

LOVE (AND REBELLION) CONQUERS ALL

Why Japanese women risked everything to marry the ‘enemy’ in the aftermath of the Second World War

During the United States’ seven-year occupation of Japan following the Second World War thousands of Japanese women would marry American serviceman. Despite Japan’s formal acceptance of international marriage decades earlier, this was a sharp break from the prevailing norms of the time, which placed preference on intra-racial arranged marriages. In this analysis, I establish the significant societal and personal obstacles Japanese World War II brides faced. I also argue the continued pursuit of such controversial marriages in the context of traditional Japanese society reveals the war bride phenomena as a struggle for independence from the predominant gender roles of the time.

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On December 31st, 1950 in West Virginia, a Japanese woman by the name of Fumiko Tomita married American soldier Louis Ward... again. Roughly three years earlier in Hachinohe, Japan, an American preacher had married them, but, as American marriages were “not permissible” and the United States did not recognize Japanese marriages, their marriage went unacknowledged.¹ Standing at the altar, pledging their lives to each other for the second time, the couple was finally able to join in a legally binding marriage – a more improbable feat than may be readily apparent. According to Japanese tradition, society, and familial values and customs, as well as the Japanese and American governments, their union simply should not have happened. Their tale is not unique. According to one estimate, approximately 40,000 to 50,000 Japanese women married American servicemen and subsequently immigrated to the United States of America during the country’s occupation of Japan, which lasted seven years and required more than 500,000 American troops.^{2 3}

For Japanese women, marrying an American man in the wake of the Second World War proved to be a difficult matter in more ways than one. Obstacles manifested themselves in multifaceted ways including larger, more societal forms as well as individual-oriented forms. These social barriers included wider anti-American sentiment in Japanese society and culture as well as the expectation of anti-Japanese sentiment in America. While many Japanese war brides would go on to express their surprise at the lack of overt discrimination in America, it is important to clarify that their expectation of discriminatory treatment based on their prior to marriage or permanent relocation in America was an obstacle, not their experience in America post-marriage.⁴ Among the individual obstacles were hesitations from their families – sometimes coupled with threats of being disowned – in the context of Japan’s family-focused society and a purposefully long and tedious marriage authorization process meant to discourage intermarriage.



American serviceman Louis Ward, left, and wife Fumiko Tomita (1950)

Source: *Japan in the Heartland* (Ohio University)

It is necessary to recognize that many of these obstacles, particularly societal pressure and family scrutiny, would have been substantial for any Japanese citizen regardless of their gender, but war brides faced the additional disadvantage of being female in a patriarchal society. In some cases this sexist reality further heightened the already significant obstacles

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that war brides had to endure and, in other cases, it was the root of such obstacles. Still, Japanese women willingly chose to marry American men in spite of these obstacles and, in hindsight, the vast majority said that they would do it all again. The question is simply, why? Why would Japanese women pursue marriage to American servicemen given the substantial, multifaceted obstacles that stood in their way? Through the examination of Japanese war brides' oral histories and interviews it becomes clear that Japanese women primarily chose to marry American soldiers as a way to free themselves from what they saw as an oppressive society. In a patriarchal society that gave women little freedom or choice and generally emphasized the collective over the individual, an American soldier was more than just a man – he was an opportunity to assert independence. Hence, in overcoming widespread obstacles and pursuing their marriages to American soldiers, Japanese women challenged their homeland's predominant culture which marginalized women on the basis of their sex.

WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL JAPANESE SOCIETY

According to Mariko Kitamura Bird, a scholar in Japanese folklore and mythology, in Japanese culture women were taught to obey the Confucian principle of the “three submissions.”⁵ Early in life women were expected to submit to their fathers, then submit to their husbands in marriage, and finally submit to their sons later in life. Beyond this, Japanese gender roles were relatively similar to American gender roles of the time in terms of labor division. Japanese society expected men to economically provide and women to stay home to bear children and be the family's primary caretaker. These systemic gender roles in Japan reflected the long-standing, patriarchal “agricultural family” — known as *ie* in Japanese.

