing a wedding

[39] OMMG, which stands for Osaka Marriage Medical Guidance, was founded in 1980 and transformed into O-net in 1997. Although the company went bankrupt at one point, today it is a major player in the marriage-hunting industry and sponsorsthe "good couple day" (celebrated annually on November 22) as well as the "partner of the year" contest.

reception; it is [creating] a new life together between two people. So if you want to have a dream, you don't want it to be a vague aspiration, you want it to be rooted in [everyday] life. OMMG Guidance System. As a better half (*beta haafu*), look for a suitable partner." On the left side, there is an ad for a free "OMMG Marriage Chance Test" with a questionnaire regarding readers' personal information and details about their education as well as a "personality test" that readers could tear out and send back to the agency. Source: *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 1984.

Various municipalities across Japan continued to actively support their denizens' marriage efforts in the postwar era. In the 1950s, the Tokyo Municipal Marriage Bureau received around fifty applications per day and oversaw approximately 1,000 marriages annually (Blood 1967). These matching services were often designed to help balance marriage markets in which uneven gender ratios impeded chances for marriage and family formation. In 1948, the mayor of Kamakura promised to solemnize the marriages of any couples formed during a group matchmaking event intended for women who had remained unmarried due to postwar groom shortages (Katayama 2021). In the ensuing decades, the problem inverted, and bride shortages began to undermine the marital prospects of men living in rural areas. To address these challenges, prefectural and local governments sponsored introduction parties and other events such as domestic and international "meeting tours" (Knight 1995). Some rural municipalities installed matchmaking bureaus in Tokyo and other large cities to recruit urban brides and promote their return to rural communities. Many towns also attempted to recruit brides from overseas, in particular from areas formerly under the jurisdiction of the Japanese Empire such as the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, China, Thailand, or Indonesia.[40] Nevertheless, it appears that these various municipal matchmaking services never enjoyed popular appeal. In a 1980s study, for example, Itamoto comments on the ineffectiveness of "elderly marriage brokers" as mediators and their "ill-concealed sexism" which repels young women they are supposed to attract (Itamoto 1988, p. 35).

[40] On international matchmaking and mail-order brides see Yamaura 2020, p. 6. See also Constable (2003; 2009).

What strikes one as particularly resonant in the records of various public and private sector marriage mediation services are the distinctions around social desirability. They are often articulated through gendered and classed commentaries on sexual respectability. For example, in 1987 a scandal erupted in Akita City after it transpired that a group *miai* event for local farmers was attended by professional "women companions" hired by the organizer, the Akita Matchmaking Association. The escorts were paid $35 to converse with and keep the company of the group of male farmers, all eldest sons around the around thirty years of age. The farmers each needed to pay approximately $28 to attend the party in addition to a registration fee which exceeded $200. Revealing the clash of expectations around the types of interactions such monetary exchanges purchased and mores regarding women's sexual respectability, one of the embittered famers remarked that he should have been more suspicious when the companions arrived wearing flashy makeup and attire.[41] Less extreme examples evince how suspicion of women's prior dating experiences could tarnish their reputations in ways that even professional matchmakers could not rectify. In one case, a family withdrew their approval for a prospective daughter-in-law after discovering she had lived without relatives' chaperonage while in college. This was construed as "evidence of emancipated independence and the possibility that she might have engaged in unknown misdemeanors" (Blood 1967, p. 40). While men's sociability was not subject to a similar degree of scrutiny, their familial status was. As indicated above, eldest sons were particularly disadvantaged due to an expectation they will continue their family lineage—a cultural legacy which persists in present-day online matchmaking (Yu and Hertog 2018).

[41] *Asahi Shinbun*. 1987. "Shudan Miai, Yushin no 21nin Aitejosei Mina Puro to wa" (Group matchmaking with 21 women in Yushin, all of whom are professionals."

The landscape of matchmaking services diversified in the postwar decades, reflecting transformations in social arrangements and available technologies of mediation. These trends further accelerated as the nuclear family became the predominant cultural standard.

Corporate family and corporate matchmaking

From the inception of the modern Japanese state, authorities regulated marriage and family for various reasons, but it was the "economic miracle" inhering in the mid-1950s that called forth the state's reliance on married women for social management and reproduction.[42] In the early 1970s, with over 1 million marriages per annum, the Statistics Bureau of Japan pronounced that a "marriage boom" was taking place, inaugurating what Japanese sociologists label "everyone married society" (Masaoka 1994). Just three years prior, in 1967, the population had surpassed the 100 million mark—the goal the wartime Population Bureau had established in the 1940s. As a growing number of white-collar men earned a family wage through permanent, lifelong employment (becoming the archetypical "salaryman"), their wives took up the tasks of full-time homemaking and caregiving without paid employment. This version of the nuclear family never became dominant: even at the peak of economic growth in the 1980s, the salaryman/housewife model constituted less than 40 percent of all married couples (Osawa 2002). Nonetheless, this "Standard Japanese Family"—to paraphrase Dorothy Smith's notion of the "Standard North American Family"—ossified into an *ideological code* which, like genetic code, reproduces "its characteristic forms and order in multiple and various discursive settings" (Smith 1993, p. 50), from policy to gender ideals (e.g., Brinton 1993; Garon 2010; Robertson 2018; Sechiyama

[42] Annual GDP growth averaged over 10 percent in the 1960s and eventually over 5 percent in the 1980s (World Bank 2020). Some estimate that for those working in companies employing over 30 people, the salaries *tripled* in the mere ten years from 1960s to 1970s (Duus 1998, p. 300).

2013). Growing affluence meant that this standard family became imagined as a unit of consumption. In the 1980s media touted the arrival of the "New Family" (*nyu famiri*), with a couple outfitted in color-matching clothes engaging in shopping and leisure, celebrating their marital ties based on love and affect (Ochiai 1997; Takeda 2005).

As many scholars note, within the postwar social contract the housewife-centered nuclear family became a comprehensive system of governance.[43] The state had cultivated its intimate relationship with married women since the interwar period when various state campaigns recognized motherhood, women's domestic acumen, and eventually their home front contributions as important resources in social management (Garon 1997; 2010). When postwar economic growth gained momentum, however, white-collar men effectively disappeared from the home and the housewife was charged with key activities including managing household finances, children's education, elderly care, nutrition, and hygiene (Garon 2010; Goldstein-Gidoni 2012; Ochiai 1997; Sechiyama 2013; Takeda 2005). In marked contrast to the North American model of male breadwinner and female caregiver (cf. Cohen 2003; Cooper 2017), customarily, men transferred their monthly earnings to their wives who managed household budgeting and accounting (barring occasional "secret bonuses" which, unbeknownst to their wives, they spent on their own leisure, rather than the family). Married women were made responsible for household consumption, thus consolidating their status as consumer citizens, while their meticulous efforts to economize and save ensured the domestic financial resources

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[43] Several policies were introduced to support this gendered division of labor. Notably, in 1961 the revamped taxation system introduced the spousal tax break, which has come under continual, fierce criticism from Japanese feminists. This scheme allows the head of the household to deduct 380,000 yen (approximately $3,800) from their taxable income, provided that their spouse earns less than yen 1.03 million yen (or $10,300) per annum. Effectively, this system encourages women's housewifery or part-time employment, as they limit their work outside the house so that their annual income does not exceed the 1.03-million-yen threshold. Housewives were also enrolled as a third category in the national pension system, so they could receive a pension through their spouse's employment. Altogether, coupled with other incentives, this policy scheme has historically relegated women to low-paying, dead-end jobs, which were nevertheless crucial in supporting Japan's economic "miracle" (see Brinton 1993).

that fueled the "economic miracle." Given the considerable degree of authority women wielded at home, as well as the engagement in public life and political clout of groups such as the Housewives Association (Garon 1997), for many women "housewife" was a coveted status, additionally recognized for its important role for the nation.

As Japanese society became more "corporate-centered" (Tokuhiro 2010) and Japanese companies appropriated familial discourses into their structures (Kondo 1990) the workplace also influenced patterns of partner selection. Between the late 1950s and 1980s, the vast majority of couples met through their employer. Indeed, the concurrent decline of marriages facilitated by the workplace and arranged marriages accounts for 90 percent of the total decline in marriage rates between 1970 and 2005 (Iwasawa and Mita 2007). Employment patterns complemented the family model; men held the majority of full-time posts while women often worked part time, in administrative and clerical positions with the widespread expectation that they would quit their jobs upon getting married (Brinton 1993). Considering this social arrangement, an idealized courtship scenario included a salaryman marrying an assistant (or so-called "OL" or "office lady") he met at the office. Marriage between coworkers was both common and desirable in no small part because prestigious firms tended to recruit graduates of reputable universities and conducted careful background checks prior to employment. Employees could reasonably assume that anyone they interacted with possessed a respectable family background, a solid education, and a high level of intelligence, as well as positive recommendations regarding their character (Edwards 1989, p. 69).

In this context, many Japanese firms established marriage consultation centers for their employees.[44] In 1973 the renowned Mitsubishi Group, comprising of twenty-nine main companies and multiple subsidiaries, founded the first corporate marriage consultation service, the Diamond Family Club. Headquartered in Tokyo's fashionable Aoyama district, by 1990 the Diamond Family Club had about 2,500 people on its rolls annually. An enrollment fee of approximately $330 secured a two-year membership. If a couple became engaged through the Club's introduction, each person was required pay an engagement fee of $350. The club used a combination of computer and human assistance to arrange matches, organizing thirty marriage interviews on an average weekend and resulting in about 100 marriages per year. Although clients were reluctant to publicly admit how they met, meeting partners connected to Mitsubishi enhanced their perceptions of trustworthiness of the service (Yoshida 1990). Sumitomo Bank, on the other hand, did not offer marriage consultation services, but it did sponsor airfare back to Japan for single male employees dispatched overseas so that they could attend *miai.* The company encouraged expeditious decision-making by covering a roundtrip ticket for the first *miai*, but only one-way fare for the second.

As these entanglements of courtship and political economy show, dating became no less enmeshed in state processes than marriage or the nuclear family. The expectation for married women to perform care and other specifically gendered tasks within their families was cemented into what conservative politicians proudly called the "Japanese-style welfare system."

[44] For example, Mitsui Group's Mitsui Group Marriage Consultation Center, Daiichi-Kangyō Bank's Heart Family Club, or Sanwa Bank's Green Club Bridal Section. Many of these marriage consultation services continue to exist today, constituting a less readily accessible segment of the marriage-hunting market.

THE THIRD LAYER: TOWARDS THE "ERA OF MARRIAGE-HUNTING"

From the 1990s onwards an avalanche of structural changes challenged the postwar family standard. The economic asset bubble collapsed, inhibiting growth for a period that became known as the "lost decades." Economic setbacks in combination with neoliberal labor deregulation undermined the system of lifelong employment which had previously instituted the sole male breadwinner (Dasgupta 2013; Hidaka 2010). Following the implementation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1986 an increasing number of women entered paid employment. Japan's changing demographic profile also became recognized as a social problem. Although birthrates had been declining since the 1970s, it was not until the "1.57 shock" of 1990 that government and media paid close attention, and several more years until they defined it as an imminent crisis (Schoppa 2020).[45] As social scientists endeavored to identify the causes of declining birthrates, young, unmarried women with their own disposable income—whom Yamada (1999) evocatively termed "parasite singles"— became one of the culprits.[46] With an increasing number of people foregoing marriage or marrying later in life, the changing family structure increasingly pushed the state to develop governance strategies centered on the individual.

To abate the effects of multifarious economic setbacks political leaders trumpeted a "structural reform" that involved reduced government spending and facilitating market expansion through privatization, deregulation, and increased efficiency. Crucially, the structural reform was to encompass all spheres of social life, including the family (Alexy 2020; Takeda

[45] In many ways, the "1.57 shock" constituted what in a different context Zubrzycki (2022) calls the "narrative shock," an event which prompts a reckoning with national identity.

[46] Although the term "parasite single" is ostensibly neutral, it has been used in reference primarily to unmarried women.

2018). The family model based on a male breadwinner and female homemaker came under attack for fostering economic and psychological dependency. As the previous chapter mentions, the figure of the housewife—previously celebrated as foundational for the Japanese nation—was now maligned for its lack of productive output and parasitical dependence on the husband. A 2002 government "White Paper on the Quality of Life" encouraged married couples to develop "emotional interdependence" in lieu of economic reliance and describes family formation as based on independent choices by individuals rather than a gender and age-based division of labor. This ethos extolling individualism and independence is also refracted into current-day municipal matchmaking practices. For example, the logo of Tokyo Couple Story, a marriage support online portal that the Tokyo Metropolitan Government launched in 2019, employs two interconnected numerical "ones" that together form the Japanese character "ri" (り) found in the word for "couple" (*futa<u>ri</u>*) (Figure 2.6). The website explains its intentions behind the design which "expresses the idea that a new 'couple' can be born when two different 'one' and 'one' come together" while the website's English version explains that different font colors symbolize each person's uniqueness.[47] The vision of matrimony put forward in the logo is strikingly different to that extolled in the previous era. Instead of the "complementary incompetence" (Edwards 1989) of the salaryman-housewife duo, it proposes marriage as a new entity made up of two autonomous individuals.

[47] Tokyo Futari Story Website https://www.futari-story.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/about/ (accessed December 1, 2019).

Figure 2.6. The logo of Tokyo Futari [Couple] Story. Source: https://www.futari-story.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/about/ (accessed January 25, 2020).

Early on, government officials recognized courtship as a key arena of concern. Echoing Fukuzawa's sentiment a century prior, a 1987 report by the Institute of Population Problems identified the problem: "The traditional omiai system has broken down, but Western-style dating (in the sense that adults expect young people to pair off naturally and approve of occasions that encourage them to do so) is not widespread. As a result, it is not easy for young adults to meet prospective marriage partners. Social intercourse between men and women in their 20s does not always function adequately to lead to marriage" (cited in Yoshida 1990, p. 172). Two aspects of this report stand out. First, it espouses the need for dating practices to be socially recognized. Second, the report tellingly describes dating as unpremeditated, "natural," and hence a more desirable form of coupling. Nonetheless, many remained skeptical whether affect-based relationships could ensure the proper functioning of Japanese society. In a 1995 study, a municipal marriage counselor contends: "We in Japan can not afford a sixties generation of free lovers as you have in America. In Japan, the household (*ie*) is a mirror image of the State. … When marriage is a matter of free will, society disintegrates, as it is doing in America" (Applbaum 1995, p. 46). As this quote demonstrates, the connection between marriage and social

order has remained firm in the minds of policymakers and everyday citizens alike, as has the tension between love and arranged matches.

Given the vociferous opposition to state interventions into matters of intimacy and reproduction that diverse feminist and civil society groups mounted throughout the twentieth century, government officials navigate treacherous terrain when debating measures to boost fertility. As Takeda (2018) points out, politicians were initially reluctant to even discuss birthrates in numerical values due to their implications regarding the reproductive capacities of different bodies. The exigency of population decline and aging, however, has changed this status quo (Schoppa 2020). Government officials have also started discussing dating services in relation to population decline more openly. In 2006 the Trade Ministry considered showing advertisements for matchmaking agencies on television—a remarkable occurrence given that advertising for businesses relying on private information is generally not allowed in Japan (Goldstein-Gidoni 2012). The government has also begun regulating online dating businesses to prevent human trafficking and sex work. In 2016, the Cabinet Office issued "The [sic] Japan's Plan for Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens," which identifies demographic change as "the root of the obstacles in economic growth" and set the twin goals of attaining "the largest nominal GDP in postwar history" and "the desirable birthrate of 1.8." In an emotion-laden register, the Plan sets out to maintain population level over 100 million people—the number first set forth by wartime authorities—which it calls "a figure representing abundance" (see also Homei 2022). It promises to foster a national environment that will "enable more youths to make their hopes of marriage and childbirth come true." Preempting indictments of statist intervention, the document states: "It is an individual goal which belongs to every single citizen and it never means that a nation will recommend that people get married or give births [sic] even when they do not want to

do so." By defining family formation as personal choice, separate from state action, the Plan transfers the responsibility for reproduction into the individual's hands. Indeed, the marriage-hunting industry that crystallized anew after the publication of *The Era of Marriage-Hunting* in 2008 became a field where these autonomous choices can be exercised.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has drawn on academic research in Japanese and English, mass media accounts, literary works, government documents, advertisements and business brochures, and visual media to reconstruct accounts of intimate governance in three periods of modern Japan. I explored how marriage mediation evolved in modern Japan in tandem with conceptions of family, gender, and personhood, themselves shaped by an ever-evolving political economic background. It would be impossible to provide an exhaustive account of the field that ultimately became the marriage-hunting market. Instead, this chapter has looked to the past to underscore how both change and continuity figure into the present.

The marriage-hunting industry and its antecedents have been simultaneously shaped by market *and* state processes. Indeed, this chapter has shown that marriage mediation has historically traversed the boundaries between what we tend to conceptualize as discrete categories of state, market, and society. Over the course of the twentieth century, as marriage mediation became increasingly commercialized and state power more diffuse, its effects became absorbed into dating practices in ways that often appear removed from the political realm. Yet, as Mitchell (1999, p. 83) observes, "producing and maintaining the distinction between state and society is itself a mechanism that generates resources of power." So does the production of distinctions and hierarchies within the intimate realms. Gendered distinctions around class,

sexual respectability, and nationality described in this chapter figure into the present. It is no coincidence that the men and women I describe in Chapters 5 and 6 negotiate their social membership through tropes of marriageability that reference the nuclear family standard and middle-class domesticity. Neither is it a coincidence that the contemporary market is structured according to the distinct legacies and different valuation of love and arranged marriage, as I show in Chapter 4. Before then, however, it is necessary to understand how these ideas structure the marriage-hunting industry in the contemporary moment. To that end, the next chapter turns to my contemporary ethnographic, interview, and documentary evidence to analyze how the market and its entrepreneurs conceive and package marriage and marriageability.

Chapter 3

Marriage-Hunting Professionals and the Moralization of Marriageability

On a balmy October afternoon, I was walking down the tree lined Omotesando avenue dotted with designer storefronts and upscale bridal boutiques. I was scheduled to visit "J-Konkatsu," a nonprofit dedicated to marriage support, which I eventually found in an unassuming basement apartment tucked away in the backstreets of the affluent neighborhood. During my four-hour-long interview with the director, Goto-san, he reflected on the issues that, in his view, make marriage-hunting so challenging for his clients:

> People who want to marry but haven't been able to, I guess they have some issues. For men, they need to take responsibility for the fact that they are going to be a father and will look after the household. I think some men are scared to take this responsibility. For women, choosing a person is a risk. They find it hard to choose the right person. I think marriage is one of the top three decisions you have to make during your lifetime. Therefore, women find it hard to make this decision, they tend to wait and not get married. They become less assertive when approaching [men] because they wonder if he is the right one. Or, if he is the right one, they become worried and unable to approach [him].

According to Goto-san, marriage is a weighty decision, but its gravity differs for men and for women. With different assumptions about familial roles, men must prepare to become providers and earn a wage that will sustain a family. A woman's decision, on the other hand, is inherently

risky; with their presumed economic dependence, they must hedge their bets and carefully choose their husbands. The magnitude of this decision results in overthinking and an inability to commit.

On its face, Goto-san describes a case of what Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) in her classic essay labels "bargaining with patriarchy"—the strategies that individual women adopt to maximize their autonomy in the context of structural and economic disadvantage. But when I asked Goto-san about his recommendations for his clients, his answer was surprising:

> There are some women who think they are in their teens even though they are in their thirties or forties. They need to become someone that is more dateable by men. … They need to understand what kind of people are not getting married, and what position they are in the market to help. *The market is based on supply and demand, so they need to understand their position.* For example, if a man is in his forties but is only working part-time, even if he wants to marry, he will find it difficult. Another example, if a woman is in her late thirties, but claims that she needs to find a younger man who earns more than 6 million yen [approx. $60,000] a year, this is also difficult. There is no one to tell her that her expectations are not realistic. She does not know either. There are people who think someone like this will seriously appear. Kind of like a delusion. Therefore, *we need to provide information to these kinds of people. Tell them the state of contemporary society and the factors he or she needs to consider.* [emphasis added]

Like econometricians and demographers, Goto-san framed the marriage-hunting field as a market based on the laws of supply and demand. People match based on social characteristics such as income and age. Moreover, the market is highly unequal—participants are endowed with varying types and levels of economic, cultural, and bodily capital (Bourdieu 1987; Green 2008; Mears 2015a; Hakim 2010), which are also weighted differently for men versus women. But Goto-san's comments reveal additional factors at play. First, he perceives market intermediaries like himself as "cultural guides" (Lareau 2015), who demystify the criteria of marriageability and provide the requisite information for estimating one's position in the market. Second, one's

position in the dating field is not fixed. By learning appropriate techniques, individuals can, in the words of Goto-san, “become dateable” and improve their chances of success.

This chapter unpacks how professionals in the marriage-hunting market conceptualize marriage and marriageability. Drawing primarily on ethnographic data, interviews with professionals, and online materials from marriage-hunting organizations, I examine how they define marriage between a man and a woman as a product with broad appeal, suitable for diverse clients pursuing different lifestyles. The marriage industry’s discourse frames marriageability—eligibility for marriage and for inclusion in the marriage-hunting market—as a meritocratic achievement, a mixture of ascribed and achieved characteristics based on quasi-scientific, rational *standards*. I show how professionals congeal standards of marriageability by infusing pre-existing cultural conceptions of desirability with scientific authority derived from population science and government statistics. These standards classify men and women into distinct groups and reinforce the expectation that they will move through the market differently: men as presumed breadwinners, women as presumed mothers racing against the biological clock. Such market standards, I argue, are simultaneously cultural, economic, and moral. Both relying upon and reinforcing these values, market professionals portray the marriage-hunting process as an arduous but worthwhile pursuit, investing it with moral resonance. Symptomatic of the uneven and stratified nature of social membership, their meritocratic ideas of marriageability reveal assumptions about not only the ideal client, but also the ideal citizen.

THE RATIONALIZATION OF SPOUSE-SEEKING

Since Max Weber, sociologists have theorized *rationalization*, the broad processes through which formal, predetermined criteria replace traditional ideas, customs, and emotions as organizing

principles of social life. Rationalization entails a reorientation toward efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control as the desired features of a methodical lifestyle (Illouz 2007; Kalberg 1980; Weber 1978). Weber considered the expansion of formal systems of knowledge a crucial component of rationalization in modernity—scientific methods and knowledge could be applied to achieve a desired outcome. Whereas Weber considered how rationalization structures formal modern institutions, such as bureaucracy and the state, sociologists have since extended his ideas to consider how diverse areas of everyday life become reorganized according to rational principles (e.g., Illouz 2007; Ritzer 1993). Eva Illouz (2007; 2019) deftly describes how intimate lives, too, have been rendered into measurable and calculable objects. According to Illouz, this process is inextricably linked to the diffusion of psychology and psychoanalysis, with their intrinsic focus on the self and its presumed origin, the family. As formal knowledge systems, psychology and psychiatry establish distinctions between "normal" and "pathological" in the intimate realms of family, interpersonal communication, and sexuality alike. Such ideas were broadly popularized over the course of the twentieth century as psychotherapeutic approaches combined with both market capitalism and (post)feminism to produce a burgeoning self-help genre (Budgeon 2014; Illouz 2008; Mojola 2015; Sweet 2021). As Illouz (2007, p. 10) writes, "Psychoanalysis and psychology were goldmines for the advice industry because they were wrapped in the aura of science, because they could be highly individualized (fitting any and all individual particularity), because they could address a wide variety of problems, thereby enabling product diversification, and because they seemed to offer the dispassionate gaze of science on tabooed topics." As a result, popular cultural repertories for intimate relationships combine the languages of psychology, the market, and feminism, accumulating in "new techniques and meanings" that "forge new forms of sociability" (Illouz 2007, p. 5).

Like the experts Illouz describes, Japanese marriage-hunting professionals, too, mobilize psychological and market discourses that foreground liberal ideals of individual agency and choice. During my fieldwork, however, I also found equally frequent invocations of national population statistics and demographic science. In seminars and lectures, marriage-hunting professionals regularly bolster their claims by relying on what Michael Rodríguez-Muñiz (2021) calls "demographic naturalism"—a belief that sees populations as "real," pre-existing entities (rather than summoned into existence through scientific and statistical techniques) and population trends as natural forces. This wraps marriage-hunting in the aura of science and renders it a rational process simultaneously subject to the laws of the market *and* demography. Selective reliance on demographic facts and stylized narratives legitimates the marriage market as a neutral domain underpinned by objective rules inhering in broader social structures and population-level trends. On the procedural level, this introduces a calculated, rational approach to spouse-seeking based on probability and cost-benefit analysis. At the same time, it provides rhetorical devices with which to capture individual men and women as potential clients. By contextualizing individual marriage-hunting experiences within population-level transformations, marriage-hunting professionals connect private and public, personal and political, linking individual biographies to state institutions and goals.

As scholars across disciplines have shown, modern states rely on various techniques of quantification in their projects of population control and management. The very emergence of population science is thoroughly implicated in modern governance projects (Foucault 2009; Homei 2022; Rodríguez-Muñiz 2021). This is especially true in Japan, where techniques for studying the population developed not simply in relation to an existing state (as they did in France or England), but deeply imbricated within the modern political project of building a

centralized nation-state and empire (Homei 2022). As anthropologist Aya Homei (2022, p. 23) writes, "Policy-oriented population research saw population in racialized and gendered terms and focused on certain demographic subjects, seeing them either as undergirding or undermining the prosperity of Japan as a nation." As I discussed in the previous chapter, scientific knowledge and population projections informed policies oriented at population management (such as birth control and sterilization campaigns). These science-backed policy solutions inscribed particular ideas of class, gender, and nationality. By utilizing a scientific approach grounded in official data, marriage-hunting professionals, historically and in the present day, have similarly linked them to conceptions of who is—and is not—considered marriageable.

