



Annual Examinations for Secondary Schools 2022

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From cola to karaoke, more Japanese people are going it alone. What's causing the huge change in the traditionally group-oriented country?

A decade ago, many Japanese were so embarrassed to be seen eating alone in the school or office cafeteria that they'd opt to eat in a bathroom stall. Appearing friendless was a no-no, leading to what became known as "benjo meshi" – taking a "toilet lunch". But many think Japan is changing in a big way. One of those people is

5 Miki Tateishi, a bartender in Tokyo. She works at Bar Hitori, a cosy spot in the Shinjuku nightlife district that is designed for solo drinkers. The bar, which opened in mid-2018, represents an unusual opportunity in conformity-driven Japan – to go out and drink by yourself. And **it's** doing well: instead of hiding in toilet stalls, people are stepping out and embracing being seen solo.

10 Yet Hitori – hitori means "one person" – is by no means the only example of how businesses are changing to accommodate people who want to do things by themselves. From dining to nightlife to travel, new options catering specifically to individuals have popped up in recent years. It's known as the "ohitorisama" movement: people boldly choosing to do things alone. Loosely translated,

15 "ohitorisama" means something like "party of one". Search for the hashtag on Instagram in Japanese and you'll find hundreds of thousands of photos: plated restaurant meals for one, cinema hallways, pitched tents at campgrounds or transport shots highlighting solo adventures. In the last 18 months particularly, more and more people have been declaring **their** love of ohitorisama alone time in both the news and

20 social media.

One recent innovation is "hitori yakiniku". Meaning "grilled meat", yakiniku usually involves sitting around a grill at a restaurant table with a group of people and communally cooking mountains of chicken, beef or pork. But with ohitorisama, the only one grilling (and eating) all that meat is you. Even karaoke is going solo – a huge

25 change to the classic Japanese pastime. "Demand for single-person karaoke has increased to account for 30 to 40% [of all karaoke customers]," says Daiki Yamatani, a sales manager who does PR for the 1Kara solo karaoke company in Tokyo. In Japan, karaoke spots are everywhere, often big buildings with several floors of private karaoke rooms built for groups of various sizes. But demand from solitary singers has

30 been growing, and so 1Kara swapped large group rooms for phone booth-sized personal recording studios.

In many nations, being solo might not seem so surprising. For example, British actress Emma Watson recently declared her love of the single life and being "self-partnered". Western publications have written guides to dining alone or reading a

35 book at a bar, and solo travel has made careers for countless social media influencers.

But in Japan where conformity and being part of the group have always been highly-prized, **it** is a big deal. Japan's 125 million people are crammed into an archipelago a

bit smaller than California – and four-fifths of **that land** is mountainous and uninhabitable. Space has long been at a premium, so emphasis has been placed on collectivity and fitting in with others. “Japan is a small country, and everybody needs to coexist,” says Motoko Matsushita, a senior consultant at Japan’s largest economic research firm. “We need to focus on living together in harmony, which is why peer pressure [to do things in a group] has been high.” Matsushita says that along with the rise of social media – the way friend numbers or likes can dictate your value – this led to stifling peer pressure that stigmatised being seen alone. She says the fallout from this and the 24/7 communication culture then fuelled the rise of ohitorisama.

But Matsushita believes this is changing, saying negative social pressures around being alone have reduced. “‘You have to get married, you have to have a child’ – these social pressures are decreasing,” she says. Part of the equation is that Japanese society is undergoing a seismic demographic shift. The birthrate is falling: last year just 864,000 babies were born – the lowest since records began in 1899. The number of single-person households is rising according to census data. Declining marriage rates are contributing to the rise in people who live alone but so too is the fact that more seniors in one of the world’s fastest-greying nations are becoming widows or widowers.

Needless to say, it’s not just Japan that is undergoing the kind of societal changes that have contributed to ohitorisama. As birth rates slump, marriage ages climb and populations age, many nations are seeing a rise in those leading single lives. Of course, in nations where doing things by yourself – dining, drinking, exploring – raises fewer eyebrows, the phenomenon of “parties of one” enjoying everything society has to offer will be less pronounced. But in Japan, its relatively rapid evolution has become a hot topic.

(adapted from: <https://www.bbc.com>)