As sociologist Anne E. Imamura described it, *ie* was the “ideal” family structure throughout most of twentieth-century Japan.⁶ The *ie* featured a male-preferential hierarchy in which the eldest son would inherit all family possessions including the family home when his father died. Daughters would marry into other families, presumably *ie* as well, and start anew. Younger sons would move out, sometimes establishing subordinate branches of the family. Despite the eldest son being the highest position within the family hierarchy, his wife was the lowest position. Her main purposes in life were to bear children and be her parents-in-law's primary caretaker as they aged. Interestingly enough, this expectation was so strong that being a caretaker was a duty many Japanese women felt inclined to perform as late as the 1990s.⁷ While the *ie* structure was formally abolished in the Japanese constitution that the United States drafted for the country in 1946 and that took effect on May 3, 1947, there was also a strong parental preference for sons up until the late 1980s, most likely due to the prevalence of the *ie* family structure.⁸

By limiting Japanese women's social mobility and access to the workforce, as well as marginalizing them within the

social hierarchy, the family system placed women in a position to be economically and socially dependent on men. Moreover, Japan has traditionally been a *kaikon shaka* or “all-marriage society.”⁹ In other words, the Japanese population did not view marriage as an option, but as an expectation. According to anthropologist John Knight well over 90 percent of Japanese could expect to get married in the post-war period.¹⁰ This high prevalence of marriage coupled with the *ie* system meant the vast majority of Japanese women would find themselves in the home.

The standard definition of “Japanese war bride,” according to historian Keiko Tamura, is “a Japanese woman who married a member of the foreign armed forces or a foreign civilian who was in Japan as a result of the military occupation after World War II and the subsequent military presence in Japan up to 1960.”¹¹ This analysis focuses on such women who specifically married Americans within the nine years immediately following the conclusion of the Second World War. This selection was not arbitrary but, rather, was made after careful consideration of the historical context. While the Second World War concluded in 1945, the United States occupied the country until 1952. The American military would maintain its presence in Japan until 1960 due to the Korean War, but the true historical setting of this analysis is Occupied Japan, a time period inextricably connected to the Second World War. Given the purposefully long and difficult marriage process for Japanese-American couples, some of whom were only able to officially wed years after beginning the application the realm of analysis was extended two years beyond the official end of America's occupation to provide a more accurate and representative time period. These years can be seen as a historical grace period as it is necessary to account for the documented discrepancies in couples' marital intentions and their artificially postponed official wedding dates.

WAR BRIDES FACE SOCIETAL AND PERSONAL OBSTACLES

The obstacles Japanese World War II brides faced were varied and significant. Among the societal obstacles Japanese women wishing to marry American soldiers faced was the strong Japanese tradition and preference toward intraracial marriage. According to Japanese journalist Katie Kaori Hayashi, this was a measure meant to keep the bloodline “pure.”¹² In fact, while the Japanese government had formally welcomed international marriage nearly a century earlier in the Meiji era (1868 – 1912) it was not a common practice before the Second World War.¹³ Moreover, in Japanese culture, societal expectations held, and continue to hold, vast importance. As anthropologist V. Ritts has said, “Japan is a collectivist society where group needs and wants are placed above those of the individual and Japanese people tend to be other-directed.”¹⁴ This only amplified the oddity of, and therefore the discrimination toward, individuals who broke the norm.

The failure to meet the widespread societal pressure to marry



Yoshiko Forinash, of Tokyo; Mitsue Klotzbach of Washington D.C.; and Toshiko Morgan, of Silver Spring, MD., (1953)
 Source: Bob Mulligan, *The American War Bride Experience*

within the Japanese race manifested itself in explicitly aggressive language against Japanese women pursuing an interracial relationship. For example, as one woman, Masa Soto, prepared to marry Don Tennyson, an American soldier, in Occupied Japan, she struggled to gain acceptance in her family for her choice to marry outside the race. Soto's sister put it as simply as she could, saying, "He will break your heart and ruin your life. Marry one of your own race."¹⁵

Given the anti-American sentiment pervasive in Japan during the occupation, the taboo against interracial marriage in general was especially amplified for Japanese women who married American men. The countries were, of course, enemies throughout the Second World War and significant ones at that. The Japanese-orchestrated Pearl Harbor attacks provoked America's official involvement in the war and America's dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki garnered a Japanese surrender, effectively ending the Second World War in the Pacific. Relations remained fraught with tension during the American occupation.