In this chapter I reveal how standardized ideas of marriageability come to suffuse the marriage-hunting market. And once discursively connected to population science and demographic trends, these standards acquire a veneer of quasi-scientific accuracy and objectivity. By standards, I refer to the special type of cultural directives, or "rules about what those who adopt them should do, even if this only involves saying something or designating something in a particular way" (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2002, p. 4) Adherence to standards is not mandatory, but is presented as voluntary and advisory (Brunsson and Jacobsson 2002; Timmermans and Epstein 2010; Timmermans and Prickett 2022). Nevertheless, the strong normative component of standards makes them amenable and indispensable to projects of social governance and coordination (Rose and Miller 2008). As Timmermans and Prickett (2022, p. 3) point out, "when the state relies on institutionalized standards to separate people and imbues the classification with both symbolic and monetary capital, administrative standards reify boundaries between the worthy and unworthy."

Within the marriage-hunting market, gendered standards of marriageability are used to sort and value people in ways that approximate administrative standards and make them legible within state categories. These expectations circumscribe marriageability to middle-class, heterosexual, and Japanese ethno-national expressions of normalcy. The state and the market interface through these standards in ways that differentiate, stratify, and thus shape life chances. Like other economic classifications, such as credit (Fourcade and Healy 2013; Krippner 2017), these criteria classify, rank, and value people according to market-based definitions of worth (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006; Lamont 2012). Because they overlap with pre-existing formal administrative standards of normative family, gender, and sexuality, they wield considerable cultural authority and encourage compliance as a condition of social membership. As the following chapters show, standardization produces different procedural approaches to spouse-seeking and a spectrum of social belonging: from hybrid gender "fitting" to "misfitting."

The remainder of the chapter proceeds in two parts. The first demonstrates how market professionals conceive gendered standards of marriageability by connecting them to Japan's demographic and socioeconomic transformations. In the second part, I show how marriage-hunting professionals extoll the "diversification" of marriage in an attempt to broaden its legitimate conceptions and define it as beneficial for both men and women, albeit for different reasons. By tracing the implicit connections between market standards of marriageability and the cultural ideal of a "standard" Japanese family with its entrenched gender roles my analysis reveals how these understandings ultimately regulate social membership.

APPRAISING MARRIAGE AND MARRIAGEABILITY

During virtually all the marriage-hunting seminars I observed, the speakers connected individual experiences of looking for a spouse with Japan's changing demographic profile. Although these events varied with respect to theme, topic, and intended audience (i.e., some were for people engaged in or considering marriage-hunting, while others for parents of spouse-seekers), presenters invariably referenced government statistical data and population projections, such as marriage and non-marriage rates. They used PowerPoint slides with data visualizations including graphs, figures, and infographics that wove together the different causes and consequences of nonmarriage for men and for women with national-level population trends. As sociologists have long argued, such data are not objective and neutral representations of social reality, they are cultural artifacts (Patriarca 1996; Porter 1996; Rodríguez-Muñiz 2021). And by relying so heavily on official population data, marriage-hunting professionals help to circulate and popularize their purported implications, rendering them meaningful in particular ways.

One way market professionals regularly invoke population trends is to emphasize how elusive marriage has become and, by extension, to underscore the necessity of engaging in spouse-seeking activities, preferably at an early age. For example, during a marriage-hunting seminar during the Shinjuku Youth Festival in November 2019, the speaker, having presented the government data on population problems, contended: "If you still hope you'll find someone naturally look at these statistics. 69.8 percent of single men and 59.1 percent of single women aged 18–34 don't have a partner (*kōsai aite*). Further, 42 percent of men and 44.2 percent of women in the same age group have no experience with the opposite sex." By linking participants' individual-level experiences to national population trends, he suggested that being single was not a temporary state or an aberration, but rather a statistical norm. Plotting these

statistical representations alongside a specific demographic narrative, he drove home the necessity of actively looking for a partner and assigned great urgency to the task.

Reliance on population data also allows professionals to portray finding a spouse as an event whose probability can be estimated with a great degree of precision. During another seminar, the speaker (introduced with the honorific *sensei* used for teachers and experts) began his presentation by reviewing recent marriage statistics. The phrase “based on annualized national census data between 2010 and 2015” appeared on each slide. At one point in the presentation, he posed the following question, also written on the slide: “What is the probability of getting married for those men and women between 35 and 39 years of age who are currently unmarried?” Audience members hazarded various guesses until the speaker revealed the correct answer: three in one hundred people. The answer was presented with a visual flourish, a large, red number “3” appearing suddenly on the slide (see figure 3.1). The audience gasped. The speaker contended that this likelihood remains constant even for those who are currently in a relationship and that it further decreases after forty years of age. He urged attendees to estimate their chances of finding a marriage partner based on these calculations.

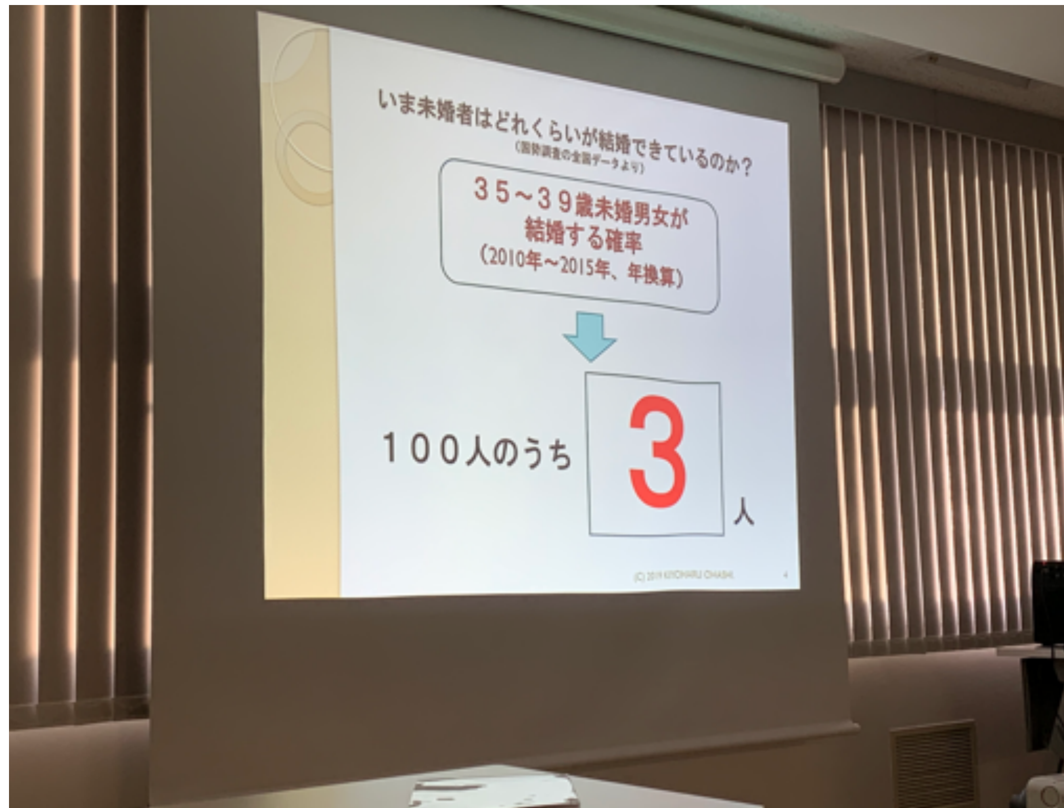

Figure 3.1 PowerPoint presentation during marriage-hunting seminar in Hyogo Prefecture's Meeting Support Center in Tokyo. Photograph by Anna Woźny, November 30, 2019.

Numbers and techniques of quantification allow market professionals to encourage taking advantage of as many marriage-hunting opportunities as possible. During a seminar at "Matching App University," the speaker described the relationship formation process as having multiple phases—from swiping and matching to face-to-face encounters and dating. To "find someone who fits you," he recommended meeting "in real life" at least ten different individuals from one's initial pool of matches—indeed, the more the better. He claimed to know someone who had met in person one hundred people they had found through dating apps. The speaker also emphasized the importance of active participation in the market by sending a lot of "likes" when perusing apps: "According to statistics, only 7 percent of users match (get to step three). As you proceed, the pool of people gets smaller. So, even if you send a lot of likes initially, you might end up

meeting just one person." In his view, since meeting someone in the market is also a function of frequency, it is worth rolling the dice as many times as possible.

Through such "analyses," market professionals translate structural conditions while explaining and justifying social differences and inequalities with respect to gender, age, income, personality, and other criteria. As one example, the marital statistics they present uniformly divide the population into "men" and "women," thus treating the gender binary underpinning the marriage market as a scientific fact. This is not surprising—after all, the speakers merely transposed official categories used (and normalized) by the government and social scientists. But marriage-hunting professionals also creatively merged such categories and statistics with knowledge tools from the advice industry to create typologies of male and female customers depending on the type of marriage-hunting services they are most likely to benefit from. Goto-san, whom we met in the introduction, organized monthly seminars labeled "marriage-hunting café" with a morning session for people in their twenties and an afternoon session for people in their thirties. During each meeting, Goto-san first introduced slides entitled "general background on marriage." These presented a graphical overview of historical changes in arranged and love marriage rates, the proportions of unmarried men and women, and the ways in which married couples meet. He contended that the decline in arranged marriages was directly correlated with current high rates of singlehood, as not all Japanese men and women possess the qualities that lend themselves to a love match. He then proposed the following classification: "Type A – love marriage type (charming, good at communication, has previous experiences with love), Type B – arranged marriage type (good "criteria", busy with work, serious), and Type C – to be revised/reevaluated type (lack of dating experience, bad at conversing with the opposite sex, low-earning men)." The next slide revealed coordinate planes, with the y-axis representing "age"

for women and “income” for men, respectively, and the x-axis representing “attractiveness” for women and “communication skills” for men, respectively. As Figure 3.2 shows, the typology was mapped out so that intersections of different characteristics suggested different ways one could benefit from the market. For Goto-san, attractive women and men skilled at communication could marry through both love and arranged marriage. Less attractive women and men with good income but poor communication skills were classified as constituting the arranged-marriage type. The bottom left quadrant, comprised of older and less attractive women on the one hand, and lower-earning men with poor communication skills on the other, belonged exclusively to “Type C,” that is, people who need to “revise” themselves. The standards of marriageability in combination with state and market discourses morph into a classificatory mechanism to which individuals must respond.

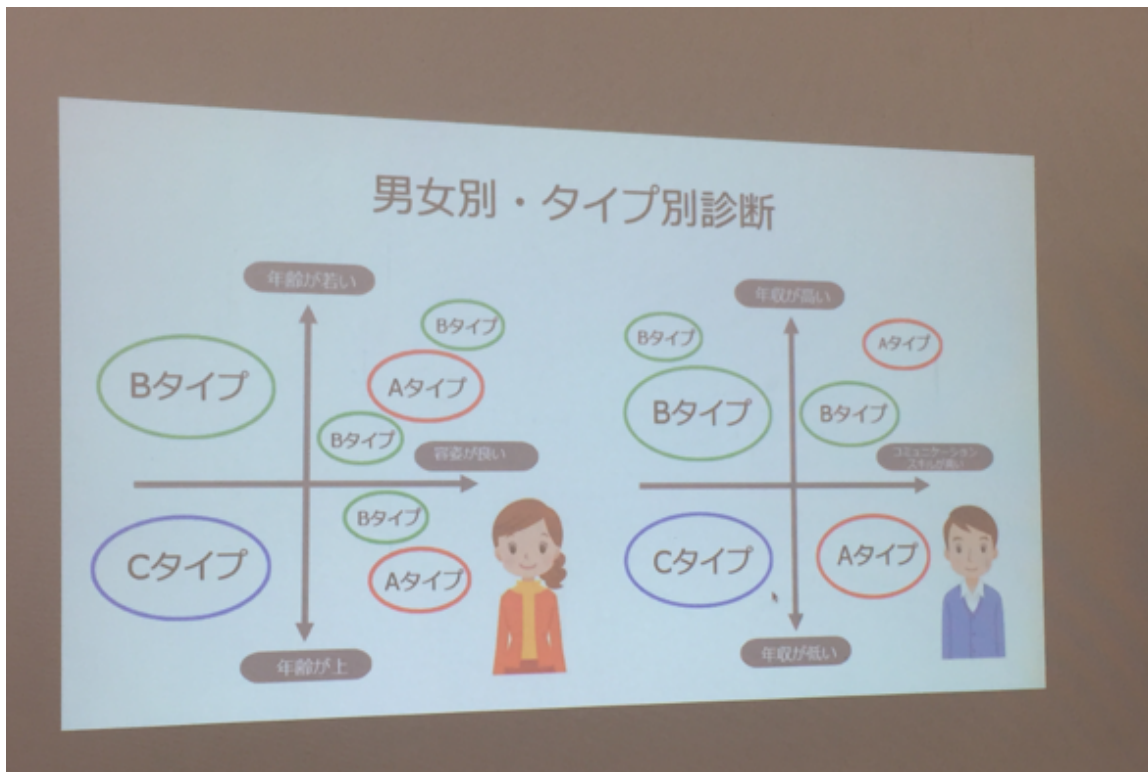

Figure 3.2 Slide from a seminar, “Marriage-hunting Café,” presenting a typology of marriageability for men and women with intersecting characteristics around age, income, and charisma. Photo: Anna Woźny, June 16, 2018.

In what ways can individuals "revise" themselves? Marriage-hunting professionals suggest customers should strive to ameliorate those conditions that are malleable, while making the best of factors out of their control. During a seminar titled "How to Begin Marriage-hunting" (organized by a marriage agency and NGO that specializes in serving men in nonpermanent employment), the speaker suggested that, first and foremost, individuals need to gauge whether and to what degree they are willing to change. For men with a low income, he recommended they "find a job with a future" (*shōraisei no aru shokugyō ni tsuku*). If irregularly employed, could they consider looking for regular employment or at least a better-paid position? If not, could they raise their educational credentials in order to become employable by reputable companies? To that end, he suggested enrolling in evening courses at renowned private universities, such as Waseda and Keio, as a way to improve one's resume and enhance one's standing in both the job market and the marriage market. Other tips he offered included getting a driver's license (especially important in rural areas), improving one's online and social media image (so that nothing suspicious appears when a potential partner performs a Google search), and contributing to the national pension system (to ensure a future safety net).

For women, market professionals foreground age as the key metric of marriageability, not least because of its perceived connection to attractiveness and childbearing potential. As such, instead of giving advice oriented at improving occupational or financial standing, women are encouraged to approach marriage-hunting as they would approach investing in the stock market and to treat their age as inversely related to their value. During marriage-hunting seminars, the phrase "The best day to start marriage-hunting was yesterday, but the second-best day is today" surfaced frequently, suggesting that the sooner a woman engages in marriage-hunting, the greater

her return on investment. When I attended a "Free Counseling Session" at a marriage agency, the counselor described it the following way:

> Most people who come to free counseling eventually come back [to enroll in a marriage agency]. However, *when* they enroll makes a big difference. If someone first comes [to us] in their twenties, but then returns in their thirties, it's a whole different story (*hanashi ga chigau*). So, since you're now still in your twenties, the best time to enroll is now. You can definitely find someone within half a year or so.

The approach proposed by market professionals encourages women to invest in the marriage-hunting market at a younger age to cash in greater returns. This was necessary to attract women in their late twenties, who otherwise did not seek out marriage-hunting opportunities. At the same time, this rhetoric serves the interest of the market by expanding the potential pool of clients, both men and women.

With these population-science-informed notions of marriage and marriageability, market professionals urge clients to calibrate their expectations of a partner. During my interview with Fumiko, a 34-year-old interior designer, she recounted how multiple people who advised her on marriage-hunting—from her marriage counselor to individuals ostensibly unrelated to the enterprise of marriage-hunting, including her hairdresser—instructed her to determine specific "criteria" or "conditions" (*jōken*) for a partner:

> *Anna*: What kind of advice did you receive?
> *Fumiko*: That I need to think about what I look for in a guy. What are my criteria? And what kind of married life do I want? I need to have these things in mind when looking for someone. I need to have a certain image and then try and meet someone that suits that image. If not, marriage is very far away. I was told marriage is all about planning. Having seen many people do marriage-hunting, they need to have a strong vision for a goal. Otherwise, [marriage] is something that is not easily obtained.

As the previous chapter established, such "conditions" for a marriage partner have a long history in Japan. Approaching these as market criteria not only envisions Fumiko as an informed

customer but also as an entrepreneurial market subject who needs to proactively pursue concrete goals that are ambitious but calibrated to her status. Eva Illouz (2007) notes that online dating generally encourages looking for partners "above one's league" and is predicated on a logic of mass consumption in which one can always find a better "bargain." By contrast, marriage-hunting professionals appear to encourage a search based on a different calculus: realistically understanding one's own position in the market and searching within established parameters and criteria.

Echoing neoliberal discourses of self-improvement (e.g., Rose and Miller 2008), clients, particularly women, are also enticed to partake in marriage-hunting as a means to that end. Market professionals cast marriage-hunting as an opportunity for self-betterment, which they called "self-polishing" (*jibun migaki*). During one seminar, the speaker described the benefits of marriage-hunting the following way: "Increasing the probability of marriage means that you need to practice, and practice, and practice. Practice equals self-polishing. To become the best version of yourself. No one will love you as you are (*arinomama*), lazing around (*gorogoro shinagara*) in your room watching Netflix" (Kawase-san, February 2020). Results aside, the very act of participating in the marriage market is desirable and conducive to becoming a better person. Being proactive and acting in accord with internalized market criteria renders one a moral actor endowed with grit and industry in contrast to those "lazing around" and "watching Netflix." Accordingly, this allows market professionals to reframe resources devoted to marriage-hunting as an investment in self-improvement. It also suggests the traits of a desirable citizen as someone who methodically dedicates herself to the task of marriage-hunting, much like the suffix *-katsu* suggests (see the introductory chapter for a discussion of its meanings).

Importantly, the ostensibly gender-neutral process of “self-polishing” refers specifically to women’s self-betterment through sartorial and bodily enhancement. (Its semantic equivalent for men is “men-polishing” (*otokomigaki*)). An online advice column defines “self-polishing” as ways to “improve yourself to become an attractive woman in the eyes of men in order to gain their favor” and cautions to “be aware that if you don’t improve yourself the right way, you may end up being self-satisfied.” The goal of self-polishing is “not to become the kind of woman that women aspire to be, but to become the kind of person who makes men think, ‘I want to be with this person’ or ‘I want to marry this kind of woman’.”[48] Put differently, seeing like the marriage market, to modify Fourcade and Healy’s (2017) expression (which they borrow from Scott 1998), means seeing through the male gaze; women must anticipate being interpellated as marriage partners. To that end, market professionals encourage modifications in specific areas considered important to marriageability. A survey of over six hundred women conducted by the matchmaking company *Onet* found that about 40 percent of women have tried to better themselves by improving their skincare, makeup, or sense of fashion, while others reported enhancing their housework skills (40.2%), manners (39.4%), communication skills (37.2%) and education (37.0%).[49] Nearly one-third of respondents reported spending over $1,000 on such above-defined self-improvement. Unlike Western popular discourses that blend postfeminist and market claims to encourage women to put themselves first (e.g., Budgeon 2014; Mojola 2015), in Japan, the marriage-hunting economy reinforces the expectation that women must strive to meet the standards of marriageability. Ultimately, however, both approaches promote consumption of

[48] PartyParty. 2020. “Points of Self Improvement to Succeed in Marriage Hunting” https://www.partyparty.jp/user_contents/2/375 (last accessed June 25, 2023).

[49] O-net. 2022. “More than 90% of women in active marriages are improving themselves! The best self-polishing activities during marriage activity are "skincare, make-up, and fashion” in *PR Times* https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000207.000022091.html (last accessed June 25, 2023).

specific products and material culture as the means to the end, further entrenching the gendered assumptions of consumer citizenship.

By leveraging scientific knowledge, promoting standardized metrics of marriageability, and encouraging self-improvement through commercial services, market professionals portray marriage as a meritocratic achievement and marriage-hunting as a worthwhile pursuit.[50] They also implicitly connect individual life projects and intimate experiences with state goals. The following section further analyzes how these actors attempt to broaden legitimate conceptions of marriage while linking it to economic rationality and consumption.

MAKING MARRIAGE 'SEXY' AGAIN

The professionals I interviewed agreed that one factor contributing to Japan's low marriage rate was the institution's negative reputation. "There's no shortage of negative information about marriage on the internet and social media. Because of this, some young people become overstimulated, and it negatively impacts their efforts to marry," one presenter said. The solution he advocated was to rectify and broaden these perceptions, or, as he put it, "to make the word 'marriage' sexy, cool, to soften its meaning." To that end, marriage-hunting professionals pursue two parallel tactics. At the same time as they strive to portray marriage as a beneficial arrangement for both men and women (albeit based on very different assumptions about gender), they also work to depreciate nonmarriage and render it undesirable.

[50] This resonates with broader social perceptions of marriage. As sociologist Yuko Ogasawara (2010, p. 56) writes, the dominant understanding of marriage changed from something that "just happens" to "something that people make happen." This change in people's attitude is reflected in how they talk about marriage. While people used to talk of "getting" (*suru*) or "not getting" (*shinai*) married, now they talk of "being able to" (*dekiru*) or "not being able to" (*dekinai*) get married."

Indeed, during my fieldwork a phrase that was often used was "diversification of marriage" (*tayōkasuru kekkon*). Coincidentally, the term echoes both the broader discourses of social "diversification" that have become prominent in recent decades (akin to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in the U.S.), and the financial strategy of capital allocation in ways that minimize risk.[51] Speakers at marriage-hunting seminars touted the changing forms of couplehood and enumerated various examples, including "common law marriage" (*jijitsukon*) defined as partners living together without a marriage certificate or "coexistence marriage" (*kyōseikon)* in which partners have a marriage certificate and co-reside, but lead separate lives. Additional examples included "friendship marriage" (*yūjō kekkon*) in which spouses are friends but are not in love, "weekend marriage" (*shūmatsukon*) in which they live and work in different locations and see each other on weekends and holidays, and "house husband marriage" (*shufukon;* 'shufu' is homonymous with 'housewife' albeit written with a different character) in which the husband assumes all homemaking and care responsibilities while the wife works outside. Speakers at marriage-hunting seminars encouraged audience members to expand their imagery of what married life can entail. As this range of examples indicates, these marital arrangements typically involve unorthodox configurations of residence, gendered division of labor, and even affective bonds—though they stop short of relationships that would not fit the mold proscribed by the family registry which, as a rule, recognizes a heterosexual marital arrangement with a male household head.

Promotion of "marriage diversification" took different forms over the course of my fieldwork and often enlisted the cooperation of everyday people. In fall 2019, Tokyo Futari Story, the marriage support division within the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, announced a

[51] For example, in recent years, Japanese educational institutions and companies began to introduce "diversity and inclusion" programs, like those implemented in the United States.

competition inviting Tokyoites to submit short narratives about their relationship that fit the theme of diversification (Figure 3.3). Exemplifying the entanglement of private, public and academic sectors in marriage promotion, the jury was comprised of a researcher from a private organization, a university professor (specializing in "love"), the director of Recruit Bridal Research Institute, the president of a company dedicated to "creating a better environment surrounding families," and a popular model and actress. They selected the top one hundred submissions to be posted on the project's website, accompanied by cartoons by illustrator Kei Hiramatsu.[52] The winning couple from these one hundred entries was to be formally announced on the "Tokyo Futari [Couple] Day," a community event scheduled for February 22, 2020, because of the multiple number twos in the date. Authors of the winning submission were to receive tickets to the Tokyo Olympics.[53]

[52] See examples of Hiramatsu work here: https://keihiramatsu.tumblr.com. Illustrations from the contest are available on the website of Tokyo Futari Project https://www.futari-story.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/100episodes/ (last accessed May 11, 2023).

[53] Tokyo Futari Day was ultimately cancelled due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the selected one hundred stories are posted on the project website. The Tokyo Olympics were postponed to 2021 and held without an audience.

Figure 3.3. Advertisement of the "TOKYO Futari 100 Stories" contest on Instagram. The competition was advertised via local media, marriage support organizations, and social media. Screenshot by Anna Woźny, November 10, 2019.

Selected entries were posted on the project website under a banner proclaiming "There are as many forms of a good married couple as there are stars in the sky. … They each value their own individuality."[54] They are divided into three groups—"encounters," "decisive factors for

[54] Tokyo Futari Story, https://www.futari-story.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/100episodes/ (last accessed May 11, 2023).

marriage," and "married life"—designating what the organizers considered key stages of relationship formation. In line with the understanding of diversification I discussed above, the stories foreground relationships whose uniqueness stems from how they reconfigure ideals of conventional marriage and household. For example, a vignette titled "A wife raised by her husband" describes a woman so unskilled at cleaning and housework that her husband sought the counsel of others before proposing to her. Traditional gender expectations are inverted not only with respect to household chores, but also in the way the husband in this case assumes responsibility for the elements of the marital bargain traditionally shouldered by the housewife: (motherly) care, hygiene, and education. The author confesses "I learned how to clean from my husband who tidies up silently day after day. I feel as if I am a child being raised by my husband."[55] Other featured examples include relationships with significant age difference, different national backgrounds, or where the woman performed a so-called "reverse proposal" (*gyaku-puropōzu*) or "reverse pickup" (*gyaku-nan*). By being presented as novel and unusual, such arrangements reveal the taken-for-granted expectations embedded in normative couplehood.

