Opinion surveys indicate that most Japanese still consider the institution of marriage to be the foundation stone of the Japanese family and one of the fundamental building blocks of society. Statistical data for 2001 reveals several distinctive marriage trends that are presently reshaping the basic composition of matrimonial union. Most prominent amongst these new social currents are (i) people marrying later than at any point in history, (ii) couples having fewer children than ever before and (iii) Japanese grooms more likely to marry a non-Japanese bride than any previous cohort.

Over the postwar decades, the nature of matrimony has constantly adapted to the shifting dynamics of the socio-economic climate. The present day couple is influenced by similar forces with many of the new marriage trends directly tracing their origins to socio-economic factors embedded in the nineties. Equal opportunity laws, higher levels of female education, youth unemployment, economic stagnation and job insecurity are just a few of the complex mix of elements which have shaped the nascent marriage trends.

In 2001, the mean age of a couple marrying reached an all time high of 28.1 years. The average age of the bride tying the knot was 27.2 years and the corresponding figure for the groom was 29 years.*

Official figures for 2001 show that the average age of first time motherhood was 28.2 years which is exactly one year after the average female age of marriage. An increasing number of mothers were pregnant at the time of marriage. According to Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labour statistics released in March 2002, 26.3% of all brides were already pregnant before wedlock. This represents a doubling of the figure over the past twenty years, indicating that the trend in expectant brides is on a gradual upward curve.

Pregnancy now appears to be an increasingly important component in the decision to marry. However, there is absolutely no sign of Japanese couples following the trend observed in Northern European countries where many children are presently born outside of marriage.

The vast majority of people appear to think that a couple should marry if they are going to have children, even though the number of children born out-of-wedlock has been rising. Many of the babies born out-of-wedlock are to women in the 15 to 19 years age group, with 15,621 live births recorded for this category in 1996. The number of unmarried mothers almost doubled during the nineties, but the relative number remains low. According to the most recent government statistics, unmarried mothers accounted for 7.3% of all mother-headed households in 1998 compared to 4.7 percent in 1993. In the 1998 survey there were 69,300 such mothers with the corresponding figure for 1993 standing at 37,500. This represented an 84.8% increase, perhaps indicating that attitudes to children born outside marriage are changing.**
One of the consequences of the late marriage trend has been the emergence of smaller families which is reflected in the declining birthrate. The birthrate represents the average number of babies born to a woman in her lifetime and it hit an all-time low of 1.33 in 2001. In large cities, the birthrate was even lower than the national average. For example, Tokyo recorded a birthrate of just 1.0 in 2001. During the nineties, the only band of women for which the birthrate rate rose was the age group spanning 15 to 19 years.

The number of babies born in 2001 was a record low 1.17 million, which represented a decrease of about 20,000 live births from 2000. Late marriage tends to lead to smaller families because fertility naturally declines with age. Basically, the later a couple starts a family, the less children they are likely to have.

The number of marriages involving a non-Japanese spouse is increasing, representing 1 in every 22 registered marriages in 2000, which was a record high. Over the past 30 years, there has been a 6.5 fold increase in the number of international marriages. In 1970, there were just 5,546 such unions, but the figure for 2000 was 36,263. In about 80% of such marriages, the husband was Japanese and the wife was non-Japanese. The vast majority of brides came from neighbouring Asian countries.

The 2001 marriage rate stood at 6.4 per 1000 people, which was the same as the 2000 figure and an increase on the 6.1 recorded for 1999. At the other end of the spectrum, the divorce rate continued its decade-long upward path. In 2001, a record high of 285,917 couples broke up, representing a divorce rate of 2.27 per 1000 people. However, remarriages were also on an upward trajectory with statistics for 2000 showing that in about 21% of all marriages for that year one or both partners were remarrying. Men are currently more likely to remarry than women. Remarriage rates have steadily increased over the last few decades, again illustrating the general shift in opinions about the meaning of marriage.

While marriage trends have fluctuated over the decades, data for 2001 clearly shows that the last ten years has witnessed a period of spectacular change. Increased premarital pregnancy, divorce and remarriage rates are just a few signs indicating that fundamental attitudes about marriage have altered from the norms recorded in the sixties, seventies and eighties. These new trends are certain to have a major influence on Japanese society as more diverse families emerge.

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