

## Of Weddings, Marriage, and Happily Never After

It all starts out rather cute. It's their big day at the chapel. Dad is stumbling over his own feet, stiff as a board and sweating from the brow, trying to maneuver his escort down the "virgin road" (likely a slight misnomer...). Meanwhile, all the bride and groom can think about is; soon having to smooch each other right in front of parents, company bosses, *tatemai* friends, and even the Christian God no less. Some resort to a handshake. Once I witnessed a fretting groom who kissed but missed. He hit the *hanayome* smack on her *hana*. The sanctuary roared. Poor chap turned the same shade as *beni shōga* atop a pile of *yakisoba*. But to everyone's relief, the pipe organ will bellow its last elaboration, the couple will depart, humiliated perhaps, and all the men can get to the banquet hall and turn their own shade of *beni shōga* too.

It happens week after week, year after year, with couple after couple. In over 1,358 places nationwide, or at least that's the count as of 2007.<sup>1</sup> Four years ago, an article I wrote titled "Japan Goes Christian!—On Wedding Days At Least" was published in newspapers worldwide. At the time, Recruit's Zeksy magazine was reporting around 70% of marriages to be chapel style. Quite phenomenal considering that as Japan entered the 70's, approximately 80% of weddings were Shinto. I figured things would begin to decline, especially as non-religious weddings were gaining momentum. But I was wrong. The trend held fast. In October of 2007, Recruit affirmed again that weddings in Japan are at least 70% Christian style.<sup>2</sup>

Evidently the hoopla started about 1975 with a chapel built at Tokyo's Keio Plaza Hotel, and some celebrities setting the mode. Now with perhaps 51,000 chapel weddings a year, or over 4,000 a month,<sup>3</sup> such chapel attendance outstrips church attendance on any given weekend. The clergy (or non-clergy as the case may be) is split into two camps over the issue, those cooperating with it and those not, each side touting valid viewpoints. One Tokyo minister went all out in favor, establishing the Christian Bridal Mission with the aim of "sharing the love and the Gospel of Jesus Christ" to as many people as possible through weddings. The company has dispatched 3,000 ministers, musicians, and vocalists throughout the country.<sup>4</sup> Other ministers glare with disdain.

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<sup>1</sup> Ecumenical News Intl. 1/22/2008 "Popularity of Japanese Wedding Chapels"  
<http://www.journeyonline.com.au>

<sup>2</sup> Asahi Newspaper 1/19/2008 "Brides Pick Wedding Churches"

<sup>3</sup> Mainichi Daily 11/06/2007 "From Blow-up Dolls to Invisible Fiances" Based on 73,973 marriages in 2006 and approximately 70% of these being chapel style.

<sup>4</sup> "Popularity of Japanese Wedding Chapels"

I'll confess, my initial involvement with chapels was less than noble. Our ministry account was in debt ("Ah hah!" You say.) I know, I know, well "sin" though it be, some years after my bout with weddings, we were out of debt—but that's not all. It turns out through weddings I had preached in person, on the love of Christ, to one-out-of-ten in my city of a quarter-million—and I hardly had to lift a finger. Pagans build, then pack sanctuaries and beg you to come preach. Sure everyone didn't flock to church the next Sunday, but the massive seed-planting opportunity awed me. Some actually did get saved. There were spin-off perks besides. One young woman in town had decided she didn't want to be buried in Buddhist graveyard. She pulled out a phone book and called churches. She bumbled and called the number of St. Catherine's "Church", my wedding chapel. Of all the places she called, the receptionist there gave the "kindest" answer; not a pastor, a non-Christian receptionist (gulp). Long story short, the lady was baptized last Fall.

So what to do with all these rogue "Christian" assemblies? I suppose that each minister's conscience must dictate that. For those in favor, check out my state-of-the-art evangelistic wedding DVD "Love Like No Other", published by Japan Campus Crusade and debuting this Spring ([www.japanccc.org](http://www.japanccc.org)). It's offered to chaplain ministers at far below cost.

What's the brief on marriage today? Numbers were up last year for the first time in five years! But people keep marrying later, men at 30 and women at 28.<sup>5</sup> For Tokyoites it's even more delayed, with men tying the knot at 34 and women at 32!<sup>6</sup> The "Christmas Cake" paranoia (women passing 25) and "*Toshikoshi Soba*" aversion (men passing 31) seems completely dissipated. But even with all the varied avenues, it's strangely harder these days to meet Mister or Miss Hopefully Right. Many resort to blind dates, 15% of marriages begin this way and one wonders how many others meet via the Web.<sup>7</sup> And what is the motive for marriage? A whopping 88.6 percent of marriages are *ren'ai* (love) marriages (prewar, some 70 percent of marriages were arranged).<sup>8</sup>

All that love, and yet something happens. Japan bemoans more sexless marriages, sex with prostitutes, and sexual dissatisfaction, than just about anywhere. The commonly cited survey of Bayer Pharmaceuticals states that 34% of married couples have not engaged in intercourse with their spouse for one or more years. Almost humorously, the most commonly stated reason for this dearth of sexual activity, was simply, "It's too bothersome."<sup>9</sup> But this is not just a problem of the youthful. Of couples where the man is 55 or older, 73% claim their

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<sup>5</sup> "From Blow-up Dolls to Invisible Fiances"

<sup>6</sup> Japan Times 5/21/2006 "Marriage...Monogamy Maybe a Relic"

<sup>7</sup> Japan Times 2/10/2008 "Group Blind Dates Could Save Japan"

<sup>8</sup> "Marriage...Monogamy Maybe a Relic"

<sup>9</sup> Mainichi Daily 12/23/2006

marriage has no sex at all. And 42% of respondents claimed to have had sex outside of marriage.<sup>10</sup>