Significantly, the contest's objectives were expressly didactic. When the director of Tokyo Futari Office first announced the contest, he said its purpose was to "show people there are different styles [of marriage] so they can try to simulate them" (*shimyurēto wo shite miru*). Similarly, as one juror explains on the website, more forthright feminine behavior "is very Tokyo-like; (…) representative of our times and extremely valuable. I hope that not only those in Tokyo, but also those in other parts of the country will use these stories as hints for their own

[55] Tokyo Futari Story, https://www.futari-story.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/100episodes/modal/modal_115.html (last accessed May 11, 2023).

marriages."[56] Another significant aspect of these vignettes is that most revolve around leisure and, to a lesser degree, domesticity. They present consumption activities such as international and domestic travel, eating out, and a more egalitarian division of labor as the keys to a fulfilling relationship. Since these stories are showcased as representing Tokyoites' authentic lived experiences and intended as cultural templates for modern couples, they have the potential to reinforce a particular vision of marriage. Such "national standards" promote ostensibly progressive ideas while excluding intimate arrangements that do not enjoy equal recognition and legitimacy as middle-class, opposite-sex, monogamous marriage. They also serve as a subtle but potent reminder about citizenship attained through consumer activities associated with the nuclear family.

While such initiatives seek to render marriage a product appealing to a broad consumer base, marriage-hunting professionals invest similar energies in portraying singlehood as undesirable. They focus on dismantling associations of singlehood with freedom, lack of responsibility, and spending discretionary income on individual pleasures. During a seminar for prospective marriage-hunters at the popular marriage agency "Marry Me," the speaker conjured the following vision of singlehood after forty: "You think 'I want to go to Hakone! [a hot spring resort],' but you don't have anyone to go with you. Everyone else goes with their family, so you cannot invite them. Once you marry, you do such things with your family." According to the speaker, at a certain life stage, travel can no longer be enjoyed with friends or alone. Instead, it requires the company of one's spouse and, ideally, a nuclear family.

The association of married life with consumption does not end with leisure alone. The speaker continued to malign the single lifestyle by weaving together moralized conceptions of

[56] Tokyo Futari Story, https://www.futari-story.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/100episodes/report.html (last accessed May 11, 2023).

domestic consumption with tropes of feminine responsibility for household finances, savings, and thrift:

> If you think about it, the cost of food is pretty much the same whether you're single or a couple. Because you need to buy the same amount. And you certainly want to use up what you buy. But what are you going to do with a cabbage [as a single person]? You'll eat half, and the second half will go off in your fridge when you store it for a month. Food is expensive in Japan and its cost, especially of vegetables, has only been going up. You'll buy potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers to make a meal and it will end up costing you a fortune. But if you prepare the same amount for yourself or as a couple, the cost won't change that much. So, you can save money if you get married.

This passage echoes important aspects of the traditional female homemaker ideal. As numerous scholars have shown, throughout the twentieth century, housewives have been enlisted in nationally minded campaigns ranging from savings and economic frugality (Garon 1997) to preparing healthy, nutritious meals (Takeda 2008). Here, the speaker invokes these tropes while reminding the audience of the moral responsibility to avoid waste. Piecing together images of recreation and domestic consumption, the implication is that remaining single is not simply lonely and forlorn, but also wasteful and morally reprehensible. To be the kind of moral actor the speaker envisions, one must be married.

Various market actors also strive to convince single men that marriage is a financially prudent decision and counter popular perceptions to the contrary.[57] Similar to the abovementioned nationally minded campaigns targeting housewives, these messages also enlist women in the task. For example, a women-focused online magazine of the financial journal *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, *Nikkei Style*, published an article relating how Misaki (26) convinced her boyfriend of three years, Shota (28, described as a "middle class salaryman") that marriage could

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[57] See, for example, an article "Why Single Men Believe in Marriage's Bad Cost Performance" by Kazuhisa Arakawa (2017), who writes about marriage and singlehood for *Toyo Keizai* (https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/156392). The article delineates several reasons why single men see marriage as detrimental to their finances and autonomy.

be “cost-effective.”[58] After attending a friend’s wedding, Misaki broached the possibility of marriage, but Shota was reluctant: “Recently, I've been seeing a lot of people on the internet saying that marriage is not cost-effective, a wedding also costs a lot of money. ... In fact, I sometimes think I might be better off staying single all my life…” In response, Misaki invited Shota to a financial planner who presented several simulations of their assets over their life course. The planner estimated, first, their net worth if each was to remain single, and then, if they were to marry. Although Shota earns a significantly higher salary, if his expensive bachelor lifestyle continues (Shota’s expenditures include concert tickets and frequent outings with friends), the planner warned that he would save less for retirement than Misaki, who diligently sets aside 10 to 20 percent of her paycheck each month. According to the financial planner, marrying would allow Shota and Misaki to save an additional USD 60,000 even if they have children, buy a house, and keep their other expenses constant. This convinces Shota that “marriage is not so bad” and he promises to “think about it constructively.” This anecdote relies on taken-for-granted assumptions about married life, such as joint purchase of a house and other big-ticket items. Significantly, it also rests on an entrenched notion of the default management of household finances as the (house)wives’ responsibility. The implication is that a married lifestyle necessitates more mature and morally superior types of expenditures oriented at sustaining the nuclear family. By contrast, spending associated with a single lifestyle, albeit pleasurable, is portrayed as trivial and less morally worthy.

From the market professionals’ perspective, marriage is an economically attractive arrangement and sound decision that tempers profligate spending while enhancing individuals’

[58] Kawasaki, Shinsuke/Money Research Institute. 2017. “60-million-yen difference over a lifetime. The real cost performance of marriage” https://style.nikkei.com/article/DGXMZO12825060T10C17A2000000/ (last accessed December 17, 2019).

ability to consume. Crucially, this is true for *both* women and men. Marriage is presumed to steer both to engage in responsible, measured spending on the household. Moreover, as the discourse celebrating diverse forms of marriage indicates, the institution can be made flexible, compatible with individualized needs and individualistic aspirations. Taken together, these notions depict marriage as a logical, rational decision for consumer-citizens, and a choice morally superior to staying single.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has documented how marriage-hunting professionals transform cultural ideals around marriage, family, and gender into market standards. Marriage-hunting organizations do not produce these criteria out of thin air. Instead, they draw on unequal ideals of marriageability that emanate from historical legacies of the marriage-hunting industry, longstanding attitudes that differentiate between categories of people, and broader social structures. Grounded in formal rationality and calculation, marriageability emerges as the moral and scientific ideal of normality. By linking these standards to state technologies of knowledge and quantification, the market implicitly connects the personal and the political.

The market standards I am describing here are not fixed and consequential to the same extent the rules, laws, or formal criteria are that sociologists typically focus on. At the same time, they are more concrete than the shared ideas, norms, values and other nebulous "stuff" that we call culture. Since these standards interface the state and the market, like official government standards (Timmermans and Prickett 2022) and economic classifications (Fourcade and Healy 2013), they engender relative cultural coherence and organize difference, producing different modes of social inclusion and exclusion. Such market-based cultural standards, to paraphrase

Sewell (2005, p. 56), hierarchize, encapsulate, exclude, hegemonize and marginalize practices and populations that diverge from the sanctioned ideal. In the chapters that follow, I demonstrate two important ways in which cultural standardization shapes the market: by scripting dating protocols in relation to different regimes of worth and by creating distinctions and hierarchies between and among men and women.

Chapter 4

Modalities of Mediation, Cultural Fluency, and Marriage-Hunting Scripts

On a gloomy February afternoon in Minato Mirai, Yokohama's central business district, I found myself in a corporate seminar room inside a glass-and-steel high rise office building that was home to several prominent tech companies. I was there to attend an informational seminar for prospective users of dating applications hosted by an organization called "Matching App University." In front of me were half a dozen sterile, white desks, upon each of which rested a notebook, a pen, and a bottle of water prepared for registered participants. The speaker, dressed in blue jeans and a casual button-down shirt, introduced himself as a 38-year-old dating app expert with a self-appointed pseudonym, Daniel (*Danieru*). His credentials included three years of experience using dating apps to pursue women in their twenties in addition to multiple interviews he had conducted with some fifty users as a part of his job at Matching App University. Daniel briefly acknowledged that the instances of scams and harassment on apps that frequently make news headlines are reasons for concern and caution. Nonetheless, he was convinced about the technological potential of dating and relationship applications which he characterized as the culmination of the "flow of history" (*jidai no nagare*). As he explained, in

the past people had initially relied on marriage interviews, then on introductions from friends and acquaintances, but today, the method of choice is smartphone applications.

Daniel's recipe for success was to find the right application, one "that fits your goals and individuality." He enumerated several goals that apps are suitable for: "marriage-hunting (*konkatsu*), love-hunting (*koikatsu*), looking for friends (*tomodachi sagashi*), or hook ups (*yarimoku*)." "Which application you choose differs with your goal," he contended. Daniel also described how dating apps differ in crucial areas in terms of users' social and demographic characteristics, such as age. Some apps, he explained, tend to attract more "culturally oriented, quiet women," whereas others draw "gaudy and loud *gyaru* (gal) types."[59] People gravitate towards apps where they feel "comfortable" and "at home" and avoid those where they feel "out of place." For beginners, he recommended using apps by large, well-known companies (which attract the greatest number of customers) and using several apps simultaneously (to identify those which attract users with desired characteristics). Daniel encouraged the audience to peruse a ranking developed by Matching App University which evaluates and scores over one hundred different dating applications available in Japan based on their "goal," "degree of seriousness," "costs" and other similar criteria.[60] During the remainder of the seminar, he detailed features of popular apps, the process from registering to meeting "in real life" (*riaru de*), the etiquette including communication rules for men and for women, and components of a high-quality dating app photograph (I discuss these later in this chapter).

As Daniel's presentation suggests, for many people who engage in marriage-hunting, selecting suitable services and associated protocols is scarcely self-evident or intuitive. Between

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[59] Gyaru are a feminine subculture associated with flashy aesthetics, see Miller (2006).

[60] The ranking can be accessed here: https://jsbs2012.jp/matchingapp/review/mami0016.html (last accessed May 13, 2023).

dating applications, online services, group dating events, matchmaking parties, and marriage agencies the sheer array of options can bewilder. These various services attract customers from different social backgrounds and with varying characteristics. Clients, moreover, use these services not only with the intention to marry, but also to look for other types of short- and long-term intimate relationships (in addition to purposes entirely unrelated to relationship formation). These diverse relational outcomes, in turn, correlate with various unevenly valued and recognized cultural ideals. Unstated rules and expectations and elusive dating protocols render the marriage-hunting process highly uncertain. Many clients lack prior romantic experiences to draw on. How, then, do individuals navigate these complex, ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory cultural codes when looking for a partner? And what is the role of marriage market intermediaries in facilitating their searches?

I focus in this chapter on the cultural guidance given by market intermediaries, or actors who serve as conduits between individuals pursuing intimate connections through the marriage-hunting industry. The different ways in which intermediaries guide searches are consequential for how people engage in partner-seeking and understand their experiences. I identify three modalities of mediation which augment and complement participants' cultural fluency to different degrees. By cultural fluency, I mean the knowledge and command of romantic and sexual scripts that enables individual enactment in ways that remain intelligible while being experienced as authentic and natural.[61] In short: Intensive mediation substitutes clients' cultural fluency, moderate mediation enhances it, while weak cultural mediation compels individuals to mobilize their own cultural fluency. Within the marriage-hunting market, clients with high cultural competence may seamlessly navigate romantic encounters, while those with limited

[61] In this respect, cultural fluency differs from Bourdieusian (1987) habitus which emphasizes practical knowledge and Fligstein's social skill which he defines as an "ability to induce cooperation in others" (2001, p. 105)

fluency may require extensive assistance to navigate the same scripts. Weak, moderate, and intensive mediation are valued differently based on their semblance to predominant relationship ideals—love marriage, which is associated with individualism, free choice, and modernity and arranged marriage, which connotes conformity, tradition, and control (see Chapter 2). I demonstrate how the interplay between cultural fluency and modality of mediation produces a tiered structure within the marriage-hunting market and how this organization dovetails with broader social hierarchies of desirability and worth.

INTIMATE SCRIPTS AND BROKERS

Scholars studying diverse social interactions—from sexual encounters to market transactions—have long identified their scripted nature (Goffman 1959; Simon and Gagnon 1986; 2003; Takeyama 2016; Wherry 2012). To successfully carry out interactions, participants need to assemble and agree upon implicit rules of conduct. Simon and Gagnon (1986, pp. 98-100), who focused on sexual scripts specifically, famously distinguish their three constitutive layers: macro-level cultural scenarios and collective representations, micro-level enactment of these scenarios in specific contexts, and the ways in which individuals make sense of and manage their desires. Although slippages and incongruencies exist between these interwoven layers, in most situations individuals resolve them in face-to-face interactions through "improvisation and tinkering" (Simon and Gagnon 1986, p. 99).

Nevertheless, in interactions where intimate and monetary exchanges combine, individual improvisation may not suffice. Since these relations intertwine what are commonly assumed to be separate and oppositional spheres, navigating them is a particularly delicate task. The ambiguity and opacity of underlying rules, as well as slippages and misapprehensions, can lead

to what economic sociologists term “relational mismatches” or disjunctions between individual understandings and appropriate conduct, including media of exchange (Altomonte 2020; Bandelj 2020; Mears 2015b). For example, in her study of the VIP party scene in New York City, Ashley Mears demonstrates how misunderstandings about gifts and money can seriously undermine or damage social bonds. When party promoters offered gifts and perks to models that they aimed to recruit, the women experienced it as friendships and defined participation in social events as leisure. However, when less experienced recruiters offered direct cash payments instead, it demoted the relationship to work and often led to women’s withdrawal from the party economy.

This chapter shows how intermediaries in the marriage-hunting market safeguard against such mismatches by influencing how individuals cobble together and choreograph their intimate scripts. The ways in which they shape intimate ties through both direct and indirect interventions is distinct from intermediaries in other intimate markets. For example, transnational marriage brokers (Constable 2003; Kim 2019; Yamaura 2020) and procurers (Bernstein 2007; Hoang 2015) facilitate production of desired bonds by subtly training their clients and/or workers in appropriate manners and conduct. So-called “pickup artists,” who emerged partly in response to perceptions of increased gender equality, expressly instruct heterosexual men in how to seduce modern, ‘liberated’ women (O’Neil 2018; Ward 2020). In addition to elucidating the rules of the game, intermediaries also brand social spaces in which clients interact to achieve desired effects. Gay club managers in New York City, for example, organize dedicated “theme nights” to increase patronage of specific clientele (Green 2008). Providing the means of symbolic production and mise-en-scène (Alexander 2004) for specific interactions renders brokerage inconspicuous. It allows participants to form ties resembling relationships entered on the basis of

"the organic roots of overlapping erotic habitus" (Green 2008, p. 45), that is, those that appear unscripted and natural.

Recent research on other types of markets, including real estate, fertility and adoption services, or healthcare, helps to further flesh out how the work of market intermediaries produces the conditions of possibility for different social relationships to form. In this view, market intermediaries combine the roles of sellers, matchmakers, consultants, and evaluators (Bessy and Chauvin 2013) and "bring the clients in line with the market" (Benites-Gambirazio 2020, p. 154) by acculturating them to tacit rules, scripts, and hierarchies. For example, real estate brokers mobilize class- and racially inflected neighborhood reputations to shape perceptions of property value and attract some clients while discouraging others (Besbris and Korver-Glenn 2023). Egg and sperm banks, too, leverage gendered and racialized logics of desirability. They recruit "sellable" donors with socially valued characteristics, such as physical attractiveness and high education levels, to advertise their "high-quality gametes" (Almeling 2011). Pricing can signal clients' social standing and serve to attract customers of corresponding social strata from those who shop around for different services (Brown 2022). In marketplaces like the health insurance market in the United States, where rules are unclear and choices abundant, market representatives assist individuals in researching and evaluating options and specify how to attain the goal of purchasing insurance (Chen 2020, pp. 772-775). In other words, they facilitate decision-making and limit possible courses of action, shaping clients' trajectories and interactions within markets.

Bridging and augmenting these areas of research, this chapter shows how market intermediaries help clients to navigate marriage-hunting scripts by channeling different relational ideals and cultural scenarios, enunciating desired outcomes, coordinating clients' interactions,

and influencing their sensemaking. I move beyond the focus on constitutive elements of mediation and instead analyze how the interplay between modalities of mediation and clients' cultural fluency organizes the market. In the pages that follow, I analyze marriage-hunting services relying on intensive, moderate, and weak mediation, respectively. All of these services enunciate relationship formation as the desired outcome. However, the definitions of that goal and suggested methods of attaining it vary substantially. These modalities of mediation also make the scripted and transactional basis of intimate relationships evident to different degrees. In intensive mediation, marriage is designated as the sole legitimate outcome and intermediaries structure the entire courtship process. In moderate mediation, intermediaries set an expectation for committed, marriage-oriented relationships and baseline protocols. In weak mediation, intermediaries sanction a wide range of intimate relationships and recede to the background, compelling clients to mobilize their cultural fluency. As such, within the marriage-hunting market, despite offering less efficient searches, the most affordable services characterized by weak mediation are more socially valued due to their correspondence to the coveted ideal of an unpremeditated encounter. By contrast, the most efficient and expensive services with intensive mediation approximate the ideal of arranged marriage and are less socially valued as a result.

MODALITIES OF CULTURAL MEDIATION

Intensive Mediation: Substituting clients' cultural fluency

In intensive mediation market intermediaries expressly delimit the purpose of marriage-hunting to a singular goal: marriage. This desired outcome is proclaimed in various manners, including advertising and pricing. Exclusive focus on matrimony determines how intermediaries structure

their services and eliminates ambiguity from the courtship process: since all clients are presumed to pursue marriage, their interactions are coordinated accordingly.

In promotional materials, this narrowly defined goal works as a selling point. Figure 4.1 shows a poster advertising a marriage agency with two slogans: “We won’t let it end with just an encounter: What Bridal aims for is marriage” and “To marriage, directly/straightforwardly.” In addition to specifying the goal of marriage-hunting, the agency implicitly distinguishes its services from less interventionist modalities of mediation, dismissing an open-ended approach to courtship as immature or unserious. Marketing materials also frequently feature “marriage rates,” defined as the proportion of clients who get engaged through these services. Services relying on intensive mediation (marriage agencies, dating applications, and online services) advertise marriage rates exceeding 60-70 percent and promise engagement within 3-6 months of enrollment. By providing quantified outcomes and measures of efficiency, intermediaries elucidate goals while shaping clients’ expectations. Similar to the techniques of quantification discussed in Chapter 3, numbers and ratios remind clients about marketized spouse-seeking as a rational, methodical pursuit whose outcomes can be estimated with considerable precision.

Figure 4.1 A poster advertising Bridal, a marriage agency, based in Shinjuku, Tokyo. The horizontal script reads: “We won’t let it end with just an encounter: What Bridal aims for is marriage” and the vertical script adds “To marriage, directly/straightforwardly.” Photo: Anna Woźny, November 1, 2019.

Interventions by market intermediaries accordingly extend throughout the entire courtship process. Although the particulars of services vary by company, they are organized according to a relatively standard protocol: Typically, companies offer a free introductory consultation during which they explain subsequent steps and collect basic information about the clients and their “criteria” for a marriage partner, such as age, height, or income. Even at this preliminary step, a number of gendered and classed assumptions embedded in this mediation tier quickly become clear. For example, Mariko (37, married) described asking whether the annual salary she wished her potential spouse to have was too high (she did not disclose the exact

amount in the interview). The staff member politely responded that her expectations were "understandable given your upbringing and your family environment, [but] if I were you, I'd probably set [the income] to this and that and I wouldn't be too selective given your age, our membership pool, things like that." As such, even before potential clients pay for the services, intermediaries have already begun to actively compel them to adjust their expectations in line with prevailing market standards.

The standardized courtship process is punctuated by regular payments which signal both clients' financial standing and their goal-orientedness. To enroll, clients first sign a formal contract and furnish enrollment fees, which average several hundred dollars (more prestigious agencies charge $2,500 and more). Tellingly, for women under thirty entry fees are often discounted or waived. Services with intensive mediation then conduct background checks based on required documents (typically, a copy of the family registry to validate prospective client's single status and employment).[62] Next, clients select a monthly "plan" or "course" costing between $30-$200. Pricier plans purchase more introductions and additional customer support. Company representatives, who call themselves "counselors," "advisors," or "concierges," then help clients craft their "profiles" which display key information such as age, educational background, income, prior marriages and children, as well as a stylized photograph and a short self-introduction. Optional services that promise to enhance one's marriageability are also on offer: for $80-150 clients can purchase styling advice, a mock date with a relationship coach, or professional photographs (see Figure 4.2). For an additional $550 one well-established agency

[62] This practice is reminiscent of traditional matchmakers I described in Chapter 1 who verified crucial information around candidates' marriageability. As was historically the case, participation of individuals with 'questionable' status is discouraged.

even provides “DNA Matching” whereby genetic profiles obtained from clients’ saliva samples are used to match them with their “destined person.”[63]

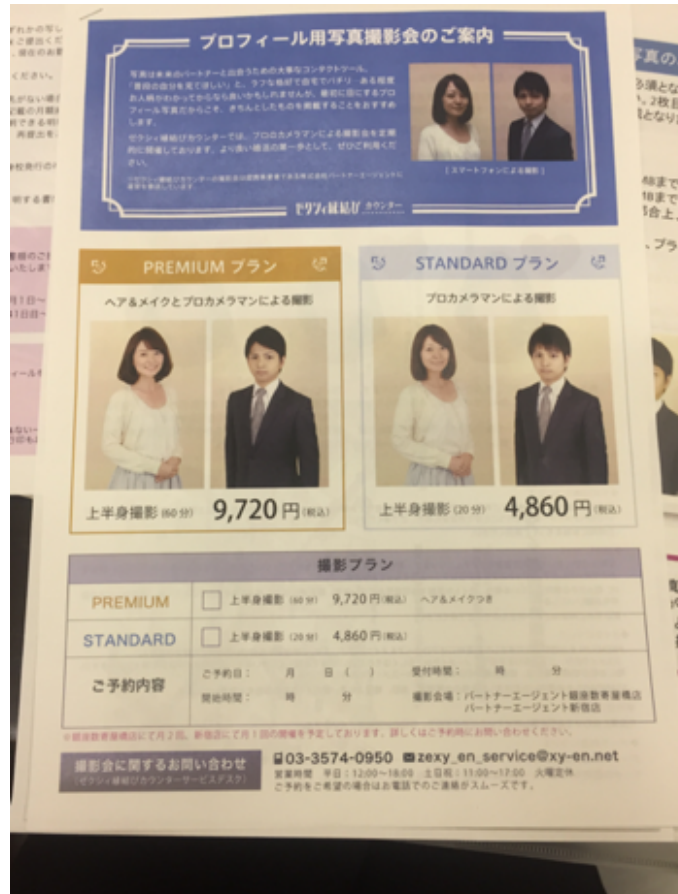

Figure 4.2 Pamphlet from Zexy Enmusubi showing pricing and comparing profile photographs taken with a smartphone camera (top right), those taken by a professional photographer during a 20-minute-long session included in the “Standard Plan” (middle right) and those taken by a professional photographer during a 60-minute-long session included in the “Premium Plan” (middle left) with hair and makeup professionally done. Photo: Anna Woźny, June 21, 2018.

When assisting clients in crafting their profiles, intermediaries make explicit references to gender- and class-specific notions of marriageability. For example, they can suggest more

[63] See https://www.nozze.com, last accessed May 18, 2023.

masculine or feminine language or hobbies with broad appeal.[64] Clearly amused, Mariko described how her advisor edited her profile. Seeing 'ramen' listed as her favorite food "the staff member said [Mariko assumed a strict tone of voice imitating the staff member] 'this is not a good idea, a woman should never write ramen, even if you like it. What about pasta? [laughs]" At the time Mariko was learning to play drums and listed it as her hobby. The counselor emphatically suggested not putting it on her profile and asked what other instruments she played. When Mariko said she used to play piano as a child the counselor said, "Now *that* sounds good." Finally, Mariko wrote she played volleyball throughout high school and college. To that, "the agent asked, 'What about yoga?' and I was like, 'I don't do yoga' and they said 'Oh, okay, well volleyball is not so bad.'" As this interaction reveals, intermediaries rely on gendered and classed connotations of different activities to increase perceptions of clients' attractiveness. Pasta, yoga, and piano can enhance perceptions of femininity. Mariko summed it up to me as follows: "we have ideas about what is favorable, what is permissible and what is not."

Intermediaries deliberately shape the remainder of clients' courtship in a similar manner. After clients enroll, company representatives assist in initial communication, coordinate meetings with new candidates and their frequency. Typically, during an introductory meeting called *omiai* (a formal marriage interview, as I described in Chapter 2), clients are forbidden from disclosing personal details. Instead, they relay their first impressions to the intermediary. If two clients wish to meet again, they enter a period called "trial association," during which the intermediary arranges a series of subsequent rendezvous, but the clients are still allowed to see other candidates. Intermediaries also negotiate the ensuing stages — the "serious association"

[64] Certain speech patterns and grammatical constructions in Japanese are associated with feminine and masculine performances. As one example, the term referring to "I/me" can take the form of neutral 'wata(ku)shi', feminine 'atashi', or masculine 'ore' and 'boku.'

phase, when clients become exclusive, and finally engagement.[65] One counselor said they can relay to the man his bride-to-be's dream proposal scenario, such that he can surprise his partner. For clients who do not wish to proceed, intermediaries mediate the breakup. Upon finding an amenable partner, clients pay a "marriage fee" that ranges from several hundred to several thousand dollars. Taken together, total expenditures in this tier can exceed thousands of dollars. Emiko (49, employee at a publishing company), who enrolled in two different agencies before meeting her husband in her mid-forties, estimated spending over $10,000 on marriage-hunting this way.