Historian John W. Dower asserted that the anti-American sentiments the Japanese felt after the war were not as unified or vitriolic as one might expect, especially given the atomic bombings. But still, the conditions of the occupation, which lasted longer than the Second World War itself, lead some of the Japanese to be openly resentful. Dower has written,

In those years, Japan had no sovereignty and accord-

ingly no diplomatic relations. No Japanese were allowed to travel abroad until the occupation was almost over; no major political, administrative, or economic decisions were possible without the conquerors' approval; no public criticism of the American regime was permissible, although in the end dissident voices were irrepressible.¹⁶

In fact, in 2003 Sheila A. Smith, currently a senior fellow for Japan studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, asserted anti-Americanism in modern Japan can be traced to the population's negative feelings toward practices the United States imposed on the country during the occupation.^{17 18} In specific regards to the opposite sex, anti-American sentiment came in the form of rumors that American soldiers would brutalize Japanese women. Murasaki Church, a war bride, said, "When the American soldiers came in, there were rumors going around that they were going to rape all the Japanese girls."¹⁹

This anti-American sentiment trickled down to affect individual war brides in their everyday lives. For example, when Yasaki Miwako met American GI Robert Cleve in 1952, they decided to marry shortly after. As part of the marriage authorization process that Japanese-American couples had to go through, Miwako and Cleve went to a Japanese municipal office. It was there that the municipal official told Miwako, "Ah, you marrying a Yankee, huh? Well, we don't need you - go."²⁰ Several women who would eventually become war brides recounting hearing horror stories of American ser-



“Babysan: A Private Look at the Japanese Occupation”
Source: *About Japan: Japan Society*

vicemen leaving Japanese women heartbroken and stranded, which left them hesitant to pursue even casual relationships with them. Parents would invoke the opera *Madame Butterfly* in which an American naval officer abandoned a Japanese geisha, Cho-Cho san, to deter their daughters from pursuing American soldiers.²¹ Another Japanese woman, Shigeko Mori, who was 26 years old when she wed, said, “It was quite difficult to marry an American. Japanese women at my age who tried to marry American men had a hard time, and those were not socially respected.”²² Even Mori, an eventual war bride herself, said she never thought she would marry an American as she did not respect American soldiers or the Japanese women who dated them.²³

In fact, even the term “war bride,” which is neutral in American English, has a negative connotation in Japanese. This connotation derived from the belief that most war brides had previously been prostitutes – the majority of the Japanese population refused to believe “ordinary women” would marry their former enemies.²⁴ The implication that prostitutes were therefore “unordinary” showed the shame of sex

work in Japanese culture. Japanese society placed an arbitrary equivalence between prostitutes and war brides, thus extending this shame on to them – presumably to promote and preserve nationalist sentiment. This false equivalence was even more outlandish in the context of the extensive background checks Japanese war brides had to endure in the marriage authorization process. Still, Japanese men felt inclined to openly shame war brides for simply being associated with American men. Their brazen words suggest they did expect reprimand or punishment for shaming women, illustrating how Japanese society accepted and even condoned such treatment of war brides.

For example, Setsuko Amburn, an eventual Japanese war bride, said a Japanese man publicly called her a “*panpan*,” a derogatory term which translates to “whore” in English, when he saw her walking with her American boyfriend.²⁵ Chuck Jensen, who worked as a Japanese linguist and medic in Occupied Japan, said young Japanese boys and an older man in uniform said, “There goes another whore with an American,” when he walked by them hand-in-hand with a Japanese woman.²⁶ This serves as an illustration of not only anti-American sentiment but also the degradation of war brides for mere association with American men.

