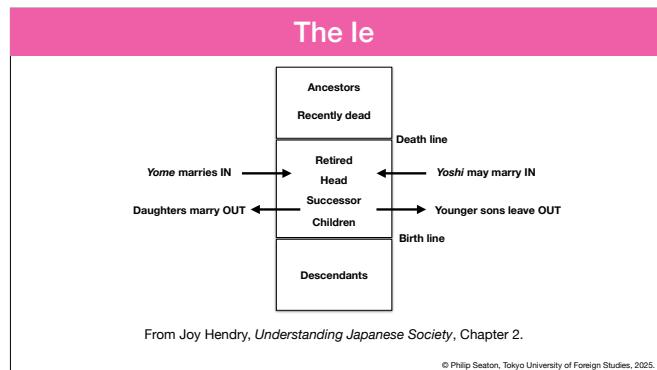


In the lecture this week we are thinking about the household. This is one of the most important units within Japanese society.

1



This is the structure of the Japanese household as presented in Joy Hendry's book, *Understanding Japanese Society*. Above the death line are members of the household who have already passed away. These are ancestors and the recently deceased. Below the birth line are the members of the ie who have yet to be born. In the middle are all the current members. As a basic principle there is a household head who inherited the family home from an ancestor or former head, and who will pass it on to a successor. Not every child born into the family can become the successor. Younger sons and daughters will leave or marry out. A *yome*, or wife, may marry in. If there are no sons and the family wants to adopt a son and heir, a man may marry in as a *yoshi*.

2

## Festivals and the Life-cycle



© Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

The importance of the household unit is reflected in the large number of events, customs and ceremonies that are connected to it. Some of the important ones are shown on the slide. Important milestones in a family member's life are marked in the *shichi-go-san* and coming-of-age ceremonies. Ancestors are remembered at *o-bon*, when families make grave visits. Marriage is important not simply as an expression of love between two people. It is a formal ceremony that marks the joining of families and, for at least one person in the couple, marks the departure from one household and entry into another.

3

## Koseki

- The family register.
- Legal document required for any rights as a member of society.
- Formalizes an individual's position within the organization of the family.
- E.g. 世帯主、配偶者、父、母、長男、次男、三男、長女、次女、三女。。。

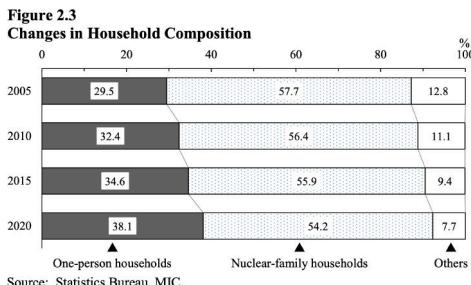


© Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

As Joy Hendry argues, the traditional *ie* structure may be loosening with time as more Japanese families shift towards the nuclear family structure. But an important legal document remains: the *koseki*, or family register. This legal document is required to have any rights associated with being a member of Japanese society. Looking at the *koseki* also reveals how every individual has not only a name and an age, but also a position within a family unit. There is a household head, and dependents. Other members of the family are all defined via their relationship with the household head. This is not unique to Japan, but the significance attached to these household roles is a notable characteristic of Japanese society.

4

## More Single People Households



© Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

However, the household is always in transition. Look at one notable shift that has taken place in the past two decades. The number of one-person households has gone up almost nine percent. Nuclear family households are dropping slightly, but the bigger drop is in other households. These other households include the traditional three generation household, or ie described three slides ago.

5

## Smaller Households

**Table 2.3**  
Households and Household Members<sup>1)</sup>

Year	Private households (1,000)	Rate of private households change (%) <sup>2)</sup>	Private household members (1,000)	Members per household	Population (1,000)	Rate of population change (%) <sup>2)</sup>
1960	22,539	...	93,419	4.14	94,302	4.7
1970	30,297	a) 15.9	103,351	3.41	104,665	5.5
1975	33,596	10.9	110,338	3.28	111,940	7.0
1980	35,824	6.6	115,451	3.22	117,060	4.6
1985	37,980	6.0	119,334	3.14	121,049	3.4
1990	40,670	7.1	121,545	2.99	123,611	2.1
1995	43,900	7.9	125,646	2.82	125,570	1.6
2000	46,782	6.6	124,725	2.67	126,926	1.1
2005	49,063	4.9	124,973	2.55	127,768	0.7
2010	51,842	5.7	125,546	2.42	128,057	0.2
2015	53,332	2.9	124,296	2.33	127,095	-0.8
2020	55,705	4.4	123,163	2.21	126,146	-0.7

© Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

These shifts mean a rise in the number of households, but a drop in the number of members per household. This is also symptomatic of the concentration of the population in large urban areas that we discussed in week 2.

