

Games of romance? Tokyo in search of love and Unity in Diversity

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23 Games of romance?

Tokyo in search of love and Unity in Diversity

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“Who will you watch the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics with?”

This is the title of a short promotional video released by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) in February 2018. The story unfolds as follows: A young couple passes through a magical gate to the past where they see their grandparents as a young couple in 1964 – the last time Tokyo hosted the Olympic Games. The young “grandfather” invites the young “grandmother” to watch the Games together and puts a ring on her left ring finger. While black and white impressions of the 1964 Olympics stream in the background, a voice-over narrator explains that the grandparents used the 1964 Olympics as a chance to get married and start a family. The video then returns to the present where we see the young couple enjoying the wedding party of a male friend. Next, we see the woman visiting a female friend – a now clearly married woman with a toddler – “who had always said it’s more relaxing to be alone, but who now looks very happy.” The grandparents then appear again, now as senior citizens, experiencing the “excitement of the Olympics for a second time.” The final scene starts with a close-up of the young couple. They turn their heads toward each other, asking “Shouldn’t we as well ...?” The video, which is available online, is the government’s attempt to “support individuals who want to get married and make their dreams come true by the start of the Tokyo Olympics in 2020. Moreover, it aims to enhance the institution of marriage in society as whole.”¹

“Rushing to get married by the 2020 Olympics” is a common refrain that is found in popular manga- and TV-series as well as in advertisements for matchmaking companies. Connecting the Olympics with a range of issues – as well as products – is not as surprising as it might seem at first glance. In fact, the 2020 Olympics are already ever-present in Tokyo, from the official Olympic merchandise to the ever-increasing

“Tokyo 2020” taxis, as well as yoghurt or candy bars emblazoned with the Olympic rings. Yet, the TMG video sheds light on a critical issue: Japan, as with many other post-industrial societies, is facing serious demographic change. The plummeting of the fertility rate far below replacement level has been caused by a decline in the marriage rate – children born out of wedlock are rare at around 2% – which has become a topic of great concern among politicians, journalists, and the general public. The official handling of the topic in the run-up to the Tokyo Olympics offers a useful perspective on the concept of Unity in Diversity, a cornerstone of the 2020 Tokyo Games’ vision, and how it connects with discussions of social change in Japan.

Tokyo’s Couple Story: (not) getting married

Getting married and starting a family with a highly gendered division of labor was the norm in postwar Japan and was reflected in the extremely high marriage rates. However, in the last 30 years marriage behavior has changed significantly: More and more adults are getting married later or not at all. At present, the average age at first marriage is 29.4 years for women and 31.1 years for men, and the permanent single rate is 14.1% for women and 23.4% for men, with even higher rates for Tokyo. According to forecasts, this trend will continue, and Japanese scientists are anticipating the emergence of a “Hyper-Solo Society.”² As early as the 1990s, the Japanese government adopted numerous countermeasures with the buzzwords “reconciliation of work and family,” “gender equality,” and later on “work-life balance.” These policies were intended to discourage women from postponing or refusing marriage.

Around the turn of the millennium, however, research showed that despite the fact that almost 90% of adults had the desire to marry, they were not able to do so for various reasons, the most common being the inability to find an appropriate partner. Within this context, the commercial matchmaking industry started to boom. Concurrently, Japanese local communities and municipalities began officially promoting various events under the label of “marriage hunting.” These events are the predecessors to the promotional video discussed earlier, as well as two other initiatives that TMG launched in March 2017 (Tokyo Wedding Day) and November 2018. The latter – Tokyo’s Couple Story, a carefully-designed and easy-to-access online portal for marriage support – features a range of marriage-related information, upcoming events, as well as the life stories of select married couples with highly diverse lifestyles, most of them with kids. The portal is intended to help those “who wish to get married and realize their individual ideas of ‘being together’.”

Marriage Hunting Start Day was one event featured on the portal that I was able to attend as a researcher. The event, which was hosted by TMG in cooperation with the Asahi Culture Center, was held in February 2019 and was part of the two-day Tokyo Couple Days, opened by Tokyo governor Koike Yuriko. The official aim of the event – held in an exclusive central Tokyo venue with around 100 attendees – was “to provide a variety of information on marriage hunting.”³³ A fashionable female presenter guided the audience of slightly more women than men through the two-hour event. It included a panel discussion – which appeared to be subtly scripted – with two comedians and four professionals from the matchmaking and wedding industries, as well as a lecture. The presenters talked about fears, hopes, failures and successes, dos and don’ts as well as personal and professional experiences while “marriage hunting.” While some of the tips were extremely specific – length of fingernails and best sock colors – the overall message of the day seemed to be that “marriage hunting is normal and will help all of us find an appropriate partner.” The atmosphere – the trendy, hip event with the sincere, yet almost paternalistic presentation of the subject matter – was startling for me and made me wonder about the attendees’ motivations and opinions. I was asked not to conduct interviews or take photos due to privacy concerns, but I overheard the positive chatter of two women nearby, who – assiduously note-taking – gave me the impression that they found the information useful. During the subsequent “event time,” the attendees had the chance to be photographed for their online profile, listen to personalized advice from counsellors and stroll around loosely arranged sofas and bookshelves with an exhibition of reading recommendations of “individuals who had success with marriage hunting.” In addition, the bookshelves had iPads streaming the “Who will you watch the Olympics with?” video. According to a statement by a TMG official, no further events are currently planned that explicitly link marriage and the Olympics. Nevertheless, the official continued, the upcoming Olympics will lead to an overall positive atmosphere of change and innovation in Tokyo. He expressed his hopes that this atmosphere could support individuals in realizing their dreams of marriage.