Beyond the anti-Americanism which plagued their relationships in their home country, Japanese women perceived that they could face anti-Japanese sentiment from Americans if and when they relocated with their husbands. Japanese women themselves held this expectation and their local communities only reinforced their fears, mounting a significant obstacle to marriage. In some cases, women were openly mocked with predictions that Americans would not accept them. Yuki Martley, a Japanese war bride who wed in 1952, described how her Japanese neighbors criticized her relationship, saying her husband’s American parents would reject a Japanese daughter-in-law and that “within a year, she would be deserted.”²⁷

Reinforced by such harassment, Japanese women themselves feared rejection from their husband’s families, and Americans in general, based on their ethnicity. Martley told the interviewer she felt “uneasy” meeting her husband’s parents and was scared of rejection. “I was a little bit nervous because I was not sure if his parents would accept me.”²⁸ In some cases, women did not even have to leave Japan before getting a taste of the ethnic discrimination they expected to face from Americans. As a requirement for their marriage to be approved, Cleve and Miwako had to go to a chaplain to receive his signature. Cleve said the chaplain, referencing Miwako, who was sitting beside him, asked, “Are you sure this is the kind of girl that you want to marry?”²⁹ Cleve said they were “so insulted” that they took back the form, saying he would have to get someone else to sign it as he walked out. Miwako said she felt she was being treated like a criminal.³⁰ Japanese war brides also faced significant backlash from their

own families when pursuing a relationship with an American soldier. While family disapproval would have certainly been an obstacle in most cultures, it was an especially strong barrier in Japan, as Japan fosters a culture which valued obedience to elders and placed a premium on family unity. As gerontologist James D. Brightman has said, "Historically, the family rather than the individual has been the basic unit of Japanese society."³¹ Furthermore, according to one oral history project:

“Given the anti-American sentiment... during the occupation, the taboo against interracial marriage in general was especially amplified for Japanese women who married American men.”

This familial pressure was especially apparent when it came to marriage. As Hayashi described, Before the war, young couples, even those who were older than twenty (the official age regarded as an adult in Japan), needed parental approval for their marriages. Marriage was not a private matter, but a family matter. In most cases, parents found the husband or wife for their child.³²

It is logical, then, that negative familial reactions would be a strong deterrent to pursuing an interracial marriage. Still, many Japanese women forged ahead.

Toyoko Murakami, who grew up in Tateyama-machi in the Toyama prefecture proper, was one of these women – she wed American soldier Alison Pier in 1954.³³ While Murakami's grandmother, the authority in the matrilineal family, accepted the marriage, her father reacted with anger and shock when he heard of her American husband. He had fought for the Imperial Army in Manchuria during the Second World War and would not accept her marriage to a "former enemy soldier."³⁴ Her father cried, feeling he had to apologize to his comrades who had lost their lives for his daughter's marriage to an American soldier.³⁵

Some families even went so far as to disown female relatives who married American soldiers. Mori did not take the decision to marry an American soldier lightly for fear she would be labeled a delinquent, a prostitute, or be heartbroken by an American soldier like she had heard others were. She refused to have an intimate relationship with her eventual husband several times. "It was a disgrace not only to me, but also to my family to be deserted by an American serviceman," she said.³⁶ When she did marry an American soldier her brothers told her, "If you are going to marry an American, I am going to disown you!"³⁷ In Mori's case it is especially telling that she received this treatment from her family as the marriage was against her will.³⁸ When another war bride, Miwako, returned to her hometown to gather paperwork necessary for the government to approve her marriage to Cleve,

her family made their feelings clear. Miwako's cousin threw rocks at her and yelled, "You not Yasaki [her family name]. We're going to take it off the birth certificate. Don't you ever come back!" Miwako reported that her father shared similar feelings to her cousin and that her mother could only cry. Miwako's brother told her, "You can do whatever you want to. Go ahead, but never come back to front door!"³⁹

