

# Cross-Cultural Worker Singles Issues: Arranged Marriage

The picture of an 8-year-old wife posing beside her 27-year-old husband appears at the beginning of an article in the June 2011 issue of *National Geographic*. The caption of the picture begins by quoting her memory of what it was like two years before, shortly after they married: “Whenever I saw him, I hid. I hated to see him.”

Unfortunately, this is what many people think of when they hear the words, “arranged marriage.” Of course, the marriage described above was arranged, but it was also forced and illegal! Arranged marriages, but not forced marriages, were the norm in many cultures for thousands of years.

Arranged marriages are ones in which someone other than the couple marrying selects the spouses, curtailing the process of courtship. This is done with the consent of those getting married. It becomes a forced marriage if the singles are required to marry against their will. Following is a description of a system of arranged (but not forced) marriage that lasted 500 years.

## Japan until mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Arranged marriage was very common in Japan from the 16<sup>th</sup> century until the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and still exists today. The following information comes not only from available written sources but also from cross-cultural workers who have served scores of years in Japan observing and participating as go-betweens. The typical procedure was (and is) as follows.

- Parents. When the parents think it is time, usually when their son or daughter is 20-30 years old, they contact “go-betweens” (nakodo) to begin the process. Singles wanting to marry may contact nakodos themselves.
- Go-betweens. Go-betweens may be older individuals or couples who are highly respected people of integrity with many contacts. They may be family, friends, or professional nakodo. From the people they know who are considering marriage the go-betweens select several portfolios, each having a brief personal history (name, age, health, education, social status, etc) and photographs.
- Preliminary Selection. The parents and prospective mates sit down with the go-betweens and eliminate people in which they have no interest. They order the remaining portfolios in terms of desirability, and then they ask the go-betweens to investigate their top choice.
- Full Investigation. The go-betweens then check out “everything” about the chosen person including family lineage, social status, religion, medical and mental illness in the family, criminal records in the family etc. They use everything from available legal records to detective agencies, to neighbors and shopkeepers. Of course, this may cost much money, but the family believes it is worth it to find the best mate.
- Meeting. After both sets of prospective mates and their families have studied the reports and give their approval, the go-between arranges a meeting (miai) between both families. This is usually in a large hotel where they can eat and engage in small talk for a while. Near the end of the meeting, the potential couple move off to spend some time together to get better acquainted.
- Decision. If all goes well at the first meeting, the potential couples continue to meet until they reach a decision. If either the potential bride or groom or one of their families does not think the first meeting or any of the following meetings went well, they can tell the go-betweens later. The go-betweens then let the other family know; both families have saved face, and they go back to preliminary selection.
- Engagement and wedding. If the couples choose to marry, they go through formal betrothal ceremonies, and later weddings. At the weddings the go-betweens walk both bride and groom down the aisle and are part of the ceremony, including standing next to the bride and groom in the family pictures.
- During the marriage. The go-betweens are available to help mediate differences between the husbands and wives if marital disputes arise during the marriages.

Much more information about the whole process is available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miai>

## Christian Workers in Japan late 20<sup>th</sup> Century

During the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Japanese increasingly adopted the Western pattern of courtship with many of the young people choosing their mates on the basis of romance and “love.” However, some of the marriages are still arranged.

Young men and women who convert to Christianity sometimes find their parents are quite unhappy when they become Christian workers. In fact, the parents may

refuse to get go-betweens to find spouses for their offspring. These singles then may ask others to be their go-betweens.

Denominational leaders, pastors, and cross-cultural workers who teach in Bible schools or seminaries may then be asked to serve as go-betweens. Knowing that they may be asked to do this, professors and administrators at such institutions may observe singles at their institutions thinking about which ones may make good couples.

When asked to be go-betweens, these cross-cultural workers are usually willing to serve. Since asked by the students themselves, the professors usually discuss with both the males and females who they may be matched with. At that point, either of the prospective singles can end the process. If they continue with the relationship, no one else knows. At their first annual conference, the couple’s names are read as being assigned to serve in the same city. That is the announcement to the other students and faculty that they are getting married. Everyone listens intently to assignments!

## Arranged Marriages Today

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, another type of arranged marriage has been developed, online dating services. Hundreds of such websites exist, and they have many millions of singles from all over the world. Consumer-Rankings.com has rated the top five sites <http://www.consumer-rankings.com/dating/>, and they report that the first month costs \$40-\$60, but the cost per month decreases the longer people continue as members. Criteria for matching vary widely. Their top-rated one was match.com which has 29 million singles.

eHarmony.com, also in the top five, seems to be the most popular among cross-cultural workers. This is probably because it emphasizes long-term relationships, was developed by a Christian psychologist teaching at a Christian graduate school, and matches singles on the basis of their answers to several hundred questions on 29 dimensions of compatibility in a research-validated questionnaire. eHarmony has 20 million singles from 200 countries and results in 44,000 weddings each year (120 every day).

Remembering that “arranged marriages are ones in which someone (or something) other than the couple marrying selects the spouses, curtailing the process of courtship,” here are the corresponding steps.

- Parents. Single cross-cultural workers wanting to marry usually contact the go-between themselves. Parents are often not involved.
- Go-betweens. The go-between is a computer program with a database of millions of singles from all over the world who would like to get married.
- Preliminary Selection. All selection is made by the go-between (computer program) with no consultation with either singles or parents.
- Full Investigation. No further investigation is made by the go-between (computer program). All matches are made on the basis of information supplied by the singles themselves when they joined. This information may be biased or even false.
- Meeting. The prospective mates usually make first contact through email or telephone. This may be followed by a Skype conversation before actually meeting in person.
- Decision. If the first communication is positive, the potential couple continues to

communicate, to meet, and to date. If the communications do not go well, one or both of the singles stop the process.

- Engagement and Wedding. These events are the responsibility of the couple.

Here are some similarities and differences when using people or computer programs as go-betweens. Some similarities are as follows.

- A wide variety of both people and online dating services are available.
- Both people and websites suggest people who would be a good match.
- Both people and websites provide information.
- Both methods involve payment for services.
- Both methods suggest other possibilities if the first ones do not work out.

Some differences are as follows.

- Human go-betweens are usually hired by parents, but online dating services usually do not involve parents at all.
- Human go-betweens select from a rather small population in a local area, but online dating services have databases of millions of people from around the world.
- Human go-betweens get additional information from a wide variety of sources, but online dating services have only information provided by the persons themselves.
- Human go-betweens initiate and facilitate initial face-to-face meetings, but online services leave those first meetings to singles to make using email, telephone or Skype.
- Human go-betweens have a continuing relationship into the engagement, wedding and marriage, but online dating services provide only the selection.

God uses many means to bring single cross-cultural workers who want to marry together. One of those means is arranged marriages whether by people or by websites.

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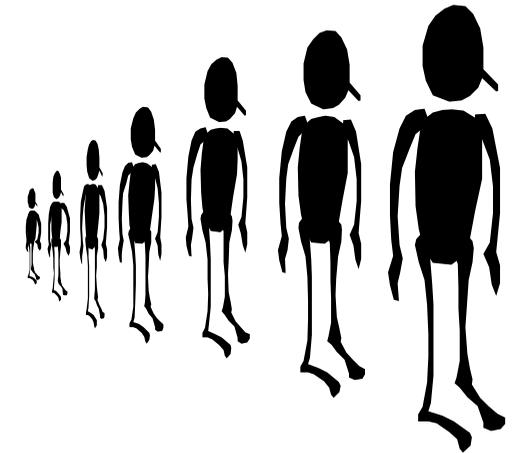
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