6

## More Lonely Elderly

**Table 2.4**  
**Trends in Elderly Households**

Type of households	2005	2010	2015	2020	(Thousands)
Private households .....	49,063	51,842	53,332	55,705	
Elderly households .....	17,220	19,338	21,713	22,655	
(percentage) .....	35.1	37.3	40.7	40.7	
One-person households .....	3,865	4,791	5,928	6,717	
Males .....	1,051	1,386	1,924	2,308	
Females .....	2,814	3,405	4,003	4,409	
Nuclear-family households .....	8,398	10,011	11,740	12,528	
Others .....	4,956	4,536	4,045	3,410	

Source: Statistics Bureau, MIC.

*The growing phenomenon of *kodokushi* (solitary death)*

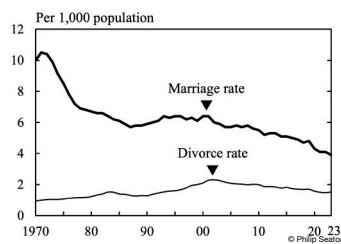
© Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Many of these single member households are elderly households. The rise of the nuclear family means that the children are more likely to move away when they become adults or when they get married. When one person in an elderly couple dies, or, if the couple divorces at around retirement age, which is a depressingly common phenomenon in Japan, it leaves a lot of single person elderly households. These isolated elderly sometimes die alone and remain undiscovered for days or weeks, a phenomenon which has its own name: *kodokushi*.

7

## Marriage/Divorce Rates

**Figure 2.8**  
**Changes in Marriage Rate and Divorce Rate**



© Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

Of course, marriages are one of the key events in the household life cycle. The statistics tell us that the marriage rate and divorce rate have both been declining slowly in the 2000s. Fewer people are choosing to marry, but once married the numbers of marriages ending in divorce is also dropping, slightly.

8

## Marriage and Divorce

- Marriage (the change in *koseki*) vs Weddings (the ceremony, often “fake Christian”). See Michael Fisch’s account of the “Christian” wedding ceremony.
- Married couples must have the same family name. Usually the woman changes her family name.
- Getting married/divorced is easy on a procedural level. But, in practice ...
- In divorce, custody of children is given to one parent (80-90% of times the mother). Visitation rights are unenforceable. The problem of child “abductions” by one of the parents. The law has changed (and could go into effect in 2026) ...

© Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2005.

Let’s look at a few issues relating to marriage and divorce.

There is an important distinction between marriages and weddings. Marriages are the legal procedures that result in a change in the *koseki*. Weddings are a ceremony that have no legal standing, but are important events to mark the rearrangement of the household. There are traditional Japanese wedding ceremonies, but many are “fake Christian” and held at a wedding chapel. I use the term “fake Christian” because while the ceremony might look Christian, the so-called priests conducting the services often have no religious training and wedding chapels have no religious functions beyond weddings. Read Michael Fisch’s fascinating article for more on this!

Once married, couples must have the same family name. In most cases, the woman changes her name, but sometimes the man changes his name when being adopted into a household, often as the heir of a family business. Many people are not happy with this and have challenged the legality of forcing husbands and wives to share the same family name. But,

9

for now this remains the law.

In a legal sense, the procedures for getting married and divorced are very simple. You just hand in the relevant documents to the local town hall and make the necessary changes to your *koseki*. However, in practice the social barriers to both marriage and divorce can be extremely high. There might be significant resistance to a choice of marriage partner. Marriage is not just about romance. It involves the joining of families. And in divorce, too, there might be significant barriers, even if both people in the failed relationship want to get out of it.

The most difficult problems are custody of the children and division of property. In Japan, custody of the children has been given to one parent, which in the vast majority of cases is the mother. Child visitation rights are unenforceable. Japan has had a serious problem of children who lose contact with one of their parents after an acrimonious divorce. Parents who have lost contact with their children post divorce often describe how the children were “abducted” by their former spouse. In recent years, this issue has received a lot of attention, largely because of high profile legal battles started by foreigners, who lost contact with their children after they were allegedly “abducted” by the Japanese spouse. However, the issue affects both women and men, both Japanese and non-Japanese, and marriages in which both partners are Japanese. The law changed last year to allow joint custody, although it does not come into effect immediately. Until I see this working well in practice in Japanese society, my simple advice to anyone who wants to have children in Japan is this: make sure your marriage works. If the children are not part of your household register post-divorce, you might not see them again until they contact you as an adult.

## LGBT+ Rights & Same-Sex Marriage

- Article 24 of the constitution reads:

Article 24. Marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes and it shall be maintained through mutual cooperation with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis.

With regard to choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, choice of domicile, divorce and other matters pertaining to marriage and the family, laws shall be enacted from the standpoint of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes.

- Since 2015, some municipalities have issued certificates. But, LGBT+ marriages do not bring the same rights as heterosexual marriages.
- There have been [wins recently in the high court](#) for LGBT+ campaigners.