Japanese-American couples also faced a time-consuming uphill battle when it came to the legal processes required to obtain a marriage that their respective countries would recognize. During the initial years of the occupation, the American military simply barred intermarriage via formal regulation.⁴⁰ In lieu of legally-binding unions some couples married in informal *Shinto* ceremonies, a practice historian Susan Zeiger characterizes as an openly defiant act of civil and military disobedience.⁴¹ Even after intermarriage became legally permissible, the American and Japanese governments looked to snuff out their respective residents' forbidden love under the mountain of paperwork and long waiting periods required to gain legal recognition for their marriages. In the process, which accumulated paperwork more than an inch thick in some cases, Japanese women had to submit their birth record and family tree as well as undergo a police investigation for "communism, tuberculosis, syphilis, and anything incriminating about her or her family."⁴² Other times, the American military would simply transfer the man to a different location in an attempt to halt marriage preparations.

Mike Nichols, an American soldier, described how tedious the authorization for the United States government to approve his marriage to a Japanese woman was. He stated how every few months officials would say materials had gone missing or were improperly signed. Finally, his master sergeant informed him he would be sent home. "I was stunned! It got ugly! I mean it had been two years since we had started the process," Nichols said.⁴³ He stormed out of the office and asked a friend of his who was a lawyer to vet the application. Nichols' friend said the application was valid and that he would "go to bat for him."⁴⁴ The government subsequently approved the marriage within two days.⁴⁵

INDEPENDENCE: WHY JAPANESE WORLD WAR II BRIDES PERSEVERED

Yet, with everything from racism to family disapproval to bureaucracy working against them, tens of thousands of



Japanese women and American GIs (1953)

Source: *The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*

Japanese women would pursue their choice to marry American servicemen. While marrying for love may seem like a given in modern America, it was a scarce practice in post-war Japan. As described previously, prior to the war arranged marriages with little thought to the wishes of the bride and groom were the norm in Japan, and this practice continued into the occupation period despite a provision in the Japanese constitution that explicitly declared that marriage would be based solely on consent of the individuals.⁴⁶ Beyond this, up until the mid-twentieth century, Japanese society viewed “love matches” – marriages pursued due to mutual attraction between a pair – as unrespectable. Some families even went so far as to disguise their children’s love matches as arranged marriages to save face, according to renowned social anthropologist Joy Hendry.⁴⁷ Yet, despite this taboo, almost all war brides who were interviewed reported that their primary reason for marrying was their personal love for the individual American soldier. A significant number of women interviewed used the phrase *hitome bore*, “love at first sight” in English, to describe their relationships with their eventual husbands.⁴⁸

In this sense, Japanese World War II brides broke a long-held societal norm in a time when arranged marriages were still frequent and held significant social value. By marrying for love, war brides implicitly asserted that their feelings and individual preferences came first – a sharp break from the predominant culture. In at least one case an anonymous Japanese woman made this explicit. After her uncle insulted her Filipino-American fiancé she told him, “As long as we loved each other nothing mattered. It is what we are that is impor-

tant and not what our parents are.”⁴⁹

Perhaps most significantly, Japanese women explicitly identified marriage to American men as a way to establish their independence, and specifically their independence as women. Interestingly enough, the man’s affiliation with the military, while a large source of conflict between Japanese war brides and society, held little relevance to war brides’ motivations for marriage. The men’s affiliation with the United States, however, did hold relevance. As discussed previously, the systemic disenfranchisement of women and the influential force of family in Japanese marriage meant women were expected to move seamlessly from the role of subservient daughter to the role of subservient wife – leaving them unable to express their own desires and shape their own lives. For example, while it was Mori’s choice to rebel against societal expectations and date Genaro Cubillos, a Mexican-American soldier, Mori was still essentially forced to marry him when a city worker gave into Cubillos’ persistent requests for her family registration record, a required document for marriage, without her consent or even her knowledge. “[Marriage] was simply his decision, and it was not my decision at all,” Mori said.⁵⁰ The fact that the city worker felt compelled to give Cubillos the record, essentially marrying her off, without even consulting Mori serves as an example of blatant disregard for women’s preferences, especially in the context of a life-altering decision such as marriage. This chain of events even astonished Mori, who had felt Japanese society was chauvinistic since she was a child.⁵¹

