

The rise of Japan's 'super solo' culture

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. 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, the opinions of others be damned.

What's driving the change and why exactly is it considered so significant?

"Japan is a small country, and everybody needs to coexist," says Motoko Matsushita, a senior consultant at Nomura Research Institute. She 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 **blowback** from this and the 24/7 communication culture then fueled the rise of ohitorisama.

stifle 扼杀; 窒息

stigmatize 污蔑; 玷污

blowback 反弹

Part of the equation is that Japanese society is undergoing a **seismic** demographic shift. The number of single-person households is rising, up from 25% in 1995 to over 35% in 2015, according to census data.

seismic 地震的

"A 'super solo society', characterised by young people who never get married and the elderly who become single again after being widowed, will be the future of all countries, not only Japan," says Kazuhisa Arakawa, a researcher at Hakuhodo.

And it's the combination of demographic shifts coupled with the emergence of more flexible attitudes about how lives can be lived that has helped ohitorisama to flourish