A Japanese Way of Life in Change: Marriage and Work in Women's and Men's Lives

I. 田中亜紀子『満足できない女たち　アラフォーは何を求めているのか』PHP 研究所
Tanaka, Akiko: *Manzoku dekinai onna-tachi. Arafō wa nani o motomete iru no ka* [Women who can never be satisfied. What do women around 40 want?]. PHP Kenkyūjo, 2008, 245 pages, ￥756.

II. 山田昌弘・白河桃子『「婚活」時代』ディスカヴァー 21
Yamada, Masahiro and Tōko Shirakawa: *"Konkatsu" jidai* [The era of "marriage partner-hunting"]. Discover 21, 2008, 200 pages, ￥1,500.

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In Japan, individuals' attitudes and value orientation with respect to partnership, parenthood and work have been changing rapidly over the past two decades. Official surveys on gender roles conducted in the 1980s and 1990s revealed that a majority of respondents were in favour of the gendered division of labour, but they also revealed that this majority was decreasing constantly. The first time that a majority of respondents stated that they were against conventional gender roles was in a survey conducted in 2002; among the young people aged 18 to 24, this reverse trend had occurred already in surveys conducted in the late 1980s.[1] The Japanese public is well aware of this cultural change, a change that has been discussed since the 1990s in particular with respect to low fertility rates and a decrease in marriages, as well as with respect to changes in individuals' lifestyles. These changes continue to draw widespread attention today, making not only researchers but also the media ask: "Why are so many people who are in their thirties and forties today still unmarried?", "What kind of life are they living?", and "Are they happy?"

This media buzz and academic interest seemed to reach some kind of climax in 2008. Besides the publication of numerous books and wide media coverage on this matter, the year ended with a significant event: the nomination of two words related to the current socio-cultural changes in

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[1] See Naikakufu (2002) for a study conducted in July 2002 and Naikakufu (2004) for a study conducted between February and June 2003.

the year's Best New Words and Buzzwords list (*shingo ryūkōgo taishō*). These words were *arafō*, which refers to "women around 40 years old", and *konkatsu* or "marriage partner-hunting". *Arafō* even won Best Prize (*nenkan taishō*), which is awarded to only two words. This result was without a doubt influenced by the high popularity of a TV drama called *Around 40: Chūmon no ōi onna-tachi* [Around 40: women who demand a lot],[2] as well as a CD titled *Around 40*, both of which were targeted at women in this age group.[3] Though having missed out on the Best Prize, *konkatsu* too had many reasons for nomination. There is a true *konkatsu* boom among unmarried people today, and various TV programmes have reported on these *konkatsu* activities for finding a marriage partner.[4]

   In this paper I will review two books, one on *arafō* and a second one on *konkatsu*. The first book is titled *Manzoku dekinai onna-tachi: Arafō wa nani o motomete iru no ka* [Women who can never be satisfied: What do women around 40 want?] and was written by Tanaka Akiko, an *arafō* herself who started her career as a writer after a period of working as an office lady (OL). The book is about *arafō* women, in particular their lifestyles and perspectives on life – which differ greatly from those of older generations of women. Regarded, on the one hand, as the first generation of women in Japan who enjoy a greater freedom when deciding on marriage and work, these *arafō* women, on the other hand, also face difficulties in negotiating various other aspects of life, often without being able to resort to any kind of role model. The second book, titled *"Konkatsu" jidai* [The era of "marriage partner-hunting"] and also published in 2008, is co-authored by Yamada Masahiro, a famous family sociologist in Japan, and Shirakawa Tōko, a journalist who writes extensively on women, marriage and fertility, and had sold more than 130,000 copies already by the end of 2008 (*Yomiuri Online* 21 December 2008). After summarizing the content of each book separately, I will then discuss both books together in the context of the changing patterns of individuals' lives in contemporary Japan.

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[2] This drama was broadcast on TBS every Friday night (22:00–22:45) between April and June 2008. Viewer ratings ranged from about 13 to 15 %; that is, comparatively, high for a drama at this hour. For more detail on the drama, see http://tvdramarating.simprich.net/2008/02/around_40.html (last accessed on 29 January 2009).

