

Ageless Love

Japan's divorce rate may be at a record high, but introduction agencies are helping customers of all ages find love. **Tony McNicol** talks to the matchmakers.

Just opposite Tokyo's Shinjuku station is a small unassuming looking building that houses an unusual company. In the brightly lit entrance there are fresh cut flowers, and jazz piano music plays in the background. Smiling members of staff usher visitors into tastefully decorated cubicles,

each fitted with a small table and two comfy chairs. This refuge of calm from the heaving streets outside is Akanekai, an introduction agency for middle-aged and elderly singles. For four decades the family-owned company has been helping older customers find their ideal partner. And today, with divorce and remarriage

rates in Japan at record highs, they have never been busier.

In a sense, introduction services are nothing new for a country with a long history of arranged marriage, but Akanekai offers something quite different. "[Our service] is similar to an old fashioned arranged marriage, but more relaxed," says counselor Nishimura Mieko. The company provides a laid-back venue for couples to meet for the first time. If they hit it off, restaurant dates and museum trips might follow, perhaps a movie, and maybe even a burgeoning romance. The company arranges several prospective introductions a month and organizes monthly introduction parties at hotels and restaurants.

Though fewer people in Japan are choosing to get married overall, an increased divorce rate means that remarriage is much more common now. The number of those divorcing has swelled from 119,135 in 1975 to 270,804 in 2004. And in 2004 127,969 men remarried, compared to 83,817 in 1980. In the past, elderly people who lost their spouses through death or divorce had few chances to find a new partner. Since many retirees lived with their children, even if they did meet someone, getting married again was often out of the question. Nowadays, however, more retirees are choosing to live alone, and some are actively on the look out for a partner with whom to share their twilight years. A decade ago most of Akanekai's customers were in their late forties, but now the average customer is in his or her mid fifties.

Introduction companies for younger people have been around for a while, and many of the new senior-citizen oriented services are spin-offs from those. Tokyo based Sun Marie was founded in 1981 to help twenty-, thirty- and forty-somethings find wives and husbands. In 1993 the company set up "Selega Club" to meet the needs of older customers. They were reacting to a change in Japanese society: "In the 1990s people stopped being embarrassed about divorce," says Kawaguchi Masaaki, Sun Marie executive managing director. "There was a change in people's thinking." Now eight out of ten of Selega Club's customers have been married at least once before, and their average age is fifty-two.

Sun Marie's typical customer for their main service, on the other hand, is a male salaried worker or public employee, perhaps too busy at work to meet potential partners. The company organizes up to ten tailored introductions per month, or even more if the customer happens to be in a particular hurry. In addition, one of



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Akaneikai Vice President Kawakami Kentaro (left) and Counselor Nishimura Mieko.

the conditions of the service is that customers must have a sincere intention to get married.

Selega customers, however, tend to take things more slowly, says Vice President Fujiwara Tetsuo. "They are most interested in making a group of friends. They form relationships more slowly." Selega only offers one introduction per month, but the company helps members set up film clubs, restaurant clubs, and other social events. "As long as we give them a place to meet, they are free to organize things themselves," says Fujiwara. And definitely intending to get married is not a pre-condition, he notes. "The aim is marriage, but it is OK to just be friends too."

That is not to say though that older customers who sign up to an introduction agency aren't often seeking a long-term partner, according to Akaneikai Vice-President Kawakami Kentaro. They also tend to have a well-defined image of their ideal other half. For women, he notes, one of the most important conditions is financial security. (Akaneikai asks new male members to provide a certificate of income.) Men, for their part, have other requests: "The older men get, the younger the women they prefer," says Kawakami. Since most women are looking for a man the same age or even younger, one of the company's trickier tasks is to negotiate some kind of compromise.

Some people can be quite specific in their requests. Nishimura recalls women who have ruled out men who wear glasses because of a spectacles-wearing ex-husband. Likewise, since in Japan many people believe that blood-type is related to personality, it is not uncommon for customers to specifi-

cally request a partner with a different blood type to their ex. All the same, when customers meet for the first time Akaneikai advises them to be forward looking. "As far as possible, we ask them not to talk about the past, about their deceased wife, or the reason for their divorce," says Kawakami. "This is a place to meet people and look to the future."

Another thing that marks out the senior introduction agencies from other services is that successful introductions need not necessarily end in marriage. Since many people have children from previous marriages, inheritance issues, or assets and property to consider, often the easiest thing to do is just to date or cohabit. "If they get legally married, all those finicky problems will pop up," says counselor Nishimura. "So they decide they don't need to do the paperwork."

But irrespective of what form relationships take, the introduction agencies and their customers are emphatic about the benefits of companionship in old age. Fifty-four-year-old Shimada Keiko (not her real name) became a member of Akaneikai in 2004 after seeing an advert on the train. "I first thought about remarriage when my daughter got married and left home," she recalls. Shimada had also been looking after her ill father, but he passed away around that time. She decided it was time to reassess her life. Through Akaneikai she met her present partner, the owner of a trading company. "He was very sincere, someone I thought I could relax with, have fun with," she says.

They got married this spring and Shimada gave up her job as a textbook editor. Some of her friends were shocked at her decision to abandon what they saw as her hard won freedom. "Half of my friends were jealous, the other half thought it would be better not to get married," she says. Shimada has no regrets though, and advises women with a career to be more "greedy." They can have a partner as well as a fulfilling work life, she says. "Getting married when you are older is a very good thing. You have fulfilled your duties in raising your children and fully enjoyed your working life."

Though Japan's divorce rate has been dropping slightly for the last several years, some in the introduction agency business predict that it is due to rise again. Soon the pension laws will be changed to allow women to receive a portion of their husband's pension, and the suspicion is that older women are waiting for the new law to come into effect before starting divorce proceedings.

No doubt, if divorces increase, the number of remarriages will follow suit. Akaneikai's Kawakami says helping older people find new partners is important for Japan's aging society. Elderly couples can help look after each other, find companionship and avoid many of the physical and mental ailments that stem from loneliness. "In lots of ways it's better for society if they live together," he says. ■

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Remarriage can be complicated for senior citizens, but for many it is still a goal, as this display in the lobby of Selega Club indicates.