In a Durex survey, Japan ranked second to last in sexual-satisfaction (just above China).<sup>11</sup> In a nation where too much stimulation inundates, a whopping 90 percent of Japanese said their sex lives lack stimulation. And for what it's worth, 38 percent of Japanese masturbate weekly<sup>12</sup>

All this leads to a myriad of disorders. Spa! Magazine gets a little carried away in an article estimating that as many as 70 percent of younger men are unable to achieve coital ejaculation. The article cites a urologist at the Toho University Omori Medical Center, who says, "It's the most common dysfunction I have to deal with among people who come to the clinic."<sup>13</sup> And marriages turn into strange arrangements. Many building homes, opt for two master bedrooms. Mitsui Homes recently announced 30% of homes it builds are the double-master type.<sup>14</sup> No wonder, with couples avoiding each other, sleeping separately, thinking of each other as brother and sister, or cruising Kabukicho or Mixi to spruce up their longings, that the birthrate continues to decline. Now at 1.28, and for Tokyo 0.9%, the national crisis is staggering. (See my JH article "Mega-trends" at [www.drmeeko.net](http://www.drmeeko.net))

Divorce rates in Japan have set records for most years since 1965. And according to the Health Ministry, in 2006 the divorce rate had risen 27% in 10 years, however, with those married for more than 30 years it had quadrupled.<sup>15</sup> Today, divorce is close to 30%.<sup>16</sup> But there has been a strange phenomenon the last five years. In the midst of all this marital discontent and dissatisfaction, divorce rates slowed, even dropped. Interestingly, the decline coincided with the passing of a new law in June 2003, the split-pension law, making it easier for wives to get half their X's retirement money. The law actually goes into effect April 2008—a date when most speculators anticipate an "explosion" in the number of divorces.<sup>17</sup>

But things are even more complicated. In the next several years millions of post WWII baby boomers hit retirement age.<sup>18</sup> This is the generation that made a notoriously small contribution to home life. Alienated from wives and with a anemically short list of friends

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<sup>10</sup> Shukan Jitsuwa 1/24-31/08 in Japan Times 1/27/08 "You're never too old to fall in love"

<sup>11</sup> Mainichi Daily Jan. 27, 2008 "Modern Japanese Women"

<sup>12</sup> Mainichi Daily 10/12/2007

<sup>13</sup> Spa! 1/29/2008 in Mainichi Daily Jan. 31, 2008

<sup>14</sup> [www.stippy.com](http://www.stippy.com) 12/11/2006 "Sexless Japan- Really?"

<sup>15</sup> BBC News 2006/02/22 <http://news.bbc.co.uk> "Japan Retired Divorce Rate Soars"

<sup>16</sup> [www.divorcerate.org](http://www.divorcerate.org)

<sup>17</sup> Shukan Post 9/15/2007 in Mainichi Daily 9/09/2006 "Dissatisfied Wives Waiting"

<sup>18</sup> BBC News 2006/02/22 <http://news.bbc.co.uk> "Japan Retired Divorce Rate Soars"

(Japanese men among loneliest in world, OECD survey: 16% rarely or never have contact with friends or colleagues outside work.)<sup>19</sup> Having worked long hours, amidst a rigid routine, they are a “generation waiting for instructions”. In retirement they will have none. The resulting stress, anger, and confusion at home, will likely force suicide and divorce rates to thrust even higher.

Many have neglected the most important things in life. Love. Family. Friendship. Sanity. Tonight, at 2:00 AM, one-out-of-four people will still be watching TV<sup>20</sup> and countless others will be surfing the Net, avoiding the arms of their formerly beloved, and a good nights sleep. But all is not grim. Though much attention has been given in the past to *Wakaresaseya*,<sup>21</sup> *Fukukenya* (patch-up pro's) are starting to catch on. One company, Ladies Himitsu Tanteisha reports 110 contracts in 2005, 430 in 2006, and over 750 in 2007.<sup>22</sup>

January 31<sup>st</sup> is a rather obscure celebration in Japan known as *Aisai no Hi* (Love Wife Day). The tradition began with a legendary noble breaking down in a cabbage patch in Gunma over the death of his beloved wife, and shouting her name. This year the little band of wife-lovers who continue to carry the torch, set up a stage at the fountain in Hibiya Park. The event was best attended by the mass media. Participants lined up for a chance to stand on stage and shout how much they loved their wife. It was a noble, crazy, and heartwarming event I couldn't pass up. On that freezing evening I joined the brave troop who climbed the stage above an ocean of TV cameras—biggest city in the world—and how many turned out to shout? Thirty. (Weeks later the Tokyo marathon boasted thirty-thousand.) That night, a Fuji Television reporter came to my home to cover the family's reaction. I guess my wife, Junko was tickled, but my kids were horrified. The news was broadcast nationwide, but worst for them was; our neighborhood, their teachers, even friends, saw it!

All this to say; couples in Japan have got a long way to go, and there will be a lot of carnage. But God bless the crazies, who stand out in a cabbage patch or on a freezing stage and scream for loves sake. God bless them, little band that they be. And God bless every other couple for that matter.

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<sup>19</sup> (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development)terry's take [www.japaninc.com](http://www.japaninc.com) at [www.debito.org](http://www.debito.org)

<sup>20</sup> Josesi Seven 10/25/2007 in Mainichi Daily 10/17/2007 “Stressed-out Japanese”

<sup>21</sup> Forced-Break-up companies, who for a price ensure divorce papers will be signed.

<sup>22</sup> Weekly Playboy 12/2007 in Japan Times 12/9/2007 p.11 “Makeup artists”