These different procedures serve as a type of "clarification strategies" (Lainer-Vos 2013); they remove ambiguity from the courtship process, increase trustworthiness and promise enhanced security. Since these services foreground what they call clients' "quality" and "high status," customers select partners primarily based on (expressly stated and verified) socioeconomic criteria. Aya (31) and Kentaro (33) who met through an online marriage agency said they decided to marry within one month of knowing each other because they were certain about each other's intentions and background. In addition to indexing clients' social standing, my interviewees generally regarded the high costs of services as an indication of the determination to marry. As this suggests, whereas monetary transactions are not the primary objective for participation in this market, they are important vehicles for meaning making.

The explicit emphasis on socioeconomic criteria and efficiency, however, is at odds with the coveted cultural scenario of an unscripted, spontaneous encounter based on affect and physical attraction. Maya, whose professed marital ideal was a relationship based on affect,

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[65] Sometimes they offer services beyond engagement, with wedding planning, couples therapy, or life insurance services.

recounted an unpleasant confrontation with her counselor. When she hesitated to respond to a marriage proposal from a man she had been seeing for six months the counselor berated her for her indecisiveness and "selfishness." Eventually, Maya felt so ashamed that she quit the agency. As she said:

> In these kinds of places, everything happens very quickly. ... Normally, you might date for like 2-3 years and then decide when to marry, but these places are different. Everything is about speed. … [He] told me I need to think about the other person more. Because I was wasting his time, too.

In Maya's account, the logic of efficiency and rationality in intensive mediation collides with the less predictable and controllable ethos of love relationships. As one counselor remarked: "In love marriages, wedding is the goal; in arranged marriages, wedding is the start." From this perspective, intensive mediation represents another facet of rationalization and standardization at work in the marriage-hunting market.

Due to this semblance to traditional arranged marriage, my interviewees generally regarded intensive mediation as an option of last resort. Tomo (40, IT specialist, married) commented on its inflexibility and predetermined nature: "This is just my image but as a system, I think there are too many things that are regulated. It takes a long time to actually meet people and during this time you always have to pay them." Relatedly, these services were reputed to attract less conventionally attractive clients. According to Fusako, (42, housewife) clients tended to have "at least one negative trait" such as poor communication skills or an illness. Ken (38, lecturer) acknowledged this viewpoint while distancing himself personally from it:

> I'm sorry to say, but in my mind, they are fat old men. And it costs so much money – my friend paid like $400 just to enroll. I think I'm still not that overweight, and I'm still under forty, I will find someone to marry if I want to. I want to meet someone naturally, like while doing an activity together.

As this indicates, services relying on intensive mediation exist in stark opposition to the coveted image of a "natural," unorchestrated romantic encounter. While these services' emphasis on efficiency and security can be appealing, those who think themselves sufficiently desirable to meet partners elsewhere are unlikely to use them.

Moderate Mediation: Enhancing Individual Cultural Fluency

Services that provide moderate mediation generally operate under the assumption that they ought to eventuate in marriage or, at the least, committed, marriage-oriented relationships. As such, they pronounce *matching* (as opposed to marriage or merely meeting someone) as an explicit goal. Intermediaries structure services in ways that enhance clients' cultural fluency such that they can pursue desirable relationships.

In this tier, too, service providers promote their efficacy and suggest favorable outcomes through a variety of numerical ratios and quantified measures of success. Many, for instance, publicize their "coupling rates," defined as the proportion of clients who match. During the events I attended that relied on moderate mediation, advertised matching rates oscillated between 40 and 70 percent. Other intermediaries, such as the company "New York Style Dating," instead showcases "contact information exchange rates," which, at 71 percent, positioned the company as "Number 1 in the industry."[66] Rather than factual data on matching outcomes, I suggest interpreting these measures as organizational "displays of confidence" (Meyer and Rowan 1977) indicating outcomes of interest. As this shows, the enunciated goal is not marriage, but rather forging a connection strong enough that it can eventuate in marriage.

[66] *New York Style Dating*, 2020. https://www.nysd.jp March 8, 2021 access.

Importantly, while moderate mediation services do presume clients' "marriage orientation," in contrast to intensive mediation, they do not disregard the importance of affect in the match. Figures 4.3 and 4.4 show advisements for online matchmaking services by Zexy Enmusubi, one of the most prominent organizations in this space. The advertisement in figure 4.3 features a smiling, casually dressed couple strolling through a shopping district in Tokyo (reminiscent of the consuming couple ideal discussed in the previous chapters). The accompanying slogan loudly proclaims: "Let's [fall in] love!" in large letters. The small, pink and aquamarine advertisement above the subway door window shown in figure 4.4 displays a message next to images of a desktop computer and a smartphone (suggesting the convenience of using the service from both home and outside). It reads: "*Zexy Enmusubi* – a matching service born from *Zexy*." The semantics are significant: *Zexy* is a well-known bridal magazine, while *en-musubi* is an idiomatic expression referring to marriage understood in more spiritual, divine terms.[67] The advertisement was a part of a larger campaign launched by the company in 2018. It depicts the couple enjoying both leisure and everyday activities together in photos and videos that look as though filmed on a smartphone camera: they travel and visit hot springs, share a bed, clean, eat meals and brush teeth side by side.[68] The advertisement makes evident that the relationship is serious and marriage-oriented (the couple even appears to cohabit) while emphasizing individual fulfillment, love, and intimacy.

[67] *Enumsubi* also means a "love knot" and is the name of a deity responsible for love and relationships. Hence, many marriage-hunting services use it in their names.

[68] Clips from the campaign can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sc9IWKh1QDI; and information about the campaign: https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000003.000019899.html, last accessed May 16, 2023.

Figure 4.3 Advertisement for matchmaking services of Zexy Enmusubi on the door of a subway train. The script reads: “Let’s [fall in, lit. “do”] love!” The term used in the phrase refers specifically to romantic love (*ai*) – see Chapter 2 on distinctions between different terminology for love. Photo: Anna Woźny, May 8, 2018.

Figure 4.4 Advertisements for matchmaking services of Zexy Enmusubi on the door of a subway train. Photo: Anna Woźny, May 8, 2018.

Pricing additionally reinforces this cultural framing. For participation in an in-person event or subscription to an online dating service or an application women need to pay $30-50 and men $50-100 on average. Such monetary valuation nominally ensures that attendees are sufficiently "serious about marriage" (per Naito-san, an event organizer) while avoiding giving an impression of a purely transactional model characteristic of intensive mediation. These prices also signal trustworthiness of the services. For example, both in-person events and dating applications relying on moderate mediation require identification documents. Occasionally, when services feature so-called "Stable men" or "Elite men" (defined as full-time employees of large companies or public servants with annual salaries exceeding 50-60 thousand USD, see Chapter 5) proof of employment and income is also expected, although during the events I attended these requirements were enforced less regularly. These signals foreground markers of middle-class status as a precondition for marriage-hunting (and marriage) but are not an overt gatekeeping mechanism to the same extent that background checks and hefty fees are in intensive mediation.

Moderate mediation relies on relatively clear instructions regarding appropriate conduct. For example, during "marriage-hunting parties" (also called "coupling parties" and resembling North American speed-dating) organizers initially detail the agenda for the event and specify the time allocated for each activity. Interactions also proceed through several predetermined activities: the "self-introduction game" during which men circulate around the venue and converse with women, the "free time" phase during which clients approach each other to chat informally and assess mutual interest, and the "coupling" ritual when intermediaries compute and formally announce the matches made. Participants also receive multiple prompts to utilize a self-introduction sheet, as well as "impression cards" and "appeal cards" which organizers

collect mid-event to convey to participants who took a liking to them, “message cards” for transmitting short messages, and “coupling cards” used to compute eventual matches. Such structuring increases the predictability of interactions. For example, because the self-introduction sheet includes boxes for income and occupation participants ask about those details during their interactions. However, to some extent this forecloses opportunities for more socially valued spontaneous exchanges. Indeed, one interviewee likened the repetitiveness of interactions at a marriage-hunting party to “conveyor belt sushi.”

In line with this degree of structuring, the services are choreographed such that expectations around gender are made apparent but not enforced. Goto-san, whom I assisted on numerous occasions in organizing his matchmaking events, perfected the art of making male participants appear to be in charge. One of his signature events was a “Tokyo Art Date,” a 2.5 hour-long exploration of museums located in the famous Ueno Park. At the beginning participants arrived in front of the National Museum of Western Art and registered with Goto-san. After introducing himself and describing the event, Goto-san asked participants to line up in two rows, men on the left, women on the right. He then instructed the attendees that the person immediately opposite them in the row would be their partner for the next 20 minutes. He asked the participants to introduce themselves to each other within each pairing – men first, women second. He then handed out two museum tickets to each man such that they could “invite” their partners on a short, date-like interaction. At the end of each event Goto-san encouraged participants to exchange contact information by hollering “Men first please!” As this suggests, the courtship rules and norms that Goto-san subscribes to tended to be based on differing (oppositional and complementary) gender ideals which assume men’s active and women’s passive stance. As he told me, he wants men to know “they should lead” in ways that are

respectful of their partners. Goto-san's services were not an exception in this regard. All in-person events I observed were structured such that men could symbolically assume the active role. For example, during marriage-hunting parties venues were arranged such that women sat on the outer perimeter and never changed their locations, whereas men rotated around positions on the inside (Figure 4.5). Both embodied practices and spatial arrangements, then, that reminded participants about appropriate behavior moored in entrenched gender norms.

Figure 4.5 Inside a venue hosting marriage-hunting parties. During the event women are seated on sofas on the outer circle and men sit on the chairs in the inner circle. Note the pink- and blue-colored self-introduction sheets for women and men, respectively. Photo: Anna Woźny, July 6, 2018.

In online services, too, organizers sought balance between scriptedness and unscriptedness by providing backstage instructions guiding appropriate conduct and self-

presentation. In his presentation, Daniel, the speaker from “Matching App University,” described the general protocol for using dating applications: (1) registration, (2) sending ‘likes’ (men only, although Daniel said it was acceptable for women as well), (3) matching, (4) payment of potential fees (usage is free of charge until matching), exchanging messages, (5) agreeing to meet, and (6) exchanging contact information on Line (a popular social media and message application). He also detailed the parameters of a good dating application photograph which are worth recounting in full. According to Daniel, the photograph amounted to “90 percent of your success on dating apps, so you should put a lot of effort into it.” First, a good photograph makes one look attractive, but without flaunting good features. On his smartphone, Daniel demonstrated the photograph he used on his dating profile: “See? This is a good picture, I look good, but I don’t look like an entirely different person (*betsujin*).” Second, the atmosphere must seem “natural.” To that end Daniel recommended that someone else takes the photograph. It could be a professional specializing in dating app photos, but the final product must not appear posed and prearranged. Continuing with the example of his own photo, Daniel called attention to his stance and silhouette. Leaning nonchalantly against a white brick wall in a white untucked linen shirt, he was reading something on his smartphone, facing away from the camera but without concealing his face. He recommended a similar position, stating that facing the camera and direct eye-contact appear overconfident and lewd. Moreover, “Unless you’re a woman who is good at taking selfies for Instagram,” selfies are a no-go. For men, “unless you’re super handsome (*mechakucha hansamu*)” a selfie will make you seem “cold and serious,” “narcissistic” or imply you have no friends. Daniel was staunchly against using driver’s license photos in which “everyone looks like a criminal” and photographs used in arranged marriage negotiations (see figure 4.2). He repeatedly urged the participants to include at least one photograph, “even if you

think you're unattractive (*busaiku*) or have some insecurities." Additional photos on a profile can include food or cute animals, which can then become a topic of conversation.

Daniel's description uncovers the myriad tacit rules around appropriate online self-presentation. The themes embedded in his description include cleanliness and modest appearance. They echo the historical criteria of marriageability discussed in Chapter 2. As such, the ways he suggests portraying oneself fit in between the rigid but respectable image of an arranged marriage profile and the spontaneous but potentially promiscuous image of casual dating. Both men and women, albeit based on different norms and expectations, need to calibrate how they visualize their personas since different pictorial elements convey interest in different intimate relationships.

Since in this tier participants' credibility is not established to the degree it is in intensive mediation, my interviewees gave numerous examples of signaling sincerity during interactions. Akiko (33, nurse), who met her husband on a dating app, recalled feeling less nervous about meeting him for the first time when he chose a nice and well-lit Italian restaurant. She also described how upon seeing her he immediately introduced himself in a formal manner – using honorific language and with his official business card that displayed a logo of, and his position in, a large and well-known Japanese bank. [69] The formal manner in which he introduced himself showcased his cultural fluency and helped alleviate Akiko's anxiety about her interlocutor and his intentions. Crucially, the elements of his self-presentation that buttressed his trustworthiness simultaneously served as evidence of his high status and marriageability.

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[69] Business cards (*meishi*), exchanged as a part of self-introduction, are an inextricable part of Japanese business culture and more formal relationships. Proper etiquette rules surrounding their exchange, such as the order of handing (from the most senior person), bowing, and receiving (always with both hands) are considered important indicators of one's manners.

Taken together, the balance between affective and unorchestrated dimensions on the one hand, and scriptedness and predictability of outcomes on the other places moderate mediation in the middle of the spectrum of social desirability. Emiko (29, daycare employee), for example, said she did not like the one-on-one interactional format of marriage-hunting parties: "It might be good for those who aren't able to talk to people easily, but I can talk to people that I'm interested in relatively easily. If you can do this, I think it is better to go to a bigger party." Emiko's cultural fluency allowed her to take advantage of different types of events. For some, meeting a partner in a more efficient way was appealing. As Shunji (36, manager in a marketing company), who met his wife through the Zexy dating service told me: "I think I could've still met someone in real life or through *gōkon* [group date between friends or coworkers], but when my friend introduced the Zexy app to me I thought it was more efficient." As this quote reveals, meeting outside of the marriage-hunting market remains the preferred ideal. However, the ability to experience the thrills of emotional attachment without wasting time on unsuccessful dates renders services with moderate mediation appealing to professionals like Shunji.

Weak Mediation: Mobilizing Individual Cultural Fluency

A weak modality of mediation renders the work of market intermediaries understated and hidden in plain sight. It compels clients to mobilize their own cultural fluency as they assemble interactional scripts and determine relationship outcomes. As such, with intermediaries receding into the background, interactions between clients tend to appear relatively unpremeditated, resembling romantic encounters outside of the marriage-hunting market.

In this tier, rules and goals are rarely expressly stated. Instead, companies promote their services as catering to broad audiences and suggest a broad range of relationships that clients can

enter while keeping within the bounds of respectability. For example, Figure 4.6 shows billboards with advertisements for the well-known dating application, “Tinder.” The billboards make no mention of the casual sexual encounters that Tinder tends to be associated with, only the bright red background and the flame in the company’s logo hint at that possibility. Instead, the advertisements emphasize formation of new social ties as well as intimacy generated through a sense of connection and self-disclosure. PartyParty, another company that organizes casual dating parties called *machikon* explains on their website: “A machikon is basically a place where you can meet a wide variety of people from the opposite sex that you cannot meet in your daily life.”[70] These deliberately open-ended descriptions broaden the interpretive possibilities of ties that form through the services characterized by weak mediation. When I asked Chihiro (28, office assistant) if many people meet boyfriends or girlfriends at machikon she responded: “It happens, but I don't know how frequently (…) It doesn't have the image of being a relationship starter.”

[70] See PartyParty 2020, https://www.partyparty.jp/user_contents/5/242, retrieved January 11, 2021.

Figure 4.6 Billboards advertising Tinder on a building in Shinjuku, Tokyo. The central red billboard reads: “There are many things you can't say to any of your friends. This is an app for meeting someone you can open yourself up to.” A partly hidden companion billboard on the right reads: “The world can be changed. Just by changing the people you are with. An app to meet the world you don't even know.” Photo: Anna Woźny, October 13, 2019.

Such services also tend to be free or very affordable. Clients usually pay a small one-off fee (in the case of in-person events) or subscription (in the case of dating apps) ranging from $5-50. Reflecting prevailing gender asymmetries, many companies allow women to participate free of charge. As a result, anyone can use these services and many companies strive to repel negative associations with various “grifters” who purportedly take advantage of users. My interviewees frequently expressed worries about financial scammers, people recruiting to religious organizations, individuals seeking extramarital affairs, and young women and men looking for

"sugar daddies" and "sugar mamas" (*papakatsu* and *mamakatsu*). Here, the fee may indicate clients are nominally interested in romantic relationships. As Emiko told me: "I thought cheaper, the better, but at the same time I was also worried that if it's too cheap the members won't be too serious about finding someone."

Moreover, although these services often state users' desired characteristics, such as age range or hobby, unlike in intensive and moderate mediation services, they are not enforced. Makoto (28, engineer, in a relationship) confessed he attended an outdoor dating event for mountaineering enthusiasts despite not being an ardent hiker. On the day of the event he wore a t-shirt which stated that he climbed Mount Fuji even though he had never ascended the famous volcano. Still, he recalled it served as a unique conversation starter, and he made several acquaintances (both women and men). Taken together, broad accessibility means that users need to determine on their own whether they are dealing with trustworthy partners.

Diffuse goals and less specified rules characteristic of weak mediation mean that clients indeed use these services for a variety of purposes. Jun (32, consultant, in a relationship) described how he unintentionally met his girlfriend on Tinder. He purchased the premium version which allowed him to change his location settings and peruse user profiles in different locations around the world. He described it as a "fun experiment" and a way to "figure out how popular I am with women." After minimal success in other countries, Jun ended up matching with multiple women in Thailand, which he explained: "I've always been told that I look more Thai than Japanese." Eventually, one of these connections morphed into a committed relationship. Despite the inconveniences of long-distance romance, Jun was satisfied with the arrangement–he could focus on work and contended that sporadic trips to South-East Asia were more cost-efficient than seeing someone on a regular basis in Tokyo (Jun estimated a date in

Tokyo would cost him $100-250 every week whereas a roundtrip airfare to Bangkok can be purchased for under $1,000). This calculus reminds us of the entrenched expectations around gender, romance, and finance with men expected to shoulder the majority of the costs of going out. Even for the relatively well-to-do men like Jun, this can become a liability.

Some interviewees leveraged the open-endedness of weak mediation to assert their initial disinterestedness in relationships or their incidental nature. Saori (33, teacher) who met her husband at *machikon* commented "Are you surprised to hear it? I was really surprised myself. I thought that there could be different encounters at machikon, but I didn't think I'd meet someone I'd marry." Earlier in the interview, Saori told me she was an avid consumer of romance literature and women's magazines because, as she put it, "I love [the idea of] love" (*ren'ai ga daisuki*). Due to these media influences, her ideal was to meet someone while traveling and to experience "love at first sight." Although meeting her husband at an organized dating activity departed from that coveted encounter scenario, it was more proximate to it than more interventionist marriage-hunting services. Saori compared it to meeting someone at a party. Emiko, cited above, described how she stopped attending marriage-hunting parties representative of moderate mediation because she disliked their artificial and constraining format. With her cultural fluency and ease of interaction she preferred larger and less coordinated dating events. As she said, "I'm sure there are interesting people with high salaries and great educational backgrounds, but it just wasn't for me. … I realized that having fun is more important." As these data suggest, weak mediation allows participants to navigate the marriage-hunting market in ways that appear unintentional, unscripted, and spontaneous and that they experience as enjoyable.

This appearance of effortless interactions resembling "organic" encounters requires clients to be well-versed in implicit rules. Indeed, when I asked Yuriko (40, single) what kind of people attend machikon events she responded, "people who are already fashionable to begin with, don't really have to do much." Other interviewees emphasized the excellent communication skills necessary to succeed. Such descriptors, in essence, refer to clients' high level of cultural fluency. Mere familiarity with rules of the marriage-hunting market and relational scripts is insufficient; one must be able to enact them effortlessly, in ways that are experienced as authentic and natural.

This competency is especially important when inquiring about sensitive topics, such as a partner's socioeconomic status. Although organizers ask participants to provide basic information on their profiles or self-introduction sheets, since marriage is not the sole legitimate outcome in this tier, clients rarely need to answer questions about their occupation, income, or marital and family background. Keiko (28, clerical worker) said "I wanted to talk more about [their] private life but had no information on where to start." When I asked how she ultimately was able to learn that information she responded she could "sort of tell from their way of being, the way they dress, or their hobbies." In other words, Keiko's ability to evaluate and classify more subtle status markers enabled her to accomplish what more interventionist modalities of mediation readily provide.

Interactions occurring through marriage-hunting services with weak mediation are structured to appear less premeditated. During in-person events, organizers coordinate clients' movement through timekeeping, facilitating mini-games, and shepherding male attendees around the venue in regular time intervals (such that they can meet all female participants). However, most of the interactional protocol is left to participants' discretion. In this situation, participants

assemble their courtship scripts by mobilizing recognizable cultural templates and relying on friends' assistance. Having attended a number of machikon events, I noticed how for each timed interaction participants formed smaller, mixed-gender groups of 4-6 and enacted scripts that resemble casual dating mixers organized between colleagues and friends *(gōkon)*. Men often engaged in a banter akin to *manzai,* a double act comedy routine with a "straight man" and a "funny man" trading jokes. Women tended to mention positive details about their companions which, if mentioned by the individual in question, could be seen as bragging and excessive self-confidence. By defaulting to these well-known cultural scripts, participants ensure their interactions remain legible while conjuring up an impression of more spontaneous, unorchestrated—and more socially desirable—encounters.

Attending these events with company has the additional benefit of creating an accountability structure. Marina, (27, paralegal) told me about an arrangement (which she called "a summer challenge") she entered with her close friend. They both promised to go on thirty dates with different men between June and August and to keep track of the details in organized spreadsheets. Based on these samples they would determine suitable partners for each. Another pair of friends, Shina (27, single, programmer) and Mayumi (34, single, office assistant), explained participating together helped ease the discomfort associated with first encounters: "There were lots of events we wanted to attend but at the beginning it can be quite scary so you need courage. That is why we organized to go together to experience what these kinds of events would be like" (Shina). Mayumi added: "(…) we can share these experiences with each other, so we were able to learn a lot. Such as what kind of hairstyles guys like." As this indicates, friends' assistance bears similarities to the types of advice clients receive through services with intensive

mediation. Here, however, instead of through a paid relationship with a professional counselor, information is channeled through informal, close ties.

Explicit directives absent, participants must also personally determine the nature of the relationships initiated through these services. Weak mediation allows participants to understand relational outcomes in ways that feel natural and commonsense. Ryosuke (28, warehouse manager), for example, described how he made sense of his relationships relying on "common knowledge" (*jōshiki*).[71] Although Ryosuke hadn't intended to marry when his coworker invited him to attend a dating event together, meeting Shiori left a lasting impression on him – he repeatedly emphasized: "I thought my wife was special." After they started dating, Ryosuke realized Shiori was five years older than him which contradicted his image of conventional age differences in romantic relationships. Nevertheless, Ryosuke rationalized their match by imputing familial roles into the relationship: "She was very kind, and I'm actually a younger brother in my family and she is an older sister in her family. So, I thought maybe it was a good pairing." Since Shiori was over thirty years old, her age also indicated to Ryosuke that she was expected to marry soon. After they dated for about a year, "It kind of seemed like she was waiting for me to propose, so I did, and that's how we got married, haha," he said, jokingly summarizing the relationship's progression. As this example illustrates, Ryosuke draws on his high cultural fluency to understand cues and determine suitable parameters for his relationship. He invoked broader cultural scenarios of nuclear family, gender roles, and appropriate behavior to decipher his partner's expectations. He decided on the course of action and the timing of different relational decisions by deploying his knowledge of relational scripts.

[71] *Jōshiki* is used in reference to common/practical sense and mastery of social etiquette. The converse expression, "lacking common knowledge" (*jōshiki ga nai)* has an additional connotation of being unintelligent and dull.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the organizational structure of the marriage-hunting market and the cultural and moral codes that guide modalities of mediation embedded in different marriage-hunting services. Studies focusing on culture and intimate exchanges typically assume that people already know how to navigate courtship scripts and ideals or that they can intuit and improvise these cultural performances based on implicit cues from their social settings (e.g., Simon and Gagnon 1986; Wherry 2012). By contrast, by focusing on the interplay of modalities of mediation and individual cultural fluency I have demonstrated that mediation follows a gradient of intensity. It is not enough to establish what intermediaries do; we must analyze both the varying ways in which and the extent to which market intermediaries exploit local cultural conditions and valuation regimes to orchestrate diverse scripts of exchange. Although this chapter has focused primarily on the work of human intermediaries, I have also shown that non-human agents of mediation such as online platforms achieve similar effects. Guidance by third-party actors matters to both the individuals involved and the organization of the market.

Indeed, a counterintuitive relationship characterizes the symbolic and economic valuation of different marriage-hunting services analyzed in this chapter. Since intensive mediation resembles traditional arranged marriage practices, relying on it is often regarded as an option of last resort. By contrast, since weak mediation allows clients to exercise their agency and affective proclivities, it is deemed more socially desirable despite its attending ambiguity. As such, the most socially prized services are also the most affordable, whereas the least socially valorized services are simultaneously the priciest. Pricing and monetary payments—albeit not the primary objective for engaging in the marriage-hunting market—partake in these meaning-making processes: they signal the types of relationships clients can expect to enter and help them

to define intersubjective meanings. They also symbolically tether the three modalities of mediation to different cultural grammars and regimes of worth.

Finally, my analysis uncovers how mediation imbues courtship scripts with expectations of different intimate outcomes grounded in intersecting notions of gender, sexuality, class, and age. Casual parties and dating applications characteristic of weak mediation can facilitate a broad range of relationships, from short-term sexual exchanges to committed relationships. By contrast, intensive mediation sanctions marriage as the sole legitimate outcome of marriage-hunting. As clients navigate these diverse expectations, they must mobilize appropriate performances of masculinity and femininity and sexual respectability. The next two chapters detail the hybrid gendered performances in marriage-hunting, how they map onto the changes in the Japanese political economy, and, ultimately, how they pattern social membership.