Unity in Diversity: the vision

The explicit focus of TMG on heterosexual marriage is quite surprising in the context of the official Games Vision. This vision is built on three core concepts, one of which is Accepting One Another (Unity in Diversity). “Diversity” is here defined as “accepting and respecting differences in race, color, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or

other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, level of ability or other status.” The primary reason for choosing “diversity” – a concept that first appeared in Japan in the early 2000s in the realm of business management practices – can be ascribed to the overall restructuring and modernization ethos of the global Olympic Movement at the time Tokyo won its bid in 2013. At that time, Thomas Bach, who had a reputation as reformer, was elected as the Ninth President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). He strongly pushed the Olympic Agenda 2020 that was agreed on by the IOC in 2014 and which comprises 40 recommendations “to shape the future of the Olympic Movement.” Most significantly, Recommendation 11 (“Fostering of Gender Equality”) and Recommendation 14 (“Strengthening the 6th Fundamental Principle of Olympism (against any form of discrimination) [with a special focus on sexual orientation]”) put a strong emphasis on diversity. The overall importance that is attached to diversity was highlighted in a speech by Bach in 2013: “We embrace [...] diversity. In fact, [...] diversity is part of the magic of the Olympic Games,” concluding: “Let us demonstrate the true meaning of Unity in Diversity.”

The choice to focus on “diversity” as a core concept turned the term into a favorite buzzword for policy and city planning. The most prominent example here being the four-year plan called “New Tokyo. New Tomorrow. The Action Plan for 2020 (Tokyo First).”⁴ The aim is to “create a new Tokyo” and “develop its three faces” – safe, smart, and diverse – by the start of the Olympics in 2020. “Diver-city,” an Anglicism combining the two terms “diversity” and “city,” is here understood as “a city where everyone can lead vibrant and active lives.” Yet, the focus here is undeniably on raising children and caring for the elderly, and therefore points to the same bias as the video discussed above. Of course, “diversity” also plays a key role in the Olympics imagery. The Tokyo 2020 emblems explicitly symbolize Unity in Diversity through “three varieties of rectangular shapes, [...] that represent different countries, cultures and ways of thinking,” and the blue and pink mascots are described as embodying the concept of diversity – designers were not allowed to assign any specific gender to them. The color-coding and appearance point nonetheless to clear associations with a heterosexual couple.

Marriage, love and Unity in Diversity: an ongoing search

According to Aoyama Yasushi⁵ – member of the 2020 nomination-winning Bid Committee – Tokyo “must demonstrate that it has transformed itself [...] into a mature society of the information age. [...] One,

that welcomes people, customs, and beliefs of all kinds and spares no effort to improve the quality of life.” The assumption of the broad concept of “diversity” based on the rhetoric of the IOC might be one attempt to do so. However, despite promoting “diversity,” a strong focus of policies to enhance marriage can clearly be identified. Initiatives that concretely promote and support other sexual orientations or divergent lifestyles are almost non-existent. Yet, within the framework of heterosexual, reproductive partnership, diversity – as well as individuality – is strongly fostered as can be seen in the policies of, for example, the Marriage Hunting Start Day. Diversity of individual needs and desires defined within the framework of partner search, couple formation, lived partnership(s) and childrearing is emphasized. Overall, finding a partner and getting married is promoted in a very modern and somehow “cool” way. With this in mind, we could conclude that TMG, and the match-making industry, do stylize the Olympics at least to a certain extent as the “Games of romance” or the “possibility of romance.” In fact, a representative of a matchmaking company outlined during my fieldwork that the number of people who actively search for a partner and register with a matchmaking agency rises significantly in advance of specific mega-events like the Olympics. This seems to be confirmed by recent data from the Marriage & Life Design Support Company: “Finding a partner” and “getting married” are apparently the most commonly cited goals that respondents want to achieve by the time of the Olympics. In fact, more than half of the respondents named either “romantic partner” and “wife/husband” in response to the question “Who would you like to enjoy the Olympics with?”⁶

However, not only the number of people who cannot get married, but also the number of people who do not want to get married is on the rise. Therefore, in this state of societal change, “new” types of life plans based on various romantic or mutually supportive relationships beyond a “classic” marriage are emerging and, in the context of socioeconomic upheavals, their acceptance is greatly needed. In the future, the various relationship worlds of straight as well as queer people and those who are single, divorced, or living alone will require distinct attention and support. The concept of Unity in Diversity and its subsequent initiatives stimulated by the 2020 Olympics are a positive starting point, but it is as yet little more than a rhetorical device that demands a great deal of further development. The crucial time period will be post-Olympics, as Tokyo 2020 is certainly a milestone, but still only the beginning. The main question will be if the concept and vision can be kept alive, put in practice and – sometime in the future – truly achieved.

Notes

- 1 www.metro.tokyo.jp/tosei/hodohappyo/press/2018/02/02/02.html.
- 2 Arakawa, Kazuhisa. 2017. *Chōsoro shakai. Dokushin taikoku Nihon no shōgeki*. Tokyo: PHP Shinsho.
- 3 www.futari-story.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/event/report.html.
- 4 www.metro.tokyo.jp/english/about/plan/index.html.
- 5 Aoyama, Yasushi. 2017. "Tokyo 2020." In Gold, John, Margaret Gold (eds). *Olympic cities. City agendas, planning, and the World's Games, 1896–2020*, 3rd ed. Abington: Routledge: 425.
- 6 Marriage & Life Design Support Company. 2018. "Survey 'Who would you like to enjoy the Olympics with?'" <https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000343.000007950.html>.