[3] According to its website, this CD sold over 200,000 copies. See http://www.around40.jp/ (last accessed on 29 January 2009).

[4] For example, the main channel of NHK broadcast a programme called *"Konkatsu": Watashi no shiawase sagashi* [Marriage partner-hunting: My search for happiness]. For more detail on this programme, see: http://www.nhk.or.jp/shutoken/tokyo/2008/1205.html (last accessed on 29 January 2009).

Arafō or "Women around 40"

In her book *Manzoku dekinai onna-tachi. Arafo wa nani o motometeiru no ka* [Women who can never be satisfied. What do women around 40 want?], Tanaka Akiko seeks to clarify who these *arafō* women are. She explains how they emerged and why this group of women currently attracts that much public attention. Tanaka examines the lifestyles and thoughts of women who are currently around 40 in Japan (particularly in terms of work, marriage and childbirth), partly by comparing the lives of these women with those of older generations. In the introduction, she states that she also wants to find out whether these women are really "demanding too much", as is often claimed by men of the same generation and people of older generations.

First of all, who are these *arafō*? Technically speaking, women around 40 are defined as women who are 35 at the youngest and 44 at the oldest. Tanaka categorizes the women in this age group (as of 2008) into three subgroups or generations, namely (1) the generation who witnessed the passing of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (age 43 to 45; born between 1963 and 1965), (2) the generation of the "bubble economy" (age 37 to 43; born between 1965 and 1971), and (3) the generation of the "employment ice age" (age 35 to 37; born after 1971). These three groups have certain commonalities and differences, and together they constitute the age group of *arafō* women. In her book, Tanaka focuses mainly on the first two generations, as "women tend to round down the last figure, when it comes to their age, and most women who think they are *arafō* are probably 38 years old or older" (p. 13).

Reading the book further, the reader will notice that there is another reason why Tanaka wanted to look at these two generations, particularly the first generation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL). Tanaka sees the EEOL of 1985 as a milestone in the history of Japanese women's lifestyles as well as women's employment. After the EEOL was passed, pursuing an occupational career became a real option for most women. Despite the fact that the EEOL of 1985 was not effective on actual employment practices, women increasingly remained longer on the labour market than in the past. Tanaka's aim, however, is to shed light on a different aspect of these women's working life. Interestingly, she points out, women and men who entered the labour market in the late 1980s constitute the first generation who quit their job, "because the job is not satisfying" (p. 48). Until then, dissatisfaction was not a reason for women or men to quit; women used to quit their jobs because they were going to marry. In the 1980s, however, a growing number of young women started to quit their jobs in search of an alter-

native way of living. Even many of those who did not have any concrete future career plans left their jobs just to have a break from work and their routine life. This became obvious in the study-abroad boom among women in the 1980s, when many women went abroad to learn English or study for an MBA (Ono and Piper 2004). "Their parents and boyfriends of the same generation could not understand [this] at all. They got rattled, seeing their daughters or girlfriends, who were 25 years old, just the right age to get married, go abroad and enjoy themselves" (pp. 49–50). In short, Tanaka argues that this boom was a protest not only against the gendered Japanese employment system, but also against the, until then, unquestioned way of living in society.

Tanaka finds the EEOL generation particularly interesting, also because women who fall into this generation have always created a social phenomenon since the 1980s. When these women were college students in the early 1980s, there was a "female college students" boom (*joshi daisei būmu*) in Japan. Many of these students appeared in TV programmes and were photographed for magazines. When they started their work life, they created the OL boom, and during the bubble economy enjoyed gourmet food and travel within and outside of Japan. These "material girls" were called *Hanako-zoku* (the Hanakos), named after a women's magazine, *Hanako* (published since 1988), which became a symbol of their lifestyles.[5] When the women of this generation became mothers, they triggered a boom of *gōka shussan* (luxurious childbirth) and another boom called *o-juken būmu* ("rivalry in competitive exams" to enter a prestigious school, even a kindergarten). Today, these women are around 40 and still constitute a main target for the fashion and beauty industries, as one can observe in the emergence of prominent new women's magazines, such as STORY, which are targeted particularly at women in this age group. Tanaka even dares to say that "it is the first time in history that women in this age group are in the forefront of attention" (p. 13).