Chapter 5

Herbivorous Men, Carnivorous Women:

Hybrid Masculinity and Femininity in Marriage-Hunting

Social anxieties surrounding marriage, marriageability, and (women's) sexual respectability manifest in linguistic creativity across the world (e.g., Armstrong et al. 2014; Frye and Urbina 2020; Pike 2020; Schippers 2007). Japan, where the media regularly vilify specific social types, is no exception. As I discussed in Chapter 2, for example, in the 1920s the cultural figure of "modern girl" who earned her own income, donned Western clothes, and socialized with similar age men in public spaces was the subject of much speculation about her marriageability (see McLelland 2012; Silverberg 2006; Suzuki 2010). During my fieldwork, market professionals and their clients repeatedly used two discursive terms, "herbivorous men" (*nikushokudanshi*) and "carnivorous women" (*sōshokujoshi*), in reference to nonstandard gender performances in marriage-hunting.[72] They described "herbivorous men" as quiet, weak, tender, professionally

[72] First coined by newspaper columnist Maki Fukasawa circa 2006 in an ironic register, these slightly derisive terms became media buzzwords around the same time that the term "marriage-hunting" was taking root. Herbivorous man" topped the "word of the year" list in 2009 and received more media and scholarly attention by far. After a short-lived career as a media buzzword, it has taken on a life of its own and continues to be used in popular discourse. Its reception and meaning have varied significantly: from praise of positive change in the intimate behavior of young men (who eschew violence and misogyny), to ridicule of their "feminine" consumer practices, to criticism of such men as the culprit for Japan's declining birth rates. In response, many pundits rushed to provide advice for women on how to approach these "sensitive" men. See Ushikubo (2008), Matsuoka (2012), Hidaka et al. (2015), and Kumagai (2015). See also Masahiro Morioka's (2013) typology of different "herbivores."

unambitious, and, most important, passive in their approach to courtship. Herbivorous men liked cooking and sweets, were interested in fashion, and were distinguishable by their slender figures and longer hairstyles (Figure 5.1). The category of "carnivorous women" was used to describe women who are independent, outspoken, sexually liberated, and take the initiative in romantic relationships. Examples of carnivorous practices could include any behavior related to marriage-hunting: using dating applications, initiating contact through social media, maintaining eye contact, touch, or talking too much and too loudly. In short, my interlocutors applied these labels to individuals who embodied the imperatives of marriage-hunting inasmuch as to apparently breach the normative parameters of gender. Specifically, they inverted the dominant, taken-for-granted conceptions of Japanese masculinity and femininity produced and consolidated during the era of high economic growth.

Figure 5.1 An online illustration explaining how to spot a "herbivore" (left) and a "carnivore" (right). The distinguishing features of the former include: a fringe that creates an "egglike" head shape, fair skin and delicate features, "just the right size" clothes, a carryout coffee, a tote bag, and a "belles-lettres" book in hand. A "carnivore" by contrast can be spotted by his "hair firmly set with wax", muscular and darker skinned body, "big silhouette" t-shirt, distressed skinny jeans, loafers, and a clutch bag. Note the "manspreading" of the carnivore compared to the sitting position of the herbivore and the latter's hand position. Accessed online https://lashiku-mrg.com/2021/06/04 on October 1, 2021.

In this chapter, I show how engaging in marriage-hunting requires a skillful mobilization of *hybrid gender performances* which combine elements of traditional masculinity and femininity in ways that avoid categorization as either "herbivorous" or "carnivorous." I focus on discursive categories of "herbivorous men" and "carnivorous women" specifically, arguing that they provide a unique window into the gender-, class- and age-related expectations of marriageability that suffuse the marriage-hunting market. Herbivorous men and carnivorous women should be seen as a part of creative nicknaming phenomena in post-growth Japan, wherein performances that depart from conventional gender ideals often acquire derisive labels.[73] Popular discourse is rife with neologisms for those men who eschew lifelong, permanent employment or engage in serious pursuits outside of it, such as the geeks (*otaku*), the "shut-ins" (*hikikomori*), the "NEETs" (*niito*, an acronym standing for Not in Education, Employment or Training), or the "freeters" (*furitā* - young people taking time off of full-time employment, often to engage in travel and leisure). A more recent portmanteau, *ikumen*, refers to good-looking men (*ikemen*) engaged in childrearing (*ikuji*). Historically, there has also been a profusion of derogatory colloquialisms for unmarried women: "Christmas cake," for example, used to refer to single women 25 years old or older: like Christmas cakes after December 25, these women were no longer believed to be desirable. Currently, in keeping with the increasingly delayed average age of marriage, a more commonly used phrase is "New Year's soba noodles," (traditionally

[73] See also the introduction for a discussion of the history and etymology of "marriage-hunting."

eaten on December 31) which instead refers to unmarried women past 31 years old (Cherry 2017). Whereas "*Ohitorisama*" (literally "the revered single") refers to women who enjoy their solo lifestyles, the 2003 bestseller *The Howl of the Loser Dogs* (Sakai 2003) sarcastically labels unmarried childless women over the age of 30 "losers" (*makeinu* literally, "loser dogs"). Unwed people—young women in particular—who live with their parents and spend their disposable income indulging in conspicuous consumption have also notoriously been dubbed "parasite singles."[74]

As was the case with "marriage-hunting" coined by sociologist Masahiro Yamada, these diverse buzzwords are often fashioned and disseminated by advertising agencies, journalists, and social scientists, reflective of the entanglements of the public and private sectors in Japan. Significantly, many of these terms pertain to an individual's relationship to and position within the normative institutions of marriage, family, and the labor market. As such, in this chapter I suggest that "herbivorous men" and "carnivorous women" offer a useful prism through which to understand normative gender expectations in the marriage-hunting market. They represent what sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (2018, p. 38) calls an "inverse relationship between *normality* and *nameability*": while the normal is unremarkable and thus semiotically superfluous, "the abnormal attracts considerable cultural attention" and is specifically marked. I demonstrate how these terms are used to police, discredit, and ridicule noncompliance with the demands of normative ideals of masculinity and femininity, representing discursive processes in which gender relations are enmeshed, negotiated, and transformed (Armstrong et al. 2014; Foucault 1978; Kondo 1990; Schippers 2007). They are not coherent gender "ideologies" deployed in the interest of specific powerholders. Rather, I contend, by effecting marriageable men and women, these often-

[74] On *NEETs* and *freeters* see Cook (2016). On *otaku* see Galbraith (2019). On *ikumen* see Ishii-Kuntz (2013). On *ohitorisama* see Dales (2014). On "parasite singles" see Yamada (1999).

contradictory discourses constitute an important element of moral regulation and 'governance at a distance' that occurs through the marriage-hunting market and which shapes subjectivities, structures social relations, and legitimates forms of power (Corrigan and Sayer 1985; Foucault 1980; Rose 1996).

In the following section, I theorize these categories as relationally produced hybrid masculinities and femininities. Next, I demonstrate how deploying hybrid gender performances requires a skillful mobilization of cultural, material, and symbolic resources. I explain how and why, due to the double standards related to age in marriage-hunting, women's performances of hybrid femininity are more restricted than men's ostensibly similar enactments of hybrid masculinity. Finally, I discuss how thus conceived "feminization" of men and women's "masculinization" upholds the hierarchical gender binary as well as standards of marriageability firmly rooted in middle-class ideals of respectability and "normalcy" that constitute the marriage-hunting economy and broader state processes.

The relational, "dialogical" (Ozyegin 2018) understanding of hybrid masculinity and femininity I advance here complicates our understanding of what doing gender means in dyadic heterosexual relationships. Scholarship on courtship all too often relies on normative assumptions regarding how such relationships should proceed to achieve more gender-egalitarian outcomes, usually touting women's proactive role as a harbinger of positive social change. By attending to local meanings and how everyday actors inhabit and interpret these seemingly progressive norms, we are better equipped to understand their significance within broader conditions of extreme gender inequality and why they might not signify a significant reorganization of the gender order.

RELATIONAL CONSTRUCTION OF HYBRID MASCULINITIES AND FEMININITIES

Recent gender literature emphasizes the distinctive refashioning of contemporary masculine styles, characterized, for instance, by wider acceptance of feminist values, increased emotionality, aestheticization, and novel consumer practices (Arxer 2011; Bridges and Pascoe 2014; 2018; Demetriou 2001; Messerschmidt 2018; Ozyegin 2018). As one example, men's engagement in childcare and housework in Japan—activities long culturally coded as womanly—has been reconfigured as a new desirable ideal of masculinity and promoted by the media and through various government programs. (Ishii-Kuntz 2013; Goldstein-Gidoni 2020; Koike 2022).[75] Sociological research suggests, however, that whereas such "hybrid masculinities" appear ideologically progressive, their selective incorporation of attributes associated with subordinate Others allows them to obfuscate their privilege (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; 2018). For instance, through dress and behavior associated with gay subcultures, straight-identifying men can legitimate and benefit from their own socially dominant positions while perpetuating systems of discrimination along the lines of gender, sexuality, class, and race (Demetriou 2001; Bridges 2014).

A parallel hybridization has occurred among femininities. In her evaluation of women's advances in the United Kingdom, Shelley Budgeon contends that modernized femininity needs to distance itself from its traditional, dependent counterpart and ostracize "overly obvious feminized qualities" (2014, p. 328) while appearing "progressive but also consummately and reassuringly feminine" (McRobbie 2008, p. 57, cited in Budgeon 2014). Individuals strategically deploy such hybrid femininities to attain specific goals such as social mobility. In U.S. sororities,

[75] In actuality, Japanese men spend on average 1 hour and 23 minutes per day on housework and childcare compared to 7 hours and 34 minutes that women devote to these tasks daily (Matsubara et al. 2020; Bureau of Statistics 2016)

for example, women fuse traditional ideals of womanhood with claims of feminist empowerment to advance in the hierarchical campus system (Ispa-Landa and Oliver 2020).

These developments complicate the pathbreaking formulation of the gender order originally developed by R.W. Connell (2005), which centers the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Whereas Connell and other scholars of masculinity see femininity as "emphasized," compliant, or otherwise passive in its own subordination, feminist scholars have called for a better understanding of femininity's active role (Adkins 2001; Ehara 2001; Hamilton et al. 2019; Kamran 2021; Paechter 2018; Schippers 2007). Mimi Schippers (2007) convincingly argues that femininities are essential for maintaining the *symbolic relationship* between masculinity and femininity rooted in the complementary and hierarchical gender binary. Maintaining this relationship with an ascendant position of masculinity is at stake in ensuring the continuity of the hegemonic gender arrangement and prevailing power relations that constitute "the state."

In this chapter, I demonstrate how men and women deploy hybrid masculinity and femininity in marriage-hunting behaviors in ways that ultimately uphold this asymmetric binary. I theorize these gender performances not merely as identities or embodied dispositions, but as strategies required to access or maintain social membership predicated on middle-class status and respectability. Indeed, as feminist scholars such as Beverley Skeggs (1997) and Lisa Adkins (2001) argue, hybridity, or assembling gender performances that span different social locations, might in fact be *required* of the twenty-first century middle-class denizens. Borrowing from the Other, however, is fraught with risk of censure and therefore requires skillful mobilization of economic and cultural capital. [76] Since the labels of herbivorous men and carnivorous women carry a tinge of stigma and derision, men and women pursuing marriage-hunting need to

[76] See Schippers (2007) for a discussion of stigmatizing aspects of women embodying dominant masculine traits (she calls these pariah femininities) and men performing hegemonic femininities (or male femininities).

selectively mobilize these attributes while remaining within the symbolic boundaries of gender. Such moral regulation through norms and ideals is crucial to processes of state formation and their legitimation (Corrigan and Sayer 1985). Marriage-hunting enables these hybrid performances by relying on ideals of gender complementarity and middle-class respectability and normalcy sutured to the state-sanctioned institution of marriage.

PRODUCING GENDER COMPLEMENTARITY IN MARRIAGE-HUNTING

I have shown elsewhere (Woźny 2022) that the discursive categories of "herbivorous men" and "carnivorous women" allow fully employed men and women to make sense of structural changes occurring in Japan that impinge on gender hierarchies. My interlocutors linked women's "carnivorous" desires to their work outside home and relative socioeconomic empowerment, which challenges the ideal-typical domesticized femininity. They similarly attributed "herbivorization" of men to their limited access to permanent, lifelong employment and hence to traditional, white-collar masculinity. During my subsequent research, cultural figures of herbivorous men and carnivorous women frequently recurred in relation to courtship behavior and marriageability. These tropes, summarized in Table 3, recall the social anxieties around women's work outside the home and men's access to wealth exemplified by "modern girls" and "modern boys" of the 1920s I discussed in Chapter 2.

Table 3. Perceptions of Hegemonic and Hybrid Masculine and Feminine Characteristics.

	Masculinity	Femininity
Hegemonic (consolidated during the period of high economic growth)	Full-time worker (salaryman, 'corporate warrior') Sole breadwinner Proactive in courtship and sexually	Full-time homemaker (housewife) Financially dependent; Passive in courtship

Hybrid (contemporary renegotiation of gender norms)	Professionally unambitious; "Feminine" physicality (skinny, long hair) and tastes; Passive in courtship; sometimes asexual	Professionally ambitious ('career woman') Financially independent Proactive in courtship and sexually

People I interviewed often expressed dismay about men's courtship practices which constitutes a significant departure from the ideals produced by the previous generation. Most held a negative view of herbivorous men, whom they understood as emblematic of the apathy of young Japanese men and antithetical to ideal market actors. Sachi (28, single, woman) said that young men's limited access to high-income jobs and permanent employment impedes their confidence and, in turn, makes them "risk-averse" in interpersonal relations. Comparing courtship to a business trip, she said that whereas the older generation tried "to arrange a nice dinner or a trip to a nice golf course," men in their twenties "just think about 'completing their mission' for the trip." Mariko, a 31-year-old woman, told me that these infantile men are "like boys," who "prefer to stick with other boys" and "play [computer] games" (instead of dating). Another man contended that the younger generation is immobilized due to fear of getting hurt. He recalled his surprise when he first heard that young men these days can stay in the same hotel room with women and not attempt to have sex with them, a shift he termed the "feminization of men."

Organizers of marriage-hunting events also shared this view. Maeda-san, a 50-year-old who volunteers as a go-between for the local government in Ishikawa Prefecture, told me that in his generation, men wanted "good things" to show off to their dates: a nice car, dining out in gourmet restaurants, or international vacations. These days, however, young men in his area seem to be satisfied with less – many never acquire a car, stay inside, and don't seem to be bothered by it. When I assisted another market professional, Shigeura-san, in organizing a

marriage-hunting party, he was appalled at one participant's disregard for the "business casual" dress code for the night (the participant sported a colorful tracksuit and a chunky golden chain necklace). When the participant started playing on his phone, Shigeura-san audibly criticized his poor manners: "This is unbelievable (*arienai*)! If you can't do as much as Google 'business casual', what kind of impression are you making? How do you expect a woman to be interested in you if you look like a delinquent (*yankii*)?"

In this context, marriage-hunting entrepreneurs redoubled their efforts to encourage women to become proactive "hunters." In my interview with Tōko Shirakawa, journalist and coauthor of *The Era of Marriage-Hunting* (2008), she emphasized that through the book, she and Yamada wanted to instigate a paradigm shift among young women. Specifically, they wanted women to realize they cannot wait passively for marriage as "something that comes naturally on the conveyor belt of life", as women once did in the high-growth era. Instead, Yamada and Shirakawa wanted to break the stereotype of feminine passivity and encourage them to pursue the men. In this light, then, the "job-hunting" metaphor after which "marriage-hunting" was coined appears profoundly gendered: in an era when more and more women work outside the house and take on the various responsibilities of the "second shift" (Hochschild and Machung 2012) it also becomes their job to find a husband. Figure 5.2, an advertisement of a marriage agency encapsulates this emphasis on women's agency and resolve. An image in muted gray tones features a young woman with a determined facial expression and gaze fixed on a distant goal. The blurry image of a path stretching to a distant point on the horizon and bounded on either side by a body of water behind her suggests the woman's singular journey — seeking a marriage partner.

Figure 5.2 A marriage agency’s advertisement on the window of a Yamanote Line train (one of Tokyo’s busiest commuter lines that circles the city’s core). The script reads “Let’s begin with high hopes.” Photo: Anna Woźny, November 1, 2019.

Other advertising materials likewise underscore the expectation that women need to respond to men’s passivity by adopting a role which men have abandoned. Figure 5.3 encapsulates the relational logic of hybrid masculinity and femininity through a cartoon representation of a marriage-hunting interaction. The illustration portrays Doronjo, a villain and a gang leader from a 1970s TV series *Yatterman*, known for her vanity, quick-wittedness, and initiative. Opposite her, Black Jack, a protagonist from another 1970s cartoon series, a highly-skilled and high-earning surgeon, whose multiple romantic involvements eventually lead him to

realize he is not suited for love.[77] Doronjo (a young and presumably educated woman) in a provocative pose and revealing outfit, makes direct eye-contact, while quickly estimating her counterpart's profession and high income. Black Jack, on the other hand, is impressed by Doronjo's assertiveness and forthrightness, emphasized by her red cape and long, blond hair. His folded arms and defensive body language indicate his shyness and passivity in this interaction, while his blank stare and black-and-white coloring further suggest how his unsuccessful romantic pursuits potentially made him a "herbivore." As the advertisement implies, the key to a successful match in marriage-hunting is for the woman to seduce her counterpart in a way necessitated by but compatible with his sensitive nature. Significantly, both characters operate at the fringes of normative society therefore signaling to potential clients that even those not entirely compliant with normative standards can find success in marriage-hunting at this agency (at least insofar as they possess other middle-class attributes, such as well-paid employment).

[77] Interestingly, both cartoons were revived in 2008 which also points to the age groups that Partner Agent tries to attract – both those who were children in the 1970s and those who were growing up in the first decade of the 2000s.

Figure 5.3. Advertisement of “Partner Agent,” a marriage agency, in Tokyo metro. The advertisement, titled “While matching in marriage-hunting” features characters from popular anime series. It describes what each character is thinking: “He thought: ‘An assertive woman. Not bad!’ She thought: ‘A doctor? He must make a fair bit…’ They both thought: ‘Huh, so this kind of person actually exists!’” The vertical script above the characters adds: ‘Doronjo, female, 24-year old NGO employee, single.’ ‘Black Jack, male, 33-year-old, doctor, single.’ Photo: Anna Woźny, May 21, 2018.

These visual discourses are not innocuous or banal market artifacts, nor is their ideological locus limited to the market. Rather, such everyday cultural representations constitute the state and enact its power. Channeling broader, state-sanctioned ideals these advertisements define appropriate gender relations and suggest their place in the larger social order. Significantly, they tether the figure of an independent and economically self-sufficient working woman to courtship and the institution of marriage.

Industry efforts to reimagine the role of women in courtship have proven largely successful. Indeed, many women thought becoming proactive a "natural" and necessary response to men's passivity and disinterestedness in courtship. For example, Sayuri, a 29-year-old single woman, told me: "Carnivorous women became reality, because at some point [men and women] have to balance each other out to make a couple." For her, a radical change in feminine performances occurred due to the inevitability of gender complementarity in heterosexual relationships. Similarly, Arisa, a 32-year-old married woman, attributed her own success in marriage-hunting to the change that occurred in her way of thinking about courtship: "When I started marriage-hunting, I realized it's very hard to meet someone because so many men today are herbivorous. … And that's how my way of thinking has changed: from being passive (*ukemi*), I became proactive (*katsudōteki*)."

Nevertheless, this needed to remain a tacit strategy as being called carnivorous by peers, or worse, potential partners, could provoke shame and stigma. Risa (32, employee, single) explained why taking on masculine characteristics is beneficial in the professional realm while the same disposition in romantic relationships crosses these symbolic boundaries:

> the nuance is that you *had to* go out there. It can be seen as, or it can mean, 'you're brave enough to go out there' or 'you're an outgoing person,' but the nuance is that you didn't have the opportunity of them coming to you and that's why you're going out. So if you are called proactive (*sekkyokuteki*) at work, it'd be completely fine, it would be a compliment. But if you are like that in a dating situation it wouldn't be a compliment. It'd be way too aggressive!

Echoing Budgeon's (2014) description of successful femininity, Risa's account of the contradictory expectations of hybrid femininity indicates that women need to walk a fine line between feminine respectability and dishonor. Similarly, during a seminar with a celebrity matchmaker, she urged women "serious about marriage" to seek a golden mean between being

outgoing and demure. She cautioned that although they are seemingly popular with men, it is not the women who party every weekend in Shibuya (one of Tokyo's wards known for entertainment) who will find happiness in marriage; this popularity ends in "one-night love." As these examples demonstrate, although marriage-hunting compels women to appropriate strategies akin to job-hunting, exhibiting the same attitude at work and in courtship has different consequences. Feminine desire and sexual respectability remain closely tied to marriage.

How, then, did men and women manage these contradictory gender standards while marriage-hunting? As the following section will demonstrate, due to age-related double standards men have been able to leverage hybrid performances of masculinity to gain additional time to invest in themselves and pursue leisure. When faced with normative standards, however, they leveraged marriage as a type of "symbolic insurance."[78] Hybrid femininity, by contrast, is carefully framed as time-bound and performative.

Trading on hybridity

Interestingly, whereas several men I interviewed self-described as herbivorous, only one woman called herself carnivorous. This discrepancy suggests that embodying hybrid gender performances is not equally available to men and women and that they faced different consequences when crafting these performances.

Assuming a passive, "feminine" role enabled many of the self-professed herbivorous men to embrace various pleasurable practices associated with femininity, such as leisure and

[78] Eric Anderson (2002) uses the term "masculinity insurance" when describing strategies that gay male athletes employ when negotiating their status in competitive sports. In this context, being a skilled athlete trumped one's gay status and therefore offset potential stigma in a homophobic environment. As I show in this chapter, marriage can also serve as a type of insurance for both masculinity and femininity, ensuring that nonstandard gender performances are interpreted by social circles through the lens of "normalcy."

consumption. They enjoyed shopping, meeting with friends, taking professionalization courses, or exercising as important meaning-making mechanisms and expressions of individual identity. Taka, a single, 27-year-old consultant, told me that "being in a relationship is not the only fun thing to do in life" and that he has plenty of hobbies, which he prefers to enjoy alone: traveling, shopping, watching anime, and playing computer games. He said that his unwillingness to compromise on these leisure activities made him "not that motivated to find a girlfriend in comparison to other men." Jun, a 31-year-old systems engineer, said that on weekends he likes to listen to music, read, and think about philosophical problems; he did not see a way to reconcile this with dating a woman, which requires time and money. Kenji, a 30-year-old architect, told me that until his recent birthday he was busy with his work during the week and focused on his self-development on weekends; for him dating would mean "splitting his energy."

Nevertheless, when asked whether they were interested in marriage, high-earning and fully employed men uniformly agreed they wanted to marry eventually and expressed confidence in their marital prospects regardless of their current relationship status. Rather than rejecting intimate relationships writ large, Jun compared himself to a "fishing anchor" – not looking too far for women but ready to act if someone directly approaches. Others used the metaphor of a "cabbage roll," referring to men with herbivorous appearances (slender body, long hair, see Figure 5.1) but who would become proactive when truly interested in a woman. They also stressed the emotional dimensions and the sense of partnership they expected from romantic relationships. Fumiya, a 34-year-old unmarried media analyst, told me: "I'm sometimes considered [an herbivorous man]. Because I'm just waiting for an opportunity, I don't pursue girls. So sometimes I'm told I'm *too* romantic, because I'm waiting for a specific situation … to fall in love …. for the right moment, or a chance encounter." The ideal way to meet a partner, he

explained, is to accidentally bump into someone in a supermarket, or while walking in a crowded downtown area. By embracing an image often purveyed by television dramas (stereotypically directed at and consumed by women) he appropriated a popular image of soft masculinity.

Thus, it is possible that by assuming a passive stance in courtship and enacting stereotypical femininity, herbivorous men engage in what Bridges and Pascoe (2018, p. 264) dub "symbolic tourism" when discussing hybrid masculinity: relatively privileged men gain access to symbolic and emotional pleasures associated with transgressing normative gender boundaries while "avoiding much of the injustice and pain." By renouncing the active pursuit of women — but not marriage itself — herbivorous men consequently extend their cultural adolescence and gain significantly more time and resources to invest in their broadly conceived human capital and benefit from the "patriarchal dividend" (Connell 2005) in the long term. Moreover, according to many women, some stereotypically "herbivorous" traits (emotionality, corporeal aesthetics, ability to cook and do domestic chores) paradoxically make them more attractive marriage partners.

By assuming a passive stance in courtship, these men delegate the responsibility of signaling romantic interest to women and deflect the cognitive and economic burden of courtship to them. They do so while remaining conscious of the age-related pressures pertaining to marriage that women anticipate. In the same interview, Fumiya, cited above, told me about three "deadlines" that women face in life: at 24 (if they want to marry after college), 27, and finally at 35 years of age. In talking about these deadlines, he said that women engage in strategic calculations: "if they want to get married before or at the age of 30, they need to find a guy by 27 or 28. So, they calculate…. They need at least one or two years for dating. If they want to get married at 35—they need to find a guy by 33 or so." By exploiting the expectations of hybrid

femininity Fumiya legitimates his passive stance while further underlining the interplay between masculinity and femininity.

The age of thirty-five emerged as a particularly salient borderline for women: virtually all the people I interviewed shared the belief that it is extremely difficult for a woman past that age to give birth to a healthy baby.[79] Because of this, women's popularity in the marriage market drastically declines over the course of their thirties. Miki, (42, housewife), commented on this the following way: "Being close to forty is seen as a risk to women. I once even got asked during an *omiai* [marriage interview] if my body was capable of having children. It's quite a disrespectful question but that guy was a doctor. He probably knew a lot about childbirth and he really wanted to have a child so he told me he wanted to be with someone younger." Moreover, none of my interlocutors believed out-of-wedlock childbearing a legitimate option. For most women, then, marriage and childbirth before thirty-five is the only viable path to normative middle-class womanhood. As Moe (30, daycare employee) put it "More so than wanting a husband, I want children. (…) I would never want to be a single mother. So, I need a husband too."

