

The Generation

The changing trends and styles of the mating and dating game between our parents and the Harvard yisei

by Janet Kim



My mother dated a couple of different men before she began dating my father. She went to Ewha Women's University, an all-female school, so the way she met these men was through some form of introduction by another party, for example through *meeting* — a dating practice in Korea where a group of female college students would agree to meet with a group of male college students with the intent of pairing up.

It turned out, however, that my mother married my father, whom she had known since childhood. A good friend of hers had been the sister of my father's good friend. Occasionally, throughout their childhood and their teens, they ran into each other at their friends' house. They never got to know each other well, nor were they initially interested in each other.

After my mother returned from attending graduate school in the United States, her family was anxious that she get married soon since she was in her mid-twenties by then. Through *suhn* (a formal introduction between two people arranged by a third party specifically with the intent of marriage, or in other words matchmaking), she was by chance reintroduced to my father, and they began dating. My mother told me that in her selection of a spouse, she and her mother were interested in *hakbul* (schooling) more than anything else. Though my father was poor, my mother married him because he was a graduate of Seoul National University (many times called the "Harvard of Korea") and was in training to be a doctor. My father was attracted to marrying my mother also because of her *hakbul*, as well as her affluent and respectable family background.

My *keun umma* (my father's older brother's wife) met my uncle in college; they were both in the chemistry department at Yonsei University. They began dating because they happened to live in the same area of Seoul and ended up going home together after school. She told me that she had not wanted to get married so early, but she married soon after graduating from college. She had felt pressured to do so in part because she had been dating my uncle for so long that her parents feared what the neighbors would say if she postponed marriage or broke off the relationship. When I asked about love, she remarked with the slightest hint of scorn that for

her, marriage had not been for love, *per se*, but more for other factors, like convenience.

My *komo* (my father's sister) told me that her marriage, also a result of *suhn* like my parents', was rushed because she was already in her early thirties and not exceptionally attractive or educated. Since my grandfather liked her husband, they married quickly, fearing that if she waited too long, she would be unable to marry at all. Her story reflects yet another factor of marriage for our parents' generation: a sense of duty to their parents and family. And as with my *keun umma*, my *komo* also said that love had not been a major factor in her decision to marry.

These stories are reflective of Korean values concerning marriage that were present just one generation ago — our parents' generation. Raised in a post-war Korea undergoing dramatic economic change, the parents of *yisei* were often motivated by economic factors. For example, my mother assumed that my father's medical career would assure her a financially comfortable life. Considering the well-known Korean emphasis on education, it is no surprise that one's school ties was also a determining factor. There were also the age-old factors of family background/social status and familial duty. Convenience was also a possible factor, but love seems to have been on the bottom of the list, if on the list at all.

The marriages I have mentioned have worked out well, though not without their tough times. One could argue that the fact that their marriages were not inspired by love but by other factors could have made the newlywed-years, when the partners are supposed to adjust to each other, all the more rough. Although they must have anticipated these hardships, these women nevertheless put their social responsibilities to their parents and families before their own personal preferences. Realizing this made me wonder not only what *yisei* think about their parents' marriages but also what their own personal views on marriage are. My curiosity led me to ask several different Harvard Korean Americans about their personal views on marriage.

In general, it seems that Korean Americans at Harvard want the same things in marriage. Not

surprisingly, love is the deciding factor of marriage for them, a result of having been brought up in American culture where love is sometimes considered to have the "power to conquer all." However, other important factors considered in choosing a spouse include ambition, loyalty, intelligence, honesty, humility, independence, and self-confidence. These qualities are pretty predictable when you consider the typical Harvard student. (Well, humility might be kind of surprising.) Many Harvard-going Korean Americans said that they want someone who is their equal, someone who shares their interests and values while holding his or her own interests and ambitions.

When it comes to the question of race, there are some difference of opinion. Nevertheless, for the most part, although most admit that marrying Korean or Asian is ideal to them, and among the Korean American Harvard students I informally surveyed also indicated that race is not a limiting factor for marriage. They do feel, however, that race is a huge factor culturally more than anything else because of the difficulty of reconciling Korean culture and values with non-Korean ones, especially non-Asian ones. A couple of people jokingly pointed out how eating Korean food in the home is important to them.

Those who answered that they plan to only marry a Korean also noted the importance of preserving culture. I share their view because despite growing up in the United States, I was raised by Korean parents on Korean school, Korean dramas, eating Korean food, and observing Korean cultural traditions in a little every day kind of way. My Korean heritage is very important to me and I believe that marrying a non-Korean would dilute that heritage for my children.

I found that Korean American Harvard students (among those whom I surveyed) defined a "successful marriage" in a way that I imagine most people in this country would — a loving relationship that lasts. It is a marriage where the children have a very positive upbringing, where the family is important, where the spouses are equals, and where a husband and wife accept and support each other. A couple of people also cited the importance of a marriage rooted in cultural tradition and/or religious values.

While they value certain things about their parents' marriages, Harvard *yisei* ... also want to do certain things differently ... some strongly disapprove of the set gender roles that often caused conflict in their parents' marriages.

While they value certain things about their parents' marriages, Harvard *yisei*, tied to their opinions of what a successful marriage entails, also want to do certain things differently. Devotion to the children is one thing many of those I surveyed want to keep the same. They stated how important it was to them that their parents worked hard and sacrificed so much for them. Indeed it is difficult for me to imagine whether it would have been possible for me to make it to Harvard without my parents' support. However, some strongly disapprove of the set gender roles that often caused conflict in their parents' marriages. And while some of their parents had met under what we would consider natural circumstances and had a marriage for love, many of the parents had not known each other very well when they got married and the determining factors for marriage were education and social status. Those whose parents fit the latter category said they plan to marry for love, not for any of the previously mentioned reasons some of our parents may have married for.

Some did recognize an important difference between *yisei* and their parents in terms of the environment they grew up in. Whereas *yisei* live in an American environment that emphasizes love as the primary factor for marriage, our parents' generation was influenced by their upbringing in Korea and had grown up in a Korea that was rebuilding itself after the Korean War, surrounded by poverty and economic instability. Thus it is only natural that our parents were pressured to marry people who would seem capable of supporting the economic stability of their household, while we, who have the luxury of considerably more financial stability, would want to marry for love. But again, although many first generation Koreans met and married as my parents did, many also did in fact marry for love, the ideal that we as *yisei* hold today.

Of course, no two *yisei* think totally alike on the issue of marriage. Other environmental factors besides family and cultural background influence what we think about something as complicated as marriage. I have definite preferences for my future husband. The major ones are that he is Christian and Korean. My parents too want me to marry Christian, and my mother specifically wants me to marry someone Korean. Of course I plan to marry for love and not out of convenience or duty, but in my reflections about the future, I realize the significance of these two qualities.

As we sort through the values that our parents have passed down to us and the various American values we have grown up with, it will indeed be interesting to see what kind of people we choose to marry in the future.

Janet Kim '04 is a Visual Environmental Studies Concentrator in Kirkland House.