In her book, Tanaka emphasizes the importance of work, marriage and childbirth for *arafō* women, whose approach toward these aspects of life differs largely from that of older generations: "Work is a sign of what we are" (p. 68). Despite bitter experiences at gendered workplaces and even when around 40 already, most women still regard work as something that can well bring about one's self-realization; at the same time, however, many of these women also want to marry. Here lies a new logic of life, namely: While, conventionally, women made their decision to continue working on the assumption that they had to decide between either getting married or continuing work, *arafō* women, today, do not necessarily make

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5 The word *Hanako-zoku* (the Hanakos) won the Best Buzzword Award in 1989.

decisions based on that criteria. Most of these women, even when married, consider work to be much more than just a means to earn a living. And, even if most companies have not really caught up with these attitudinal changes, for these women, work is something to fulfil their curiosity and thirst for further self-development.

The trend toward less marriages and later marriages, and therefore also toward late childbearing, started to accelerate in the 1980s and 1990s, when today's *arafō* women were in their twenties and thirties. Recounting various life stories of *arafō* women, Tanaka not only shows that these women are at the forefront of these trends, she also points out a new, increasing trend among *arafō* women: their marriage with younger men. Previously, there were extremely few women who married younger men, and *arafō*-like women were even "avoided" as future wives, because they were considered to be "impertinent" (p. 101). Today, however, they "strike back": many *arafō* women increasingly turn to men of younger generations, whereas a majority of single men aged around 40 and over today still wish to marry a younger, and especially good-looking, woman to take care of the household, a type of woman that is becoming increasingly difficult to find. Here we can observe a grave attitudinal gap between men and women of this generation.

The image of *arafō* women, namely that they want to have everything in an "ill-disciplined" manner, led to the construction of society's unfavourable view of them. Tanaka, however, tries to tell a different story of these women. She describes that they were destined to struggle without having any role model and, nevertheless, took on difficult challenges in search for a real sense of fulfilment. The author thus argues that *arafō* women were not simply selfish; rather, as pioneers, they did not know how to cope with problems strategically.

Konkatsu or "Marriage Partner-Hunting"

The second book under review here, *"Konkatsu" jidai* [The era of "marriage partner-hunting"], focuses on the tendency toward less marriages as the result of increased difficulty in marrying in today's Japan. On the basis of his sociological research, the first author, Yamada Masahiro, explains this tendency on a theoretical level, yet in an easy-to-read manner. The second author, Shirakawa Tōko, uses her empirical data collected through her work as a journalist to highlight what is happening on an individual level. The book features three main themes: (1) a description of the current situation of marriage – that is, marriage as something difficult to achieve, as compared to in the past; (2) an explanation of what today's actual diffi-

culties are in marrying someone; and (3) an introduction to classic and new forms of *konkatsu*, as well as recommendations for successful and proactive marriage partner-hunting activities.

Early in the book, the authors state that Japan has entered a "new era" in which one cannot marry as easily as one used to. Yamada explains how difficult it is today to find a partner in the marriage market and cites well-known data on demographic changes, pointing out that the average age of marriage is getting later and later, and that the rate of never-married people is increasing across all age groups. These tendencies, which started to be visible in the late 1970s and intensified in the 1980s, are interpreted in this book as phenomena reflecting the increased difficulty for singles in marrying. To explain this, Yamada introduces the notion of a liberalization of the marriage market in the 1980s analogous to the liberalization of the job market. He then continues by pointing out that, just like students who seek occupations need to go job-hunting (*shūshoku katsudō*, often abbreviated as *shūkatsu*), those who want to marry need to do marriage partner-hunting (*kekkon katsudō*, often abbreviated as *konkatsu*); that is, they need to engage in certain activities in order to find someone to marry.