Facing these pressures, unsurprisingly and in contrast to the single men, the women I interviewed did not find their hybrid performances pleasurable. They also expected significant concessions related to matrimony, such as giving up their hobbies and leisure activities. Emiko said: "As a single person, you can spend your money however you like. But once you get married, and especially if you have children, that isn't the case. I find this a shortfall." Several women complained about how bothersome changing their surname post-marriage is. Maho (35,

[79] They considered this "common sense" knowledge and a medical fact. Although a growing number of women in Japan give birth past the age of 35, these pregnancies are considered high risk, and so-called "late age childbirth" (*kōrei shussan*) remains socially stigmatized.

married, corporate employee) said that for working women interacting with clients it is highly "inconvenient" to change their email addresses and announce their new status to clients who are used to addressing them by their last name (as Japanese workplace standards dictate). However, according to company gossip, "women who choose to keep their last names have a higher divorce rate" as they don't show the commitment necessary for a lasting marriage, and therefore it is better to suffer the minor inconvenience. Miki, cited above, summarized these concessions the following way: "At school, I was taught that gender equality is very important. But after marrying, I really learned that the two genders are not created equal and we both have different roles to fulfill. … Gender isn't created equal."

Mobilizing hybrid femininity can also be expensive. Although women's participation fees in marriage-hunting events average half of men's, one exception to this rule were events featuring "stable men" (*antei danshi*), defined as well-educated, fully employed, and earning more $50,000-60,000 per annum. These events required women to pay higher fees than participating men, reinforcing the idea that status mobility requires heavy financial investments in hybrid femininity. Moreover, women were expected to spend the difference on clothes and makeup purchased specifically for the occasion. One interviewee recounted how his friend, a high-earning pharmacist, spent at least $200 on hair, makeup, and apparel for each of one hundred marriage interviews she attended before eventually quitting marriage-hunting. Asserting psychological preparedness for marriage also comes at a cost. Sachi (30, in a relationship, nurse), for example, described moving out of her parental house in order to appear more independent and increase her value on the market:

> This goes back to the topic of marriage-hunting, but it is said that if a mother and a daughter are close, the daughter will find it hard to get married. And I was very close with my mother. I went on holidays with my mother and went shopping with her more than my friends. It was shown on TV too, that those who cannot

> marry are those who are close with their mothers. I thought that I won't be able to get married and so I started living by myself in Tokyo three years ago. So, it was all because I thought that I couldn't get married. Apparently, men do not like it if we are close with our mothers. Also, women who stay with their parents tend not to like men. I was told they are not independent. I was told that I would become more independent too. At home, my mother would do everything, such as cooking meals.

Although Sachi enjoyed the convenience of living at her parents' house and a close bond with her mother, inundated with messages about marriageability from the media and her social environment, she decided to relocate to a one-bedroom apartment in the outskirts of Tokyo. As one of the highest-earning women in my sample, Sachi was able to afford this marker of autonomy. However, most young women I interviewed did not enjoy similar financial security. What stands out from this quote is that activities Sachi felt betrayed her overreliance on her mother — leisure pursuits (travel and shopping) and domestic chores—are the same activities that well-adjusted social adults are expected to enjoy with their families and that marriageable women must be able to perform on their own.

Overall, middle-class working women felt far less assured about their marital prospects, cognizant of the age-related pressures, and described engaging in marriage-hunting as filled with anxiety and uncertainty. When asked about the meaning of marriage, most described it as psychological relief and peace of mind (*anshin*), perhaps related to satisfying normative expectations. Emiko said: "You definitely feel at ease, because you don't have to do *konkatsu*. Your parents also feel at ease and … you get to be with someone you like." Since the term carnivorous woman held more negative valence in comparison to herbivorous man, women

worried that appearing too proactive might damage their reputations. Few men said they would marry such women as many believed they routinely engage in extramarital affairs.[80]

Recuperating middle-class gender normalcy

Even if herbivorous men benefited from uneven age-related expectations, their single status and herbivorous traits were subject to evaluations by their social networks. For them, marriage could symbolically uphold normative masculinity when hybridization was confused with feminization. For example, Shun (31, consultant, married) was called an "herbivore" by a male friend who pointed out his "geek" (*otaku*) interests such as idol songs and idol concerts. However, when I interviewed Shun a few weeks earlier and asked him if he considers himself herbivorous, he immediately retorted: "Definitely not! I'm married!" In this situation, marriage not only fulfills the expectation of normative masculinity but also serves as a type of symbolic insurance when a person's other characteristics cast doubt on their masculinity.

Unmarried men also leveraged heterosexuality—the mainstay of normative masculinity—to distance themselves from the sexually ambiguous and thus potentially stigmatizing label of herbivorous men. Yasu, a 35-year-old unmarried consultant in a major corporation, was living with his parents and grandmother at the time of the interview. Although he did not consider himself herbivorous, he had been labeled as such before. Barring a brief period in college, he had never had a girlfriend, which raised eyebrows among his friends and colleagues, many of whom began to doubt his heterosexuality. He recounted the following banter with his supervisor: "My boss is quite direct and doesn't beat around the bush.… "You know, work is work, but the next step should be marriage, right?" [mimicking an old man's voice]. "If

[80] This can arguably be seen as another threat of effeminacy – see Schippers (2007) on cuckolds and male femininities.

you can't get married and have children, what use does Japan have for you?' or 'If you want to work abroad, it would be better to have at least [a family]?" He continued:

> Looking from the outside, from the perspective of society, when a man my age is unmarried, everyone thinks that they have some sort of problem…. They may ask "Are you gay?"–I've never been asked that directly, but it has been implied. I've heard: "You have these particular hobbies…." I tell them: "I'm not. I one hundred percent love women." So then they ask "So why don't you have anyone?" "I just want to preserve my lifestyle," maybe not *preserve*, but I don't like to change my plans for other people. "Ah right" they respond…. It's a bit of an awkward conversation.

As this excerpt shows, herbivorous men's sexual ambiguity can call normative masculinity into question. Because it is incompatible with the conventional logic of gender and sexual complementarity (which presumes heterosexual attraction and intent to establish a nuclear family) sexual ambiguity needs repudiation. To save face in front of his boss and coworkers, Yasu relegates its negative valence to gay men and asserts his "love for women." The supervisor's questioning of Yasu's utility for Japan and the company and the suggestion that he cannot work overseas unless he has a family additionally bolster the standing of married men who comply with the demands of normative masculinity.[81] Both gender and sexuality are thus mobilized to elevate the status of marriage, the very institution called into question by many men in this age group (see Nemoto, Fuwa, and Ishiguro 2012).

To help unmarried men approximate normative ideals and expectations, marriage-hunting entrepreneurs devised many strategies to help them appear more proactive. In recent years, myriad "groom schools" and "men schools" popped up to teach men how to embody marriageable masculinity. One of them, Bright for Men, offers an array of services for single

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[81] Some supervisors reportedly implied that men who want to work overseas are expected to be married to a full-time homemaker, as balancing the demands of working and living overseas does not leave a single man time to take good care of himself. These professional expectations show remarkable historical continuity; see Murata (2000) and Lunsing (2001).

men that help them navigate dating scripts. Kawase-san, its director, described how their "How to get a girlfriend in 3 months" program provides a "date tracking" system to ensure a smooth relationship progression and trains clients to calibrate when to officially "confess" (a moment typically considered as the point a couple becomes exclusive):

> *Kawase-san*: It is important to know that during your first date, you will not necessarily end up confessing and asking her to be in a relationship. We teach our students to confess on approximately the third date. So we need to plan out what to do leading up to these three dates. The first will be an "eating date," like dinner. The second can be more activity-based, such as going to the movies or museums. We teach what the third date should be like, and at what point you should confess to her.
> *Anna*: What should you do on the third date then?
> *Kawase-san*: For the third date … you have to think about the preferences of the girl. But it is also important to consider at what point you should confess.… For example, after dinner, you could take her somewhere with a nice view and confess there. For people that are not experienced, it is difficult to just confess casually over dinner. The girls might appreciate it more if it's in a more romantic setting. Therefore we offer this "date tracking", which would also differ depending on if the girl is young, experienced, mature, etc. as their preferences would be different.

By teaching clients courtship scripts and expectations of appropriate conduct, institutions such as Bright for Men work to enhance their cultural fluency. As this quote illustrates, the vision of marriageability offered by "Bright for Men" is quite class-specific: it relies on men's economic resources and presumption about their capacity to become providers.

Social location was further emphasized via what I came to call marriage-hunting "uniforms."[82] Upon entry to Bright for Men's headquarters in Ginza, Tokyo's upscale business district, I was greeted by two men wearing tight V-necks and carefully coiffed hair, conforming to the "carnivorous" stereotype. They expressed surprise that a woman had entered the premises. Soon after, they showed me to a seminar room where a speaker was blaring American party hits from the early 2010s. The music accompanied a presentation on a laptop showcasing "before and

[82] On the importance of uniforms in Japan see McVeigh (2000).

after” images of Bright for Men’s “alumni” which fitted the aesthetic Kawase-san promoted during the seminar I had attended a few weeks earlier: “When in doubt, wear navy (*komattara, neibi*)” (See Figure 5.4). In the corner of the room stood a clothes rack with tweed and corduroy blazers in plaid, cognac, and navy along with white and navy polo shirts and more V-necks. On a nearby shelf, I noticed high-polish black and brown leather oxford shoes and loafers that complemented the preppy look. During our interview, Kawase-san opined that this style helps avoid giving the impression of showing up for a job interview while displaying a sense of “TPO”– time, place and occasion—something that in his view most Japanese men lack.

Figure 5.4 Screenshot of the “before and after” transformation from the Bright For Men website. In a short interview underneath the image on the website, “C-san” (in photographs), a railway company employee, recounts that thanks to styling services at Bright for Men: “I felt like a new person, or rather, I felt reborn.” Accessed online https://bmen.jp/alumni.html on October 19, 2021.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, most marriage-hunting interactions were also intentionally structured in ways that allowed men to assume the active, leading role. For instance, group dating events always seated women in designated spots throughout the event

duration, usually on the perimeter of the room, while men were directed to move from one spot to another. The discrepancy in participation costs also symbolically reflected the expectations and gendered asymmetries in courtship. Goto-san told me that when he inaugurated his NGO he first established equal participation fees for all clients. However, after a number of clients lodged complaints about it, he adjusted fees to reflect industry standards with men paying twice the cost of women and older clients paying more than younger. He recalled that clients initially denounced the practice of having equal participation fees as unfair due to women's lower earnings and the expectation that they will spend money on aesthetic enhancement. Such arrangements implicitly signal the protocols for doing masculinity and femininity in desirable ways and tie these performances to broader structures of inequality.

Market professionals generally regarded women more as proficient in marriage-hunting rules and expected them to subtly enhance men's efforts. When I visited "NPO People-Community," an organization in charge of the annual "National Conference on Marriage Support," the staff member showed me props she uses during marriage-hunting events: boxes upon boxes of conversation starters and prompts to enact various situations. "Japanese are shy (*shai*). Or should I say, Japanese men are shy," she explained the purpose of these props. "They need something to begin the conversation and they need women to lead them. … Many women doing marriage-hunting are already perfect (*suteki joshi*). It is the men we need to work on for *konkatsu* to succeed."

Individual women strived to appear sufficiently approachable and affable and to establish their hybrid femininities within the bounds of middle-class respectability. During a large-scale *machikon* event I observed, a woman next to me put down "eating yummy food and sleeping a lot" as her hobbies while I wrote "Japanese literature." After the event, she pulled me aside and

asked about my hobby: “You see, I also like literature. I also have played koto for 15 years. But I don’t write this as my hobby, it would be hard to relate to and difficult to ask about.” Her concern with appearing unapproachable, and perhaps uppity, in the marriage-hunting interactions reveals that women also need to avoid coming across as overly educated or accomplished.

Women also selectively mobilized elements of appearance that conveyed cleanliness, purity, and sexual respectability to avoid the carnivorous label. During marriage-hunting events I observed most women dressed in flowy skirts and dresses that did not reveal any skin or cleavage. They self-consciously used colors and modified their appearance to “soften” their features. Motoko (39, married) commented: “in marriage-hunting, it is necessary for everyone to be your typical Japanese girl. You have to be nice, soft, and feminine. Wear pink, orange, or something. Something light. With nice long hair. Unless you dress the way that men like, your chances will significantly decrease. It is a must.” The difference between feminine modesty and sex-appeal is visible in Figure 5.5 which compares “good” and “bad” marriage-hunting attire. The dress on the left conveys propriety and sexual respectability through color, length, cut and attendant cleanliness. The same features on the neighboring dress which comes with stains and dirt, by contrast, convey a lack of understanding of rules of the game and potential promiscuity. Yoshiko, a 27-year-old investment broker, told me she once attended a marriage-hunting party wearing her favorite bright red skinny pants and a suede button-up shirt. Seeing her depart from work in this outfit, her male colleague ridiculed her by saying “What the hell? You’re going to a konkatsu party like this? You really need to learn some feminine skills (*joshiryoku*)!”[83]

[83] *Joshiryoku* is a colloquial term referring to women’s investment and motivation in fashion, makeup, taste in clothes or appropriate manners. In recent years, it also began to be jokingly used in reference to men.

Figure 5.5 Screenshot from a website advising women "How to choose a dress to succeed in marriage-hunting." The "good konkatsu dress" (left) has a "feminine silhouette", skirt length below the knee, "pastel color" or "basic color" and no wrinkles or stains. The "NG [no good] konkatsu dress" (right) is "too tight or oversized", has a skirt length above the knee, is dark or is in primary colors, is stained or covered in lint, and displays "no sense of cleanliness." The facial expressions are also telling: the woman performing "good" femininity is demure, happy, and relaxed, while her counterpart appears perplexed, confused, and out of place. Accessed online https://dress-cons.com/ikina/?p=4912 on October 19, 2021.

Finally, another way for women to keep within bounds of feminine respectability was to denounce any nominally carnivorous behavior as both performative and temporary. As Miyuki explained it: "I think "carnivorous women" describes their behavior pattern rather than their true way of thinking." When probed why women behave this way she responded "Well, because they want to get married!" as through it was self-evident. Rather than a personality trait or gender identity, she saw hybrid femininity as a *strategy* for attaining the coveted status of married woman. Arisa, cited above, similarly commented on the hybrid strategy which rendered her marriage-hunting efforts successful: "I'm not carnivorous myself, but I realized I need to act like

this as a woman to meet someone." Once this goal is achieved, the strategy could be renounced. As Motoko (39, married) told me, "Once you match and get into a relationship, you can start showing more of your individuality, but before you date you have to be normal. That is the theory of marriage-hunting." She elaborated: "This isn't really about trying to hide your uniqueness, but it's more about showing it after you become closer to someone. I think it's a strategy that works well and I understand it as I'm older. But younger women, they find it hard to accept this as it seems like they are denying their true self." In other words, Motoko identifies the tension between hybrid femininity as a strategy necessitated by marriage-hunting and individual identity or a gender performance experienced as true to oneself.

As my data suggest, men and women strategically deploy hybrid gender performances that span different social locations in marriage-hunting pursuits. Yet, access to hybrid masculine and feminine performances is not distributed equally. Doing gender well in this context requires financial resources, cultural capital, self-scrutiny, and often also guidance from the market entrepreneurs.

CONCLUSION

The structural transformations discussed in the introductory chapter opened fissures in Japan's dominant gender arrangements, enabling new performances of both masculinity and femininity. However, marriageability as defined within the marriage-hunting field is laden with uneven expectations around gender, class, and age. In this chapter I have shown that women and men must tread carefully to remain within socially acceptable gender boundaries when they enact hybrid masculinities and femininities in marriage-hunting.[84] Self-identified herbivorous men can

[84] West and Zimmermann (1987) refer to this as "accountability" in their watershed framework on *doing gender*. Gender, in this view, is always performed in anticipation of being assessed by others.

temporarily embrace the herbivorous category and symbolically and materially benefit from assuming a passive approach to dating. Still, when confronted with normative expectations, they need to repudiate the threat of feminization it can represent. As they distance themselves from the effeminate, they often implicitly and explicitly elevate the status of heteronormativity and marriage. Women, too, need to carefully craft their performances and ensure that their "masculine" traits (being proactive, assertive, and goal-oriented) are packaged in demure middle-class appearances and explicitly denounced as temporary, performative, and enacted with a view to entering serious, marriage-oriented relationships.

In this way, the narratives related to herbivorous men and carnivorous women that emerge from my data are not simply accounts of and about individual men and women; they reveal what is good and desirable in *idealized relationships* between men and women (Schippers 2007). The marriage-hunting industry additionally ensures that hybrid gender performances are performed in ways that serve gender complementarity and that those who occupy the social positions of "men" and "women" are interpellated as *co-producers* of these ideals. Their hybrid gender performances therefore fortify the hierarchical relationship of normative masculinity and femininity: women's proactiveness is reconfigured as a response to men's passivity, while elusive matrimony is cast as a symbolic insurance for those who are singled out for noncompliance with gendered expectations of normalcy.

Significantly, not all of my interlocutors were willing—or able—to pursue these labor-intensive strategies and enact gendered standards purveyed by the marriage-hunting market and sanctioned by the state. I turn attention to their experiences in the following chapter.

Chapter 6

Marriage Market Mismatches and Cultural Intelligibility

> Norms are what govern "intelligible" life, "real" men and "real" women. . . . [W]hen we defy these norms, it is unclear whether we are still living, or ought to be, whether our lives are valuable, or can be made to be.
>
> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (2004, p. 206)

On November 10th, 2019, the day of the parade inaugurating the Reiwa era and the reign of Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako, I attended the National Marriage Support Seminar, an annual conference for policymakers, scholars, journalists, and private- and public-sector marriage-hunting specialists. In her opening address, Tokyo's governor Yuriko Koike suggested that the large turnout at the conference on the momentous occasion of the Reiwa Era Parade was indicative of the issue's significance. Standing before an audience of over 250 attendees, Koike praised marriage support offered to Japanese youth as helping to "make new, Reiwa-era couple" and encouraging (*senaka wo osu,* literally "push the back [of]") those hesitant about marriage to take the initiative in their romantic lives.

One of the conference's main events was a panel interview titled "True Feelings of the Youth of the Marriage-Hunting Era: Discontents, Anxieties, and Hopes." The panelists were two

men and two women, ranging in age from their late twenties to late thirties, with half hailing from large cities, half from rural areas. The organizers introduced the panelists as generic representatives of the cross-section of Japanese society that eschews marriage. Yohei Harada, director of the Youth Research Center at Hakuhodo and author of books such as *Why are Young People Useless Nowadays?* (2010) and *Bring Out Their Potential: How to Develop Members of the 'Pampered Generation'*[85] (2016) served as a moderator. The panel took the form of a talk show centered around participants' reasons for not marrying thus far and their experiences dating. Harada drew frequent laughs from the audience by interspersing answers with commentary and jokes made at the participants' expense. As one of the men, age 37, introduced himself, Harada interrupted, asking "Can you even still be called a 'young person' (*wakamono*)?" He ridiculed one of the women for excessive enjoyment of work and free time activities that allegedly prevented her from thinking about marriage. He lampooned another participant who had not dated since ending a long-term relationship several years prior by attributing his overly sensitive attitude to his "pressure-free" upbringing, characteristic of the young generation.[86]

Intentionally or not, in his role as moderator, Harada transformed archetypes of unmarried Japanese men and women into caricatures. His pointed irony regarding their very classification as "young people" reinforced the notion that non-marriage at certain age failed the criteria of culturally defined adulthood. Indeed, with the government defining non-marriage at a "social problem" (Bourdieu 1980; Ueno 1998) the panelists fit into the state category that, until

[85] See Hakuhodo. 2016. "Yohei Harada on developing 'pampered generation' members" https://www.hakuhodo-global.com/news/yohei-harada-on-developing-pampered-generation-members.html (last accessed June 24, 2023).

[86] "Pressure free generation" (*yutori sedai*) refers to those educated under the "pressure free" system introduced from the 1970s onwards. The same term used in the title of Harada's book is translated to English as "pampered," although the latter has much stronger connotations.

recently, was assigned the pejorative label of "lifelong singles" in official documents.[87] Significantly, Harada presented the panelists as drifting into singlehood not due to the structural conditions underlying the marriage market, but because of their implied weak moral character, inability to take risks, or to command control over their lives. Within the context of the conference, it was implied that Japan's demographic and economic woes were the result of such young people's passivity and squandering of their potential.

This final empirical chapter examines the experiences of individuals relegated to the margins of the moral economy of marriage-hunting. I anchor my analysis in experiences of women considered past their reproductive age, men without access to stable employment or income, as well as sexual and ethnic minorities. Although these individuals are not outright excluded from the market, all experienced significant ontological insecurity in relation to their marriageability. I argue that fitting or misfitting market standards is not a categorical distinction but occurs across a complex spectrum of social membership and demonstrates how these women and men negotiate processes of diminishing *cultural intelligibility* as marriageable subjects. I distinguish two broad strategies these individuals have developed in response to their marginalized social membership. First, I show how they develop new symbolic and material attachments to the state by redefining their relationship to key components of the dominant cultural ideal of conjugal couplehood—namely, domesticity and consumption. Second, because these realms are feminized, I show that such a strategy of redefinition engenders a different type of hybridity altogether, with uneven consequences for women and men.

[87] In 2019 this official category was changed to "unmarried people under 50" in recognition of demographic trends and the stigmatizing tone of "lifelong singles." See https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2019/05/127bae339d88-japan-to-stop-labeling-people-unmarried-at-50-as-lifelong-singles.html last accessed June 24, 2023.

By analyzing how perceptions of individual worth transform over the life course, I highlight the dynamic intersections of gender, sexuality, class, and age, and demonstrate the divergent consequences of aging for women and men. I build on and expand conceptual tools from queer and feminist theory—developed through analyses of individuals occupying various social margins—to analyze experiences of those who conform to some market standards and expectations of marriageability, but defy others. In doing so, I show the tenuous nature of citizenship negotiated through the market. I suggest that social membership becomes conditional upon attaining cultural intelligibility as autonomous, self-regulating subjects within the normative grid of familial and conjugal life. This view helps us to understand state power as horizontal, exercised not by a specific institution or a group of actors, but deeply embedded in the fabric of social life, enacted "by ordinary people simply living their lives" (Canaday et al. 2021, p. 3).

MARKETIZED CITIZENSHIP AND CULTURAL INTELLIGIBILITY

Research on neoliberal governance documents the adverse outcomes that follow unfettered marketization of nearly every sphere of social life. When the symbolic and material benefits of social membership become conditional on adopting the disposition of market actors, people's livelihoods are differentially valued and ranked according to how closely they approximate the ideals of personhood that markets proffer (Bauman 2003; Fourcade and Healy 2013; Lamont 2012; Somers 2008; Sweet 2021; Tyler 2013). As Somers (2008, p. 4) maintains, the market becomes an "arbiter of moral authority—one that is recalibrating our notions of citizenship rights and the citizen from that of social inclusion, shared fate, and membership to only conditional inclusion, quid pro quo exchange, and social exclusion." Put differently, the

capacity to enact various normative expectations influences social perceptions and self-understandings of individual moral character as well as symbolic (and often economic) worth.

In this chapter, I suggest that marketized social membership requires rendering oneself intelligible within the system of cultural representations. Cultural intelligibility, as Judith Butler (2004) defines it, describes the creation of a standard framework which determines who can be deemed a legitimate subject. For example, gender is made intelligible through what Butler terms the heterosexual matrix, the tacit but pervasive norms that render heterosexuality as "natural" (see also Foucault 1978; Rich 1980; Sweet 2021; Ward 2020). While Butler's argument stops at the analysis of gender and sexuality, I suggest that other markers of social belonging likewise require sufficient cultural intelligibility. As such, the process of becoming and remaining intelligible resembles anthropologist Aihwa Ong's characterization of cultural citizenship as "self-making and being made within webs of power linked to the nation-state" (Ong 1996, p. 738). In contrast to the sociological concept of legibility (Greenberg 2021; Sweet 2019; Scott 1998), which captures how individuals make themselves visible or invisible to the state vision and bureaucratic categories, I argue that it is cultural intelligibility that facilitates social recognition as moral equals and, as such, it is constitutive of full social inclusion.

Representational technologies and social infrastructures built around ideals of marriage and nuclear family constitute a multilayered spectrum of intelligibility. Cultural tropes and normative, taken-for-granted representations of a middle-class heterosexual household, conjugality, and the nuclear family are powerful components of governing "at a distance" (Rose and Miller 2008, p. 6; see also Canaday et al. 2021; Donzelot 1997; Foucault 1978; Takeda 2005; Ueno 2009). They make it possible to shape individual action and sensemaking without explicit instruction or dictating individual choices. Tightly woven into the fabric of everyday life,

familial ideals serve as evaluative standards by which individuals examine their actions, desires, accomplishments, and capacities. Normativity, however, should not be confused with ideology of the Marxian tradition, understood as a set of "false ideas" imposed by the dominant group. Instead, multiple, often contradictory, cultural norms are embedded in power relations and thereby productive of diverse meanings and identifications. Individuals inhabit and creatively refashion normative landscapes within the constraints of their structural locations.

In the pages that follow, I analyze how men and women who have variedly experienced devaluation in the marriage market due to their age negotiate their intelligibility vis-à-vis representational technologies of normative "family." In particular, I focus on how they respond to and make themselves intelligible against common tropes of domesticity and consumption. As I have already established, both consumption and domesticity have been integral to the Japanese postwar political economy, and, through married women's contributions, have straddled what are typically conceived as public and private spheres. As such, I suggest that by responding to these morally laden, often feminized tropes, individuals (re)define their attachments to the state and its normative apparatus (Althusser 2009). Common representations of family life encapsulated in meal preparation, laundry, shopping, travel, and other leisure activities not only provide the interpretive grid for evaluating one's (ab)normality and (un)belonging, but also disseminate class-specific, gendered codes of conduct.