In another case, Murakami was expected to marry a local boy

of her mother's choosing and secede her matrilineal family's name and house as six generations of eldest daughters had done before her. Even in a matrilineal family, a rare occurrence, Murakami said she had little freedom. "It was taken as granted for me to marry the local boy. I did not have a choice as a girl," said Murakami.⁵² Murakami, however, did not marry her family-selected fiancé. After her family allowed her to live in urban Tokyo before being married, she decided not to return to the countryside. Instead, her Japanese fiancé, who was at her house in a traditional kimono for the wedding ceremony, was left waiting. That was the day Murakami said "she moved outside her family's control."⁵³ Murakami further moved outside her family's control, as well as Japanese society, when she married an American soldier. She said she was attracted to the "American life" and the qualities which differentiated him from Japanese men, such as his outgoing ways and the financial generosity the American dollar's strength allowed him to have.⁵⁴

Beyond independence from their family, in becoming war brides Japanese women also found refuge from their native society which they viewed as oppressive toward women. More than one war bride described that her personal qualities were inconsistent with those of the traditional, submissive Japanese wife and called either Japanese men or the country as a whole "chauvinistic."⁵⁵ Japanese women perceived American men, and the American lifestyle which came with their marriages, as a way to explore a new life outside these strict expectations. Katsu Watanabe, who married Cecil Kelley in 1951, described herself as aggressive, outgoing, and "not afraid of anything."⁵⁶ For these reasons, she did not think she "would make too good [of] a Japanese wife."⁵⁷ Looking back, Watanabe thought she could no longer live in Japan as a person unable to express her individual thoughts and opinions. "There is freedom with American men," she said.⁵⁸ Mary Shi-

zuka, who wed American GI Walter Rex Bottomley in 1953, was another example of a woman who married an American soldier explicitly to free herself from Japanese gender roles. Shizuka said one of the reasons she married an American was "felt that [she] could have a fuller life as a woman if [she] lived in America ... I would be no good in Japan because I have too strong a personality for a Japanese woman."⁵⁹

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Japanese war brides' testimonies show that they persevered against a multitude of significant societal and individual obstacles to marry American servicemen in the nine years immediately following the Second World War. Moreover, their testimonies reveal implicit and explicit struggles for independence from both their families and Japanese society's pervasive gender roles. While not all facets of their new American lives would be as the war brides expected and some of their marriages ended in divorce, the majority of the women interviewed said given the chance to do it all over again, they would stand by their choice to marry an American.⁶⁰

The Japanese war bride phenomenon can be seen as a stepping stone for Japanese women and in Japanese culture as a whole. It would be the first time Japanese women would participate in international marriage in significant numbers despite its formal acceptance nearly a century earlier. As the tradition-centered Japan faced vulnerability during the American occupation, Japanese women seized the opportunity to break away from a society they viewed as oppressive and chauvinistic and assert their own individuality. Throughout the occupation, it just so happened that the United States sent more than 500,000 men, clad in American uniform, who provided that opportunity. 

Endnotes

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- [22] Crawford, Hayashi, and Suenaga. "Japanese War Brides in America. 136
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- [24] Ibid. 249 – 250.
- [25] Ibid. 115.
- [26] Regina F. Lark, *Mr. Chuck Jensen interview*. Tape recording, Bremerton, California, August 25, 1996. Accessed May 2, 2016. <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll17/id/564929>
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- [38] Mori was forced to marry Genaro Cubillos, a Mexican-American soldier, after a city worker gave into his persistent requests for her family registration record – required paperwork for a marriage. See further discussion of this on page 9.
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[55] Ibid. 122, 133; See similar examples in: Shizuko Suenaga.

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[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid. 181.

See similar examples in: Shizuko Suenaga. "Goodbye to Sayonara: The Reverse Assimilation of Japanese War Brides." *Boston College*. 1996.

[60] Ibid.