In order to explain why it became so difficult to marry, Yamada compares the periods before and after 1980 and identifies the differences between the two periods in terms of three phases within the partner-finding process: (1) meeting opportunity, (2) interactive selection, and (3) decision to marry. Yamada argues that, in the pre-1980 period, meeting opportunities were limited and usually arranged by other people. Back then, people fell in love with someone they were introduced to; and love was strongly related to marriage, so that most couples married within two years after their first date, partly because their future married life was foreseeable in terms of income level and lifestyle. The post-1980 period, however, can be characterized as a free marriage market. Meeting opportunities are neither regulated nor arranged any longer, and they are not as equally available. At the same time, criteria for a desirable partner have become stricter than in the past. This, Yamada argues, inevitably leads to a mismatch between choice and expectations so that some people end up being "unable" to marry. Furthermore, today, there are fewer incentives to marry than in the past, because (1) the association between love and marriage has become weaker, (2) the diversification of lifestyles has increased the need for approximation of marriage norms and values between men and women, and (3) increased economic difficulties since the 1990s have discouraged young people, whose employment situation is unstable and unpredictable, from marrying. For Yamada, this third factor is unique to Japan, where many young people do not leave their parental homes, so that they can continue to enjoy an economically comfortable life.

Yamada places special emphasis on the economic change since the 1990s and its impact as the key contributor to the increased difficulty in marrying. He also argues that, similar to economic disparity, a kind of "disparity of attractiveness" is emerging in the marriage market. He warns that this is true particularly for male singles, saying that single men especially are divided in terms of economic status and communication skills. This disparity is further elaborated on by Shirakawa, who focuses on the psychological aspects of individual men and women who "cannot" marry. Based on her interviews with men and women who remain single despite their wish to marry, she identifies major reasons for their non-marriage. Unmarried women she interviewed named the following factors: (1) they do not meet attractive men – that is, there is a disparity in meeting opportunities; (2) men who they do find attractive are often already married; and (3) they – or their steady boyfriends – do not take the road toward marriage. Unmarried men, on the other hand, named the following factors: (1) they place too much emphasis on the physical attractiveness of a woman, leading to either a string of unsuccessful courtships or an "addiction" to two-dimensional women; (2) they have a communication problem with women and would rather retreat from the marriage market than lose their pride; and (3) they lack responsibility or courage and cannot decide to marry their current girlfriends.

In their book, Yamada and Shirakawa also offer practical advice and information on *konkatsu* activities in an attempt to motivate the unmarried to go marriage partner-hunting. In the past, it was men who were active in "hunting" a partner, while women were trained to become good future housewives (*hanayome shugyō*) in order to be "chosen" by a man. In today's Japan, however, Yamada and Shirakawa advocate the reverse, namely that today it is women who should go "hunting", while men should work on themselves so that they will be chosen: "This is a basic strategy in an era of marriage partner-hunting" (p. 110). From this perspective, Shirakawa continues to describe the current situation of marriage partner-hunting in Japan – from the well-known dating industry to online dating and from *konkatsu* practices of the countryside to international marriage – and introduces various *konkatsu* methods as well as useful information for effective and successful *konkatsu* activities.

Discussion

Arafō and *konkatsu* were catchphrases of the year 2008 in Japan, words that have triggered widespread attention both in the media and among scholars. Those unfamiliar with these words will find the two books helpful in

understanding why these two words became prominent in Japan recently. Those who have heard about these words or are familiar with the related demographic and lifestyle changes will also enjoy these two books as they give readers a feel for the buzz that evolved around these words.

The books are not necessarily written for researchers who look for scientific explanations, and although what Yamada reports is based on his sociological analyses, it is also a repetition of what he has written elsewhere. Yet, the two books still have something to offer even to an academic readership. What is interesting is that they deal with such topics as *arafō* and *konkatsu*, both of which are signifiers of a new era arising out of the current social transformation of Japan – a transformation in which the conventional patterns of the "Japanese way of life", which was dominant until around 1980, started to change and a new mode of life and living started to take shape. Those who are interested in the diversification of lifestyles and the individualization process will share, if not all, many of the authors' views on present social changes expressed in the books.

Arafō and *konkatsu* became big booms in Japan. We need to wait and see what consequences these booms bring about. But no boom emerges in a social vacuum. The two books are, without a doubt, useful materials in understanding the context of these booms.

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