The stories of Emiko, Hana, Asuka, and Daichi related in this chapter represent a range of intersectional locations that unevenly position individuals within the gradient of social belonging. Emiko, who married nearing her fifties, disidentifies from motherhood and select cultural premises of lifelong monogamous marriage, but commits to totalizing projects of housework and care. Hana, who fell in love with a man from an ethnic Korean background,

faced family ostracism and used marriage-hunting as an opportunity to legitimate her relationship and redeem her social membership. Asuka, a queer doctoral student in his late thirties adopts a type of dormant hybrid masculinity centered around his housework skills in anticipation of his increasing desirability. Finally, Daichi refuses to fit socioeconomic criteria of marriageable masculinity, but defiantly plans to pursue marriage-hunting until his exclusion from the market, which he poignantly refers to as the moment of "no hope."

Emiko: Compensated Femininity

I met Emiko (49, full-time employee in a publishing house) during a matchmaking event at which we both volunteered. Two years prior, following more than two decades of spouse seeking "even before it was called marriage-hunting," she married a man she met through a marriage agency. Her lengthy experience in the marriage market inspired her to help others navigate marriage-hunting and its uncertainties. Emiko's case illustrates the social marginalization of women considered past reproductive age. As we will see, the inability to secure this key marker of normative womanhood compels her to emphasize other attributes of femininity, enacting a different type of gender hybridity altogether.

Already in her forties and economically independent, Emiko's motivation to marry did not relate to economic security or to satisfying societal expectations of motherhood. Instead, when I asked what motivated her extended search, she described marriage as an answer to the fundamental need for social connection:

> It's not like I had a strong marriage drive or really wanted to have kids, but I couldn't imagine myself living alone forever. I guess there are people who are fine living alone, like those working really hard or with a particular hobby. Having a family would make it harder to live their life. But that wasn't me. I did work, but it's not like work was my life. It's not like I strongly wanted kids, but I wanted to be with someone.

This quote reveals the tension between individualistic aspirations (exemplified in devotion to a career or a hobby) and the anticipated demands of family life. Emiko identified with neither of these common justifications for the decision to forgo marriage, while, at the same time, she shunned the possibility of a solitary life. Since legal marriage remains the dominant socially recognized familial arrangement, Emiko regarded it as the only legitimate solution to her desire not to be alone. The fact that she did not mention considering any alternative solutions to her desire for companionship speaks to the grip that the institution of state-sanctioned marriage has on people's conception of what is possible.

Recounting twenty years of marriage-hunting experiences, Emiko described how the pool of men who showed interest in her gradually dwindled. Once she reached her forties, most of the men interested in her were twenty years older than her. This "generational difference," as she called it, made forming a meaningful connection difficult: "we were into different things and the conversations didn't go well due to the age gap." She joked about her surprise at how many men in their sixties and seventies were well-versed in using smartphones and dating applications. She bemoaned the fact that "when I tried matching with men my own age I usually got rejected." This compounded her sense of marginalization. As the years passed, she let go of any "criteria" (*jōken*, see Chapter 3) she had for a husband; as she put it, "I was old, I couldn't be so picky." Her only non-negotiable requirement was the location: she was not willing to uproot herself by quitting her job and relocating outside the Greater Tokyo Area. The fact that she eventually did find someone close to her age "was a big point. It made me feel closer to him."

Marrying at forty-seven meant that Emiko wrestled with different cultural expectations of marriage, family, motherhood, and femininity. She rejected some, acquiesced to others, and still others she refashioned in ways compatible with her situation. For example, even though she had

fantasized about a grand wedding party when she was younger, for their nuptials Emiko and her husband opted for a modest reception with their twenty closest family members. She described how they arrived at that decision: “Given my age, marriage wasn’t something to have a big party about, so we decided to do a more subtle one.” This suggests that public announcements and celebrations of marriage are considered appropriate only until a certain point in life. If a woman in her forties happens to marry, it behooves her not to draw excessive attention to it.

The desire to underplay the wedding was also partly related to uncertainty regarding her ability to fulfill the key marker of adult Japanese femininity—becoming a mother. As I discussed in previous chapters, the modern Japanese state has long recognized motherhood as indispensable to its goals. For Emiko, the normative link between marriage and childbirth was so ingrained that, early in the interview, when describing how her life changed after marriage, she said “I don’t have a kid yet” as a way of saying she was not too busy. When we circled back to the topic of children at a later point, she referred to her age as prohibitive: “I did [want to have a child], I can’t have one now due to my age, though. I told my husband this. But he doesn’t want kids. It’s not that he doesn’t like children but at our age, it’s too late and saving enough money to be able to send the kids to college would be hard [laughs]. If we were younger, it might have worked out but….” Significantly, recognition of Emiko’s age as not obstructing her marriageability was contingent on her husband’s fertility intentions and accord. As this implies, and as numerous interviewees confirmed, had he desired offspring, he would have been more likely to marry a younger woman instead.

Late marriage also resulted in a significant renegotiation of the cultural ideal of a married lifestyle. In contrast to the entrenched ideal of a married couple that enjoys joint leisure activities, Emiko described how even on days off she and her husband preferred to spend their

free time separately. Distancing herself from the trope of a controlling wife, she said: "because Sunday is his only day off, I try and let him relax." Emiko and her husband also chose not to disclose important personal information to each other, such as their financial standing. They split their living expenses roughly evenly, with her husband paying for occasional outings, but they were mutually uninformed about each other's income, accumulated savings, or spending on items unrelated to the household:

> We don't really talk about it. … It's not like I mind telling him but if I tell him, it will pressure him to tell me… I guess this relationship works because we are both working. If I was just a housewife, I don't think it would work. If you marry young, stuff like finances is very important but after marrying late, I think it's quite common for people to not really know how much each other earns. It's kind of hard to ask. Awkward maybe… And I don't answer because I don't get asked too… It is kind of strange, [he's] a little bit like a stranger.

This quote conveys the distinctive marital arrangement Emiko cultivated with her husband. In a stereotypical marriage from the period of postwar high economic growth, the housewife is tasked with managing all household finances along with her husband's paycheck (Garon 2007, Takeda 2009). Most of my married interviewees described managing household finances through a joint bank account, with each spouse retaining an individual savings account earmarked for personal expenditures, including hobbies. By contrast, through separate finances, Emiko achieves a more radical form of autonomy within her marriage. As she astutely observes, this arrangement is only possible because of her financial independence—it would be impossible had she been "just a housewife."[88] Nevertheless, although her marriage ostensibly fulfills the contemporary market-inflected ideal of women's economic independence, Emiko experiences her relationship as "strange," akin to living with "a stranger."

[88] With an annual income of USD 80,000, Emiko was one of the highest earners among the women I interviewed.

This dissociation from traditional ideals was also evident in how Emiko spoke of divorce. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the time she spent marriage-hunting led her to transform and reorient her ideas about lifelong monogamous marriage. She criticized the "traditional Japanese understanding that after marriage you should be with that person forever" and that "divorce is rare without serious issues." She described being prepared to divorce should her and her husband's values become incompatible:

> People continue to grow, and your values change after marriage no matter your age. Sometimes you may want to spend less time with them, and you might want to spend time with someone else. Even once you're sixty, your values change and you may want to be with someone else. At this age, I am starting to question this idea of marriage for life as we humans are always changing. I don't think divorce is a bad thing. You could still be in a relationship with them as friends. As your values change, the person you live with will change. It's not like I want to get divorced right now [laughs] but depending on each other's values it might be best to divorce.

By challenging the notion of lifelong monogamous marriage, Emiko distanced herself from a crucial normative ideal. From the state's perspective, her emphasis on compatibility of values and worldviews constitutes a feebler ground for matrimony than policy interventions or coercive measures. Nevertheless, in other ways, Emiko's autonomy epitomizes an ideal subject. Her flexibility, openness to change, and ability to absorb individualized risks typify her as an ideal modern subject. Unlike many divorced women in Japan who experience poverty (Abe 2012, Hertog 2009), Emiko's financial independence and childlessness mean that, in the event of divorce, she is unlikely to require state support. In other words, she appears well-equipped to cope with risk as a responsible citizen and an embodiment of feminine independence.

Yet, for Emiko, this autonomy was double-edged. Despite disidentifying from some cultural promises of heteronormative marriage, she did not escape other expectations around the material arrangements of a male-female household. She described performing virtually all household chores, not unlike a full-time homemaker in a traditional nuclear family. Asserting

that her workload remained largely unchanged, she rationalized it as follows: “Just the amount has increased. [Now] I do two people’s worth of laundry instead of one. And it’s not something I have to do every day.”

Emiko similarly described adjusting meal preparation—another referent of feminine, wifely domesticity— to align with her husband’s preferences:

> When I cooked for myself, I would just make something edible. But now, I care about taste, nutrition, or variation. Cooking for someone, or just thinking for someone can be fun – although some people may find it annoying. I think there are lots of mothers who work hard for someone, like their kids. I don’t have a kid, but I want to work hard for my husband too. Like if he wants to eat something, I’ll make it for him even if it might be something I don’t particularly like.

While acknowledging that it might be unpalatable, Emiko transformed her disposition towards hard work to embrace the more traditional ideal of femininity. Working hard for her husband and putting his preferences ahead of hers serves as a functional equivalent of the labor she would perform as a mother (see also Bellah et al. 2007; Borovoy 2005). Her description of cooking with attention to diverse and nutritious meals echoes the understanding of housework as a project requiring total dedication and specialized knowledge (cf. Takeda 2005; 2008), as well as the normative expectations of a “good wife, wise mother” that, since the Meiji period, have underpinned Japan’s gendered political economy. As Emiko’s case attests, care and selflessness remain uncontested signifiers of culturally intelligible womanhood.

Crucially, Emiko described this reorientation as entirely voluntary. In the same vein, she rejected the potentially subversive behavior and identity of a woman drinking alone in public by no longer going out to drink on her own—an activity she particularly enjoyed prior to marriage. As she put it: “It’s not like my husband says anything, but I just don’t go out now and drink for the sake of drinking.” These experiences underscore the seductive power of normativity and the subtle ways in which it can (re-)orient individual aspirations and behavior. While Emiko was

well-positioned to potentially reject or reformulate these expectations—and indeed, she disidentified with some premises of heterosexual marriage —she ultimately embraced even those ideas of femininity she once deemed problematic. As a "career woman" past reproductive age, her hybrid performance of femininity embraced certain aspects of traditional femininity (domesticity, housework) with double strength.

Hana: Legitimating Marriage with an Outsider Through Marriage-Hunting

Hana, 38, hails from what is conventionally considered a good family. Her father was a manager in a large Japanese bank while her mother took care of the house and children. Due to the nature of her father's work, Hana grew up both in Japan and overseas, in locations from Switzerland to the United States. Her experience rotating between these different cultural contexts and struggle to pursue marriage with a man illuminates the national dimensions of marriageability. When we met, Hana had been happily married for almost two years. She first tried marriage-hunting in her early thirties, upon returning from overseas and having finished her graduate degree and a long-term relationship with a woman. She described how her reintroduction to Japanese society at that age revolved in large part around marriage:

> Back in Japan, I felt a lot of social pressure about getting married, the appropriate age of marriage and things like that. Things I had not been so aware of, or I was not under that kind of pressure when I lived in the United States. … All of a sudden it dawned on me that I am thirty-two and I need to get married.

Compounding her sense of diminishing cultural illegibility were interactions during social outings with her friends. She noted how their conversations became markedly different from those in their twenties. When I asked if her friends pressured her to marry, she hesitated:

> Not directly, like they weren't trying to persuade me to get married or anything like that. If I told them I wasn't going to get married they would probably say, "Oh, that's fine." But indirectly, yes, I felt a lot of pressure from them. Because whenever we went out for drinks or for dinner they would talk about their

> husbands and about their kids and I felt left out, a lot of times. Because I didn't share the same kind of life experiences. And then when they would notice me being silent, they'd also ask "What's going on, Hana? How is your life?" but it was obvious that what they were really interested in was how to get their kids into daycare or whatever. I felt like we were in different life stages… They didn't have any bad intentions, but I did feel very much left out or left behind.

As Hana eloquently describes, being the only unmarried, childless person in the company of young, urban mothers and wives was alienating. Although there is no official mandate for motherhood, it is the taken-for-granted, normative experience of women in their early thirties. Her marital status meant that Hana became less intelligible to her friends, who were uninterested in or unable to relate to her life outside the familial narrative. This indicates how the trope of the nuclear family delimits what is "thinkable, sayable, and doable" (Rose and Miller 2008, p. 4). Moreover, with her friends entering life stages that she was unfamiliar with and that involved discussing things like childcare options, Hana became acutely aware of her social membership slipping away. As she phrased it, she felt "left out" or even "left behind."

Compounding this, between her day job as an adjunct lecturer and her freelance job as a translator, Hana was also no longer getting introduced to new people beyond her close network. This compelled her to try marriage-hunting. She cast her net broadly. During a year-long stint, she attended machikon and marriage-hunting parties (see Chapter 4), used several dating applications, and, with her parents' financial support, enrolled in a marriage agency. At one point, she got engaged to an engineer working at Toshiba. Despite their families' mutual approval, they called things off. Hana described realizing irreconcilable differences when he suddenly lost his job and did not start immediately looking for employment (earlier in the relationship he told her she did not have to be gainfully employed). Hana also could not comprehend his decisions around big-ticket purchases, such as when he insisted on buying a spare pair of wedding bands: "He said whenever we manufacture products at Toshiba, we always calculate risks, probability

the machine will break down and so on. You need spare parts." At this point, despondent, Hana decided to go on a marriage-hunting hiatus.

This is when she met Hikaru, her now-husband. They met at a bar and "he seemed like a really nice guy, so we started going out," she recalled. On their second date, Hikaru revealed he was a third-generation Zainichi Korean.[89] Like many resident Koreans living in Japan, Hikaru was working in the highly stigmatized *pachinko* [gambling] industry. Hana considered these factors irrelevant: "he doesn't even speak Korean at all, he grew up and he was born and raised here… it was just ethnicity." These factors did, however, matter a great deal to her parents, who objected to their relationship: "They were totally, openly, absolutely opposed. I've never seen my father so mad! He was swearing, screaming and everything… my mother wasn't yelling but she was really upset."

Hana was taken aback. Earlier in the interview, she described her upbringing as "global" and her family as "globally minded." Her parents' reaction contradicted the "family values" she was brought up with, including "not discriminat[ing] against people based on race or ethnicity. … So, when they started reacting against my partner I was like 'What are you talking about?!'" She interpreted her parents' opposition as having more to do with their expectations about her partner's class background. Beyond even education or income levels, she felt they were looking for more elusive markers of social status. As an ethnic minority working in a disreputable industry, Hikaru did not match her parents' expectations and standards of marriageability, which were circumscribed to Japanese ethnonationality and middle class economic and cultural capital.

[89] Zainichi Koreans are the largest ethnic minority in Japan. On experiences of Koreans in Japan see Jaeeun Kim (2019) *Contested Embrace*, on the tensions around the involvement of Zainichi Koreans in the gambling industry see also Min Jin Lee's novel, *Pachinko* (2017).

Although Hana's prior experience marriage-hunting led her to realize that "I know there are no better people out there, I'm not going to meet anyone," her parents insisted she return to the marketplace. They struck a deal: if she did not meet anyone within one year, her parents would accept Hikaru as her husband. In the meantime, they redoubled their efforts to marry their daughter off to a more appropriate candidate: they attended marriage-hunting events for parents and enrolled Hana in another marriage agency. A renewed effort at marriage-hunting with an expectation of meeting a candidate of opposite gender and suitably middle-class, ethnically Japanese background constituted as a type of redeeming opportunity for Hana. She could not marry below her status without endeavoring to find a good match first.

The fallout of this mismatch reveals the potency of boundaries around the intersections of gender, class, and nationality. In addition, it had profound individual-level ramifications. Although they were eventually allowed to marry, the experience left an indelible mark on Hana and Hikaru's relationship. During the one-year period their relationship was put on hold, Hana was introduced to about one marriage candidate per month, forcing the couple to preserve their bond though sporadic meetings. Hikaru offered to talk to Hana's parents in an attempt to convince them about his sincerity, but as Hana put it, "that wasn't the point." She described learning about the pain and humiliation her husband experienced from his boss. A Zainichi Korean man in his sixties, he too experienced a tumultuous relationship with a Japanese woman decades ago. He told Hana that waiting for her while she was seeing other men "crushed him, shattered his pride."

The experiences of engaging and disengaging with the marriage-hunting industry led Hana to reevaluate what she was looking for in a partner. By temporarily acquiescing to her

parents' wishes, she was able to redeem herself in their eyes and to retain her social membership circumscribed to heterosexuality, Japaneseness, middle-class status.

Asuka: Dormant Hybrid Masculinity

At the time of our interview, Asuka was a 38-year-old doctoral student. He initially asserted he would be of no use for my research as he did not want to marry and was not interested in marriage-hunting or relationships in general. Indeed, he said he tried not to think about them. Yet, during our interview, it became apparent that he was not immune to the allure of cultural intelligibility offered by marriage. Our conversation uniquely illuminates the command that normative standards have even over those who distance themselves from marriage and heterosexuality.

Asuka enumerated several reasons why he felt ambivalent about marriage. He came from a well-to-do family. His father, a successful businessman, and his mother, a renowned pianist, met through an arranged marriage. Theirs was not a good relationship. Instances of domestic violence permanently tarnished Asuka's view of marriage. On several cold winter nights, his father threw him and his mother out of the house with no coats and no money. Desperate and embarrassed, they had to take taxis to his grandparents' house and borrow cash for the fare. Harboring these traumatic childhood memories, Asuka viewed his married friends with repulsion. He spoke disapprovingly of his male friends who pursued extramarital affairs with women half their age and were frequent visitors to the diverse establishments of Tokyo's sex industry. It made him question the point of marriage.

But Asuka also criticized friends who fell into typical patterns of domestic life after marriage. Since their lives and schedules now revolved around their families, he rarely saw them, and when he did, he complained: "all they talk about is where to buy a cheap house, where to

buy organic groceries. They compare themselves to single people. I feel really isolated." This led him, as he put it, to periodically "overhaul" (*rinyuaru suru*) his friendship group—to cut ties with friends who became unbearable due to their familial attachments and to "ignore their invitations [without] feeling bad about it." Echoing Hana's sense of being left out, Asuka described how aging without access to the shared cultural narrative of the nuclear family and domestic life results in a sense of social isolation. He also recalled numerous instances, such as at family functions and gatherings, when he had to account for his single status—that is, make himself intelligible. He even described an embodied, visceral experience of waning belonging when his massage therapist recently ruined the state of relaxation by prying about marriage.

Mundane reminders about normalcy and the desirability of the nuclear family as a precondition for social membership seemed ubiquitous in Asuka's everyday life, making him particularly appreciative when he was able to avoid them. He was grateful, for example, that his neighborhood of Koenji, a residential area popular among single women, normalized the quotidian life as a single person:

> You can walk around alone here and nobody's giving you strange looks. You can buy 100 grams of meat for your meal at the butchers and the shopkeeper won't be surprised – in other places they would get annoyed. You can buy a quarter of a cabbage, you know, the amount needed for a meal for one person.

As this quote illustrates, the conventional images of domestic life and nuclear family do not simply saturate interactions within social networks, they also structure the very environments that individuals inhabit. Echoing the metaphor of a cabbage head that goes to waste if purchased only for a single person (see Chapter 3), Asuka asserts his independence through the ability to purchase an appropriate amount of produce. The themes of shopping for produce and preparing fresh meals—symbolic of broader middle-class homely activities— recurrently emerged in my interviews in relation to the notions of idealized domestic life (and the household labor

performed by women). Asuka's experience accentuates that access to these symbolic activities is not equally available to those whose consumption patterns typify them as single.

Asuka identified as progressive, an orientation he attributed to his education in women's and gender studies and his status as a sexual minority (he considers himself asexual). He also boasted a large circle of friends who are women. As such, he acknowledged that women his age experience much stronger pressures around marriage in comparison. Asuka also rejected expectations that only women perform housework. He took great pride in his housekeeping skills, the utter lack of which he identified as one reason men like him marry:

> I'm very good at doing laundry. For example, what kind of detergent to use, what program, how to hang it. I also iron completely by myself. I hand-wash. My apartment is really clean. I am really good at house chores. So, I don't mind if my wife is a "hyper-career woman" (*chō kyariya uman*), and I'm the one preparing meals and picking up children. But in Japan, this kind of idea is still rare.

This quote further underscores the notion of housework as a totalizing "project" that requires specialized knowledge. Asuka was uniquely willing to become a stay-at-home husband given his domestic skills. By opening up this alternative interpretive possibility, he narrated a version of himself that is culturally intelligible and borrows from a masculine identity of a stay-at-home father that has recently gained in desirability (e.g., Goldstein-Gidoni 2020). At the same time, he asserted his self-sufficiency when it comes to housework—in contrast to the archetypical Japanese man who, while economically independent, relies on his wife for domestic work.

As the quote above also suggests, Asuka did not preclude the possibility of marrying one day. The main issue, he explained, was that he did not feel like a full-fledged adult member of society (*shakaijin,* literally: social/societal person).[90] For one, he lacked a *proper* job for his 38

[90] Categorization as *shakaijin* usually assumes permanent employment and is contrasted with the category of "student" (*gakusei*) who is not considered a full adult. To become an adult (*shakaijin ni naru),* then, usually implies

years of age: "It's really weird when you think about age. Being a PhD student in your thirties is fine in the U.S. but in Japan… it's kind of ok, but it kind of sets me apart from the values (*kachikan*) of dating." In this way, Asuka demonstrated his familiarity with the dominant valuation system in the dating economy, in which marriageability for men requires full-time, stable employment. Asuka's low income was another issue. Even prior to graduate school, he earned a meager salary as a community organizer, which he cited as preventing him from thinking seriously about relationships with women:

> I only made 120,000 yen [approx. USD 1,200] per month. I could barely live off it myself, I really don't think marriage would've been realistic. People in the [organization] told me 'you could become a kept man (*himo*), you could depend on the woman.' But in Japan, still if the man is not a breadwinner (*breddowinnā*), it's somehow … [long pause] … not good. … I just don't think it's such an easy thing to become a *himo*.

As these qualms around employment, income, and marriageability reveal, and despite his identity as a sexual minority and progressive outlook, Asuka was nonetheless unable to simply repudiate the standards of marriageable, breadwinner masculinity. His inability to precisely articulate his unease with becoming a dependent man was telling. Becoming dependent invokes the specter of social abjection by contradicting the values of autonomy and entrepreneurship. As Fraser and Gordon (1994) remind us, neoliberal political regimes tend to frame dependency itself as a shorthand for moral and psychological unworthiness. As Asuka astutely observed, it is not easy to become a kept man.

Still, Asuka was optimistic that he would be able to marry once he decided to. He disclosed having a large circle of single women friends, though he was not fond of the fact they

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being a fulltime worker, which further underscores the entwinement of preconditions for marriage and cultural citizenship.

were nearing their forties.[91] Even their parents liked him. He described how once, at a friend's wedding reception, the bride's mother confessed she had always expected him to marry her daughter. Asuka initially described this comment as "weird" and wondered out loud how someone could think of a "poor graduate student in this way." At the same time, he interpreted the comment as indicating his greater value in the marriage market compared to the groom, who, albeit a widower, was "a high-ranked bureaucrat in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications." In this instance, the gendered standards of marriageability that normally reminded him of his inadequacy allowed Asuka to evaluate himself as superior to another eligible bachelor.

Indeed, market standards also informed the way Asuka talked about an anticipated increase in his "market value": "I don't have a lot of money now, but if I become an assistant professor, I probably won't have a problem [getting married]. I'm kind of 'high prize' on the market if I'm single, not divorced, 42 years old, working at a private university. I should become a good candidate. I don't need to hurry." Significantly, Asuka explicitly described himself as a "high prize" in the marriage market. Confident that his status as a desirable commodity will increase with future full-time employment, he opts to wait until he embodies that criterion of masculine marriageability and thus attains cultural intelligibility. As such, he adopts a strategy not unlike the herbivorous men I analyzed in the previous chapter.

Asuka's example illustrates the many paradoxes faced by individuals who disidentify from traditional family and gender norms. He recognized the negative aspects of matrimony and conjugal life informed by his childhood experiences, sexual identity, interactions with married

[91] For example, he said he was weary of dating women in their late forties because, in his mind, for them "any future relationship or love affair must be definitely connected to marriage." He didn't like the fact that women's desire to marry precludes other types of relationships they could enter.

acquaintances, and academic knowledge. At the same time, he was unable to fully renounce or pivot away from the promises of heterosexual marriage and continued to evaluate himself vis-à-vis prevailing standards of marriageability.

Daichi: Persistence Until Exclusion

My interview with Daichi, 38, was arranged last minute on an early Tuesday afternoon. He informed me that, as a self-employed construction worker, he sometimes gets an unanticipated weekday off due to unforeseen disruptions in the supply chain. On those days, he likes to go shopping in Tokyo's commercial center, Shinjuku. Indeed, dressed to the nines in a trendy cable knit sweater, dark jeans, and what appeared to be a brand-new pair of leather boots, Daichi carried several shopping bags emblazoned with names of retailers and department stores in the vicinity: Paul Smith, Zara, Isetan.

Like Asuka, Daichi confessed feeling ambivalent about marriage. His own familial experiences made him wary of the issues that can break a family apart. His parents divorced after years of domestic violence. He described how, as a teenager with an above average build, he often intervened when his father abused his mother. There were economic issues, too. Daichi and his two siblings all started working in junior high school to subsidize the household income. After years of conflict over finance, he eventually became estranged from his brother who, he felt, was not contributing his fair share.