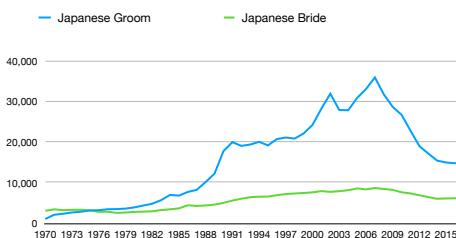
© Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

I am going to talk briefly about two special types of marriage. The first is same-sex marriage. The Japanese constitution defines marriage as a union between a “husband and wife”. So, despite historical and contemporary tolerance of same-sex relationships, the right of same-sex marriage is not explicitly allowed in the constitution.

Since 2015, some municipalities have issued certificates for same sex couples. But these are weddings, not marriages, and same sex couples do not have the same legal rights as heterosexual couples. This affects things like access to mortgages, healthcare as a dependent, or tax breaks. The legal battles fought by the LGBT+ community for full legal equality are ongoing. Recent high court rulings have ruled the ban on same-sex marriage is unconstitutional. We still have a way to go before full legal equality, but Japan is slowly heading in the direction of recognizing same-sex marriage.

10

## International Marriage, 1970-2017

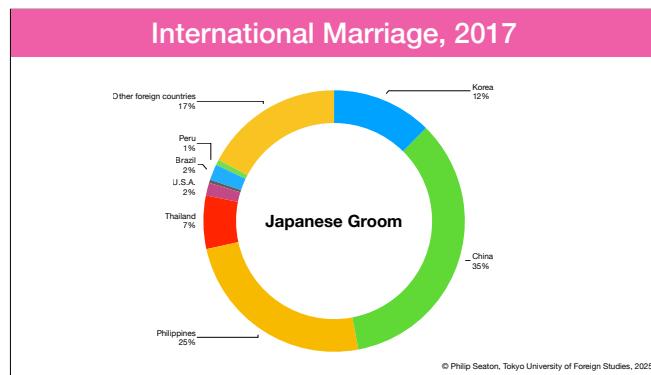


[International marriages account for about 1 in 30 marriages in Japan](#)

© Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2025.

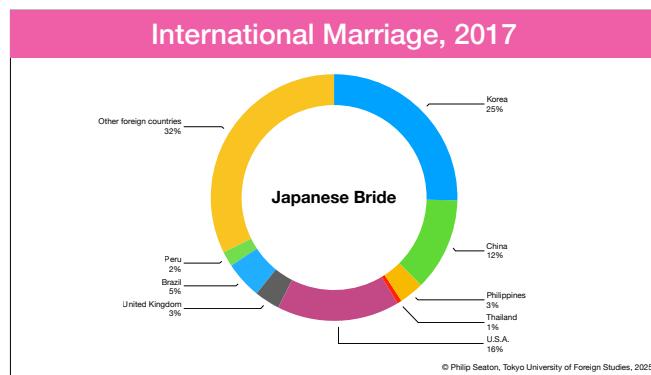
The second type of marriage is international marriage. The common image of *kokusai kekkon* in Japan is of a foreign man, probably caucasian, married to a Japanese woman. Well, actually, since the mid 1970s, there have been more marriages between Japanese men and foreign women, particularly since the 1980s. International marriage has been declining since around 2005 and plateaued after 2015.

11



We get a much better idea of what is happening if we look at the nationalities of foreign spouses. This is the data in 2017 for a Japanese groom and foreign bride. Most foreign brides are from Asian countries, particularly Korea, China and the Philippines.

12



However, Japanese women are choosing their husbands from a much larger range of countries. The largest category is “other foreign countries”. The next biggest category is Koreans. And remember that many Korean husbands and brides are not really international marriages if they are zainichi Koreans born and brought up in Japan. As a very tentative conclusion, we might suggest that economic issues could be an important consideration for Asian women marrying Japanese men, but it is very hard to make conclusions about the motivations of Japanese women marrying foreign men.

13

## Group Work

- Look at the PDF on the website. It contains many patterns of households in Japan. Discuss their “issues” and “housing situation”. You can use the hints in the slides, but add further ideas/analysis of your own, too.

© Philip Seaton, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2005.

It has been a very short tour through some of the issues facing the household in Japan. Using these insights, I would now like to give you time for some group discussion. Look at the PDF on the website. It contains many patterns of households in Japan. Discuss their “issues” and “housing situation”. You can use the hints in the slides, but add further ideas/analysis of your own, too. Hopefully, this exercise will give you a good understanding of how Japanese families take many different shapes and forms. Families are not just the “typical ones” you see in textbooks. I have made this point repeatedly during the course, but I will make it again here. When we think of anything to do with Japanese society, and today it has been the Japanese household, it is helpful to consider the diversity of Japan rather than its homogeneity.