

The 'Toshi-No-Sakon' Phenomenon: A Trend in Japanese Family Formations

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Abstract : 'Toshi-no-sakon,' which translates to as 'age gap marriage,' is a term that has been popularized by celebrity couples in the Japanese entertainment industry. Japan is distinct for a developed nation for its rapidly aging population, declining marital and fertility rates, and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Statistical data has shown that the average age of marriage in Japan is increasing every year, showing a growing tendency for late marriage. As a result, the government has been trying to curb the declining trends by encouraging marriage and childbirth among the populace. This graduate thesis seeks to analyze the 'toshi-no-sakon' phenomenon in lieu of Japan's current economic and social situation, and to see what the implications are for these kinds of married couples. This research also seeks to expound more on age gaps within married couples, which is a factor rarely-touched upon in Japanese family studies. A literature review was first performed in order to provide a framework to study 'toshi-no-sakon' from the perspective of four fields of study—marriage, family, aging, and gender. Numerous anonymous online statements by 'toshi-no-sakon' couples were then collected and analyzed, which brought to light a number of concerns. Couples wherein the husband is the older partner were prioritized in order to narrow down the focus of the research, and 'toshi-no-sakon' is only considered when the couple's age gap is ten years or more. Current findings suggest that one of the perceived merits for a woman to marry an older man is that financial security would be guaranteed. However, this has been shown to be untrue as a number of couples express concern regarding their financial situation, which could be attributed to their husband's socio-economic status. Having an older husband who is approaching the age of retirement presents another dilemma as the wife would be more obliged to provide care for her aging husband. This notion of the wife being a caregiver likely stems from an arrangement once common in Japanese families in which the wife must primarily care for her husband's elderly parents. Childbearing is another concern as couples would be pressured to have a child right away due to the age of the husband, in addition to limiting the couple's ideal number of children. This is another problematic aspect as the husband would have to provide income until his child has finished their education, implying that retirement would have to be delayed indefinitely. It is highly recommended that future studies conduct face-to-face interviews with couples and families who fall under the category of 'toshi-no-sakon' in order to gain a more in-depth perspective into the phenomenon and to reveal any undiscovered trends. Cases wherein the wife is the older partner in the relationship should also be given focus in future studies involving 'toshi-no-sakon'.

Keywords : age gap, family structure, gender roles, marriage trends

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