By the time we met, Daichi had been searching for a spouse for over six years. He had used every type of service within the marriage-hunting industry along with adjacent services, such as fortune telling for spouse-seekers. He had dated several women, including a primary school teacher he saw for three months, but invariably he was rejected. He perceptively

attributed these failings to several disadvantages: “In the end, I was rejected every time. It was usually because of my income, job, or the fact that I was the eldest son.” As this quote suggests, men like Daichi are acutely aware of the key characteristics that render a man marriageable—namely, the combination of their breadwinning capacity, occupational status, and the social expectation (or lack thereof) of caring for aging parents (see also Yu and Hertog 2018)—and expect to be evaluated by these standards.

Over the years, however, Daichi grew resentful of the socioeconomic criteria determining his desirability in the market, particularly being evaluated through the prism of his income: “I think many people there [in a marriage agency] cared about money. They cared about where you worked and if you were earning more than average. If your income was less, you got rejected no matter how hard you tried.” Although Daichi’s salary was not below the marriage-hunting market standards of “stable men,” in combination with his other socioeconomic characteristics, it resulted in disadvantage. He described how multiple rejections prompted him to reconsider why such criteria matter for men whereas others seemingly do not. Frustrated with these normative standards, he described a new strategy he had recently implemented: to find someone who puts less emphasis on socioeconomic status, he lowered the income displayed on his dating profile by between USD 10,000 and 15,000 per year. He also disclosed regularly playing the lottery (*takarakuji*). As such, he risked increased unintelligibility as a man in irregular employment, without higher educational attainment, and with a potential gambling problem. Since making those adjustments, Daichi had found no matches, indicating the difficulty of subverting the rules of the game.

Paradoxically, although Daichi despised being judged by socioeconomic standards, his notion of a fulfilling marriage was deeply entangled with the ideal of a middle-class consuming

couple. For example, when asked about his desired married life, he described enjoying domestic and international travel with his spouse. When he was younger, the costs of travel were prohibitive; the only trip he remembered was a once-a-year day excursion from his hometown Kawasaki to a local farm where he picked and ate fresh strawberries. Now, more economically secure, he hoped to devote a part of his disposable income to traveling both within Japan and overseas. That this image of marriage exerted such a strong pull on him is significant. First, it illustrates how common tropes of marriage involving consumption and travel work in tandem with the portrayals of domesticity discussed above. Second and relatedly, this ability to consume and afford certain leisure activities within the material arrangements of heterosexual marriage affirms cultural belonging both as a married subject and a consuming citizen.

Moreover, despite his frustrations with the prevailing standards of masculine marriageability, Daichi did not disavow parallel market criteria for women. He expected his future wife to embody paradigmatic hybrid femininity. In an apologetic tone, he said his wife had to be under 35, as he heard it is difficult to conceive past that age. He did not mind if she stayed at home, but she should not be *intent on* becoming a housewife. As he elaborated: "It seems like these people won't work hard after marriage. I like people who are challengers. I don't like people who think that if they're ugly, then they will always stay ugly. I don't like it if they become people with frizzy hair, unless it's a perm…" By likening household labor to the efforts necessary to achieve conventionally attractive, neat appearance, Daichi rejects the image of an indolent, passive housewife as morally inferior. Like housework, embodying proper hybrid femininity is a labor-intensive project that requires devotion and intentionality on the part of the wife. In keeping with the market ethos of self-betterment, Daichi hoped for an entrepreneurial partner who would continue improving herself. While he attempted to reclaim his own social

membership by disassociating from one set of standards, he upheld the parameters of women's intelligibility encapsulated in normative femininity.

Significantly, Daichi also expected his wife's care work to encompass him. In addition to hoping for an amicable relationship, Daichi described wanting a wife who could skillfully manage his emotions: "I would also like her to not hide things. It's okay if I don't realize [that she's hiding something], but if I do, I think my feelings will be hurt a lot. So, if she can't hide something well, don't hide it at all." Rather than wishing for complete honesty and transparency, as dictated by the normative model of marital intimacy, he recognized that some issues might best be left undiscussed and did not seek full intimate disclosure. In such situations, his partner ought to either labor to conceal them completely, or not conceal them at all.

Towards the end of the interview, I asked Daichi by what age he hoped to marry. "By forty-five, perhaps?" he answered after some deliberation and elaborated, "After that, I might give up. I started at thirty-two and if it gets to my mid-forties then I would have done [marriage-hunting] for thirteen years. Also, the women around me will increase in age too. I guess after then, there will be no hope." For Daichi, the possibility of pursuing marriage-hunting for over a decade connotes a failure, as evinced in the phrases "giving up" and "no hope." But ultimately, Daichi based his anticipated withdrawal from the marriage-hunting economy on the expectation of his partner's more advanced age. The real situation of "no hope" was perhaps failing to secure a match with a woman young enough to become a mother.

After our conversation, Daichi timidly handed me one of the bags he carried. Inside was a box of Japanese confections in wrapping paper decorated with a beautiful depiction of figurines of the Emperor and Empress in traditional court dresses on their wedding day—a display parents customarily arrange for their daughters before Girls' Day on March 3. According to a

superstition, failure to store these figurines away in a timely manner results in a daughter's delayed marriage. The custom serves as another potent reminder about the embeddedness of representations of marriage in everyday life and the gendered standards underpinning marriage at an appropriate age.

As Daichi's example illustrates, disidentification from one set of masculinity standards is not necessarily paired with a parallel relaxation of expectations for feminine overcompensation. It is possible that by falling short of key criteria of marriageable masculinity, he shores up even more rigid expectations for his future partner, despite being aware it might ultimately lead to his exclusion from the market.

CONCLUSION

As the examples of Emiko, Hana, Asuka, and Daichi demonstrate, signals about the normalcy and desirability of a traditional conjugal arrangement and a male-female household are ubiquitous in everyday life. From shopping for produce to outings with friends, individuals in this chapter were routinely reminded how their cultural intelligibility—or lack thereof—is intertwined with market standards of marriageability and the capacity to participate in the marriage-hunting market. Representational technologies pertaining to consumption and domesticity provide powerful evaluative frames through which individuals assess their lifestyles, accomplishments, as well as past and future decisions. Repeated mundane encounters with these tropes can lead to an interrogation and redefinition of one's attachments to the state-sanctioned normative ideals, yet the possibilities to completely repudiate them are limited.

By focusing on how gender and age dynamically intersect with other social characteristics, this chapter has illuminated the uneven and inconsistent distribution of social

membership within the marriage-hunting economy. Devaluation and prolonged exposure to market standards results in complex enactments of gender. Different configurations of sexuality, class, and nationality shape access to (and perceptions of) prevailing standards and result in "an unequal distribution of ability to shape symbolic realities" (Schwalbe et al. 2000, p. 425). When negotiating their relationship with and proximity to normative ideals, Emiko, Hana, Asuka, and Daichi simultaneously negotiate their attachments to the state. As their narratives evince, even with access to the signifiers of middle-class normalcy, marriage alone is not a guarantee of full citizenship; marketized social belonging requires constant labor.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the marriage-hunting industry in Japan, documenting how morally laden market standards of marriageability distribute social membership around intersections of gender, class, age, and nationality. I set out to answer two main research questions. First, what is the role of this dating economy in modern governance? The answer to this question reveals the importance of attending to culture and gender to understand the connections between intimate markets, statecraft, and citizenship. Second, how do individuals navigate the standards and values embedded in marketized courtship practices? The answer illuminates the diverse self-making projects as those interpellated as "men" and "women" in the marriage market enact complex, hybrid performances of masculinity and femininity in response to prevailing valuation regimes.

To engage macro- (structural), meso- (institutional), and micro- (individual) level analyses, I collected multiple types of qualitative data. I observed dozens of diverse marriage-hunting events, conducted nearly 130 interviews with professionals organizing spouse-seeking activities and their clients, and collected documentary evidence such as advertising materials and government documents. By triangulating between different types of evidence, I have analyzed how the marriage-hunting market mediates structural-level social transformations and state

discourses and, in turn, how individuals respond to the demands of marriageability refracted through the market. My experience living in Japan as a woman, fluent Japanese speaker, and alumna of the University of Tokyo helped me to connect with my interlocutors and contextualize their experiences, self-understandings, and aspirations.

Following from my analysis, I argue that participants in the marriage-hunting economy negotiate not only their interpersonal intimate ties but also their membership in the political community. Market discourses act as a mechanism of moral regulation by redefining marriageability as a meritocratic achievement conditional on access to material and symbolic resources. Combining moral, cultural, and economic valences, marketized standards of marriageability are used to evaluate and classify individuals while circumscribing socially legitimate forms of intimacy. Since marriageability standards are believed to differ for men and for women, the emergent normative ideal of social membership is also gendered. Grafted onto citizenship mechanisms that have been historically entrenched in the institution of marriage, the marriage-hunting economy reinscribes social hierarchies and distributes social belonging along a spectrum of cultural intelligibility.

In the following sections, I provide a succinct overview of this dissertation's findings before then exploring their implications for social-scientific studies of gender and governance as well as for theorizing the commodification of intimacy.

Overview of Findings

In the first empirical chapter, I drew on academic research in Japanese and English, mass media accounts, literary works, government documents, advertisements, business brochures, and visual media to reconstruct accounts of intimate governance in three periods of modern Japan. I

explored how marriage mediation in modern Japan evolved with new conceptions of family, gender, and personhood and how family and marriage were central to the shifting goals of Japanese statecraft, from modern state- and empire-building to postwar economic expansion, and finally to current efforts oriented at preventing economic and demographic decline. The married woman—who in the postwar era congealed into the housewife ideal—was envisioned as an agent of the state, tasked with the responsibilities of both biological and social reproduction. I showed how the different commercial courtship services that emerged over the course of the twentieth century and ultimately adopted the marriage-hunting label have long been structured by gendered distinctions around social status and sexual respectability. By situating the marriage-hunting market in an array of intimate services, I have shown how marriage mediation shifted from a "gift exchange" of brides between patriarchal households to a market economy in which autonomous, self-reliant women are expected to skillfully commodify themselves and engage in marriage-hunting.

In the next chapter, I moved to the contemporary context to show how professionals in the marriage-hunting market conceptualize marriage and marriageability. I outlined how market professionals connect the personal and the political by linking marriage-hunting to demographic change and population science. When refracted through market institutions, entrenched notions of marriageability crystallize into market standards wrapped in a veneer of scientific credibility. I demonstrated how the marketization and attendant rationalization of spouse seeking also promotes gendered criteria of marriageability that emphasize men's economic standing and women's reproductive capacity. By framing heterosexual marriage as a product with broad appeal and marriageability as a meritocratic achievement, market professionals imbue marriage-hunting with moral valence and frame it as conducive to self-betterment.

Based on my analysis of mediated marriage-hunting interactions, in the fourth chapter I coined a new analytic concept, *cultural fluency*, to examine how different modalities of mediation enable individual enactment of courtship scripts. Intensive mediation substitutes clients' cultural fluency, moderate mediation enhances it, while weak cultural mediation compels individuals to mobilize their own cultural fluency. I demonstrated how different marriage-hunting intermediaries variedly draw on legacies and reputations of arranged and love marriage and their attendant courtship practices. Since weak mediation enables romantic interactions that most closely resemble "organic" encounters outside the market, it is the most socially valued. The tiered structure of the market enables individuals to pursue spouse-seeking at different junctures, insofar as they can approximate key normative criteria.

In the fifth chapter, I showed how fitting the market standards of marriageability requires mobilization of hybrid gender performances. Through an analysis of interviews, spatial and embodied arrangements of matchmaking events, and textual and pictorial discourses from the industry, I demonstrated how women are encouraged to become proactive and pursue marriageable men in a context in which economic stagnation has purportedly rendered men uninterested in courtship. When enacting hybrid femininity, women must strategically avoid trespassing boundaries of respectability. By linking contemporary gender ideals to historical governance projects and long-standing anxieties about respectability, I showed how these ostensibly progressive gender norms are enmeshed in patriarchal state goals.

In the sixth and final empirical chapter I provided an in-depth analysis of the narratives and experiences of four individuals marginalized within in the marriage-hunting market. I revealed the influence of marketization and attendant standardization as men and women in this chapter evaluate themselves, their aspirations, and their current and anticipated social standing

vis-à-vis market criteria. Assumptions around gender, class, and age indelibly structure their intimate experiences and life chances. Since their social membership is conditional on being intelligible as marriageable subjects, they negotiate the unstable nature of marketized citizenship in different and creative ways.

Gender, Governance, and Courtship

This project demonstrates the utility of social scientific inquiry into modern state power through sites which, at first glance, appear to have little to do with statecraft. Aiming to capture state power as horizontal and diffuse (Canaday et al. 2021; Morgan and Orloff 2017), my inquiry moves beyond approaches taken by scholars of the state who analyze policy and legal discourses, or individual interactions with organs of authority. By historicizing the contemporary marriage-hunting market and by tracing how state discourses are woven into courtship ideals and everyday practices, this dissertation provides new insight into "governing at a distance" (Rose and Miller 2008). Specifically, my analysis of the moralization of marriageability, reveals how "modern," ostensibly progressive gender ideals, including articulations of hybrid femininity and masculinity, are central to governance through autonomous, agentic individuals.

My findings also illuminate the contradictions and unintended consequences of such operations of modern state power. At the time of this writing in June 2023, the Japanese state's decades-long efforts to sculpt the body politic (Cott 2001) have failed to increase marriage and childbirth rates.[92] Moreover, Japan has dropped to the 125th position (down from 116th the year

[92] In fact, marriage rates dropped to a new historic low while total fertility rate dropped to 1.26 in 2022. See Shunsuke Kamiashi and Ayami Abe, "COVID not sole cause of marriage decline in Japan amid record low births" *Mainichi Shinbun*, June 6, 2023, https://mainichi.jp/articles/20230602/k00/00m/040/177000c (last accessed June 24, 2023).

prior) in the annual Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum 2023), ranking the lowest in the Asia Pacific Region and among G7 countries. Extreme gender inequality—material *and* symbolic—continues to shape intimate choices for both men and women. Although Japanese political leaders pledge to redouble state efforts oriented at reversing population decline and increasing gender parity, it will take more than lip service to dismantle cultural ideals entrenched in the social order based on the "traditional" Japanese family and women's unrecognized social contributions. Indeed, this study's findings suggest that normative gender expectations reflected in proposed solutions are increasingly untenable and exclusionary.

This is not to argue that normativity has lost its grip. On the contrary, my findings suggest that in the context of extreme gender inequality a novel form of patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti 1988) is taking shape. Better positioned women and men develop cultural fluency sufficient to navigate the uneven terrain of citizenship. For others, however, social membership and the possibility of recognition as moral equals are compromised. At the same time, individual recognition and enactment of standards as performative, temporary, and a means to an end suggests the ultimate limits of subjectification processes. Future work should investigate whether and to what degree performances necessitated by market standards coalesce into more permanent identifications and subjectivities.

Commodification of Intimacy

In March 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought my in-person data collection for this project to an abrupt, unexpected end. Over a hectic weekend, I packed my bags, scribbled farewell messages to my interlocutors promising to come back as soon as possible, and boarded an almost empty return flight to Detroit. Back in the United States, I moved my research online

at the same time as vast swaths of social life—including courtship—pivoted to virtual platforms. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this had unanticipated methodological advantages. I began to notice striking parallels between my findings and the accounts of courtship in the United States.

As the pandemic has further accelerated the popularization of online dating and dating applications, third party mediation in intimate markets became the norm. The media also reported on the emergence of so-called "intentional" (as opposed to casual) dating in response to prolonged uncertainty.[93] The variegated landscape of courtship services now includes services promising to lead to committed relationships and even marriage in a straightforward, efficient manner. By circumventing the inconveniences of dating, these services function not unlike the more interventionist modes of mediation I analyzed in this study.[94] Perhaps most surprisingly, the popularity of reality television shows such as "Indian Matchmaking" and "Jewish Matchmaking" has brought explicit consideration of socioeconomic criteria, status, and family background—bread and butter for sociologists, but taboos under the regime of romantic love—into open discussion. Occurring against the backdrop of skyrocketing economic inequality, these shifts indicate that the logics of markets and standards have become an important regime of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) in intimate lives.

As such, although the empirical focus of this study is the marriage-hunting industry in Japan, my analytic scaffolding will have resonance in other contexts. Attending to the cultural work of market intermediaries, I have argued that sociologists must analyze both the varying ways, and the extent to which, third party actors exploit local cultural conditions to facilitate

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[93] See Cady Lang, "How the Pandemic Fueled the Rise of 'Intentional' Dating." *TIME*, October 28, 2021, https://time.com/6106565/pandemic-dating/ (last accessed June 24, 2023).

[94] See Alyson Krueger. "What It's Like to Work with a Matchmaker." *The New York Times*, February 27, 2021.

intimate ties. By attending to experiences of those both at the center and on the margins of the marriage-hunting market, this dissertation has clarified how social inequality is refracted through market-based courtship practices in novel ways. Taking intimacy as always-already embedded in the political economy, I demonstrated that commodification does not inevitably corrupt intimacy or erode the putative private sphere. Rather, its adverse consequences lie in predicating individual life chances (Weber 1978) on one's location in the market.

My sociological approach to marriage-hunting in contemporary Japan offers a unique analytic prism through which to view the entanglements of markets, politics, and intimate lives in the twenty-first century. Systematically linking the emergence of this field with the state's long-standing attempts to regulate sexuality, reproduction, and gender hierarchies through the institution of marriage allows us to conceptualize marketized courtship as a site where individual agency, subjectivity, and desires come to terms with novel modes of social control. These theoretical insights will enable a fuller understanding of the new dating economies and their stratifying effects—in Japan and elsewhere they emerge, reshaping intimate ties and the contours of governance.

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Appendix A. Marriage Support Organizations

List of companies and organizations providing marriage-hunting services. All links were active as of October 19, 2021.

1. Companies Organizing Dating Events, Marriage-Hunting Seminars, and Matchmaking Services:

Airisu Konkatsu Café, https://smartstyleparty.com
Bridal NPO, https://bridal-npo.org
Bridal Tulip, https://bridal-tulip.info
Bridal VIP, https://www.bridal-vip.co.jp
Bright for Men, https://bmen.jp
Chane Claire, https://www.2400.co.jp
Exeo Japan, https://www.exeo-japan.co.jp
Fiore Party, https://www.fiore-party.com
IBJ Japan, https://www.ibjapan.jp
J-Konkatu, https://konkatu.or.jp
Konkatsu Style, https://konkatsu-style.net
Machikon JAPAN, https://machicon.jp
Marry Me, https://marrymeweb.com
Marry Up, https://www.marryup.jp
Matching App University, https://jsbs2012.jp
Minna no Konkatsu, https://minkon.jp
Natural Style Party, https://www.clubwith.tv
New York Style Dating, https://www.nysd.jp
Nozze, https://www.nozze.com
NPO SPB, http://npo-spb.net
Omi Kare, https://party-calendar.net
Onet, https://onet.co.jp/service/ouchi/
Otocon, https://www.otocon.jp
Partner Agent, https://www.p-a.jp
Party Party, https://www.partyparty.jp/kanto
Party, https://party.jp
People and Communities Network, https://www.p-co2012.jp
Rooters, https://www.team-rooters.com

White Key, https://whitekey.co.jp
Zexy Enmusubi Agent, https://zexy-en-soudan.net
Zexy Enmusubi Events, https://en-event.zexy.net
Zwei, https://www.zwei.com

2. Matching Applications:

Aocca
Bridal Net
BridalNet
Couplink
Cross Me
Dine
EnKonkatsu Agent
Fancy
Feat
If If
KoiAi
KyariKon
Live Duo
Marissh
Match.com
Matchbook
Matcher
Mimi
Omiai
Pairful
Pairs
Pairs Engage
Ravit
Remarry
SweetRing
Tappuru
Tinder Japan
Tōkare Dēto
Tōkare Romansu
With
Yay!
YouBride
Zexy Enmusubi

3. Marriage Support Services Sponsored by Local Governments:

Aichi Deai Sapooto Potaaru Saito, https://www.aiconnavi.jp
Aomori Deai Support Center, http://adsc.jp

Deai Ba – Ibaraki Deai Sapooto Sentaa, https://www.ibccnet.com
Deai Plaza, Akita Kekkon Shien Sentaa, https://www.sukoyaka-akita.com
Ehime Kekkon Shien Sentaa, https://www.msc-ehime.jp
En-Musu Kagawa, https://www.ems-kagawa.jp
Fukui Konkatsu Kafe, https://www.fukui-konkatsucafe.jp
Fukuokaken Deai Kekkon Ouen Jigyou, https://kekkon-ouen.pref.fukuoka.lg.jp/fukuoka/
Fukushima Kekkon Kosodate Sentaa, http://www.fukushima-youth.com/ouen/
Gifu Marijji Sapooto Senta, https://konsapo.pref.gifu.lg.jp
Gunma Sumairu Raifu, http://smilelife.pref.gunma.jp
Hiroshima Deai Sapooto Sentaa 'Hirosapo', https://www.hirosapo.jp
Hokkaido Konkatsu Information Conciel, http://hokkaido-kic.com
https://www.pref.okinawa.lg.jp/site/kodomo/shonenkodomo/seishonen/documents/h30itakujigyou.pdf
Hyogo Deai Go!, https://www.msc-hyogo.jp/contact/tokyo/
Ikiiki Iwate Deai Support Center, https://www.ikiiki-iwate.com
Ishikawa Kekkon Shien Sentaa, https://www.i-oyacomi.net/kekkon/ouentai/
Kagoshima Deai Support Center, https://www.msc-kagoshima.jp/matching/
Kanagawa Koi Kana, http://www.pref.kanagawa.jp/osirase/0214/koikana/
Koichi Deai Sapooto Sentaa, https://www.koishiyo.pref.kochi.lg.jp
Koitama – Saitama Deai Support Project, https://koitama.jp
Kumamoto Hapimon, https://www.hapimon.jp
Kyoto Konkatsu Ouen Sentaa, https://pref-kyoto-konkatsu.jp
Marissa Tokushima, https://www.msc-tokushima.jp
Mi-Chi-Bi-Ki Miyagi, http://seinenkaikan.or.jp/portal/
Mie Deai, https://deai-mie.jp
Miyazaki Kekkon Sapooto Sentaa, https://www.miyazakikekkon.com
Nagano Konkatsu Shien Sentaa, http://konkatsu.nagano-kosodate.net
Nagasaki Konkatsu Sapooto Sentaa, https://www.msc-nagasaki.jp
Nara Kekkon Ouendan, https://www.naradeai.pref.nara.jp
Niigata Haato Macchi, https://www.msc-niigata.jp/matching/
Oita Enmusu-Bu, https://oita-enmusubu.com
Okayama Enmusubi Netto, https://www.okayama-musubi.jp
Okinawa Jinkou .. https://www.jinkou-okinawa.com
Osaka Fami Nabi, http://fami-navi.jp
Saga Deai Support Center, https://www.sagadeai.com
Shiga Hagu Nabi, https://www.hugnavi.net/marriage/support.php
Shimane Enmusubi Sapooto Sentaa, http://www.shimane-enmusubi.com
Shizuoka Fuji no Kuni Deai Sapooto Nabi, http://www.deai-support.org
Tokyo Futari Story, https://www.futari-story.metro.tokyo.lg.jp
Tottori Deai Sapooto Sentaa 'Entorii', https://entry-tottori.jp
Toyama Marijji Sapooto Sentaa, https://www.msc-toyama.jp
Very Matching – Tochigi Deai Ouen Saito, https://www.msc-tochigi.jp
Wakayama Deai no Hiroba, https://www.mirai-kirakira.jp/index.php?/encounter
Yamagata Deai Support Center, http://ymsc-yamakon.net
Yamaguchi Kekkon Ouen Sentaa, https://www.yamaguchi-kekkon.com
Yamanashi Deai Sapooto Sentaa, https://www.msc-yamanashi.jp/aimusubi/

Appendix B. Glossary of key Japanese terms

Apuri – lit. application, term used to refer to a variety of smartphone applications; of special interest here are dating applications (*macchingu apuri*) ranging from those less serious, to those created with specific goal of finding a marital partner.

Gōkon – practice of organized group dates popular among young people in Japan. It is typically arranged by two friends or acquiantances who organzie a night out for an equal number of participating men and women with the intention of forming romantic relationships.

*Miai (*or, *omiai* with the customary honorific) – formal marriage interview traditionally arranged professional matchmakers and parents. Today *omiai* take the form of less formal meetings between prospective spouses typically held in well-known restaurants or hotel lobbies.

Miai kekkon –the practice of arranged marriage which was dominant until 1960s.

Nakōdo – go-between, term referring to a traditional matchmaker.

Kaikon shakai – lit. "everyone-married society," a marriage-oriented society in which most people get married at a young age. The term is used in reference to marital patterns during the period of high economic growth.

Kekkon sōdanjo– marriage agency (lit. marriage consultation center) formal matchmaking organizations which mediate the contemporary practice of arranged marriage.

Konkatsu – "marriage-hunting" is a term coined by the journalist Tōkō Shirakawa and the sociologist Masahiro Yamada. It is fashioned after the Japanese term for job-hunting and underscores the role of marriage in attaining normative adulthood and social status.

Machikon – small- and large-scale mass dating events for single men and women organized by private entities and local governments. *Machikon* are usually held in affiliated restuarants, bars and other commercial venues. First machikon was organized in 2004 in Utsunomiya, in Tochigi Prefecture.

Ren'ai kekkon – love marriage based on romantic interest of two individuals. Love marriages surpassed arranged marriages in number in the 1960s.

Appendix C. Note on Transcription and Transliteration

In this dissertation, apart from names and places commonly recognized in English, Japanese-language words are transcribed using the modified Hepburn system. All translations are mine unless noted otherwise. When writing Japanese names, I depart from the Japanese convention and use the first name followed by family name.