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Finding Lost Love, Japanese Style

The Lovelorn in Japan Hire Private Agents to Help Them Reunite With Their Exes

By NORIKO NAMIKI
TOKYO, March 20, 2008



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Breaking up with your lover can be tough. What's even tougher is trying to win back the heart of a lost love who's moved on with his or her life without you. Is it possible?

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(Getty Images)

"Give us three months or so, and we can certainly give it a shot," said Yoshiko Okawa, the president of Ladies Secret Service, a private detective agency in Tokyo.

A decade ago, a 30-something Japanese housewife wanted her husband to break up with his mistress. She hired Ladies Secret Service.

The detectives provided evidence of the affair, thinking it was part of an effort to win a higher divorce settlement. But the client added a twist.

"She said to us, although our job is over, her battle has only begun," said Okawa.

"She said her wish was not necessarily to break up with her husband, who was the father of her child," said Okawa. "She wanted to live happily with him -- as we often say in Japanese, to live together until their hair turns gray, meaning forever."

That incident led Okawa to a new line of work: reuniting couples. Some shy Japanese find their way to services like Okawa's to be reunited with their ex-partners -- someone they find difficult to let go of.

Many of Okawa's clients are women in their 20s, 30s and 40s. "Some people just find it hard to move on after a tough breakup, and they would do just about anything to have another opportunity with that special person," Okawa said.

"Sometimes you don't realize how important someone is until that person is out of your life," she said.

When someone turns to the agency to win the heart of a lost love, it selects agents from its pool of more than 200 and tailors a scheme to bring the client and his or her former partner, or "target," together.

Each scenario is crafted carefully to suit the individual. "No scenario is like any other," said Okawa, who once was an agent. "We spend a lot of time -- up to one month -- studying the client and their target. We then try to come up with a way to create a natural setting for reunification."

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The trained agents often approach the target and become friendly.

As the target and the agent get acquainted, the agent starts to work his or her magic -- drop a good word about the client or create a "happening" with the client and target running into each other.

The target has no idea that the agent, or new friend, is actually hired by a former partner. The agents stress good points about the client to make the target regret the breakup.

The agents are hired for the duration of a project, which can last for a few months. The fees can run up to about \$7,000 a month.

"We once had a woman who spent a little more than \$20,000," Okawa said. "That was money she had saved for her wedding. I am not sure if she had the wedding she wanted, but she did get the guy back and they eventually got married."

Okawa said the ages and background of the agents vary. "We train them for up to one month. We basically want them to be personable."

Maintaining one's composure is another trait often looked for in agents.

"We sometimes send our trainees to a busy department store with a big lion's statue," said Okawa. "We tell them to stick their hand in the lion's mouth and keep standing for a few hours."

The point of this training? "We want our agents to be able to retain their cool in any type of situation," Okawa said. "We could come across a dicey situation where the target could wonder about our agents. They cannot panic, or they could be busted." Okawa said no agent so far has been "busted."

Masaru Nakamura, the president of the Japan Research Information Center, also hires agents to provide a similar program. "Being personable is important," he said. "You

want someone you can easily make friends with or relate to."

Nakamura said his agents travel all across Japan to work on various projects. "Usually an agent is assigned one project at a time," Nakamura said. "But there are agents who may be taking on a few projects."

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Both Okawa and Nakamura refused to say how much they pay the agents, but both said they can often earn more than an average officer worker.

While clients know their motives, their targets do not and may never know how they got back with their partners.

"Is this a deception? Hmm," Nakamura said. "But we never break the law, and we have not received any complaints from our targets."

Both Okawa and Nakamura boast of their agencies' high success rate -- more than 70 percent of their clients succeed in rekindling their relationships. In 2006 Okawa's agency received 814 requests to restore old bonds and 147 of them married their targets.

"We do not keep track of what happens to our clients," said Nakamura. "We are often a part of the clients' lives, which clients do not necessarily want to remember. They want to move on, and we let them." In fact, no client was willing to talk about their experience with the service.

Some question the validity or longevity of a relationship given this somewhat unusual help.

"Those who try to win hearts this way may see their romantic partners more as symbols of a deeper need," said Toshiki Nishizawa, a clinical psychologist in Tokyo. "It may not necessarily lead to happiness. They have to try to understand what prompts them to resort to an action like that."

Nishizawa, who counsels couples with various issues, says the very person the client thinks is the source of happiness may only be a symbol of something deeply rooted in their heart.

"It could be the affection they could not have growing up as a child or a fear of being left alone," Nishizawa said.

"They have to try to understand why they feel that way about someone and face their emotions," he added. "Otherwise they may continue to find themselves in similar circumstances and still not know what to do."

No one can know what the future holds for those clients. Okawa and Nakamura say going through a service like theirs also gives their clients time for reflection.

"We ask clients why they think they ended up breaking up with their partner," Okawa said.

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"We ask every single client to reflect on their behavior and personality," she said. "If there are things they need to improve or correct for the sake of a relationship, we ask them to work on them. Magic will not happen while you wait. You have to do your part to make it happen."

Okawa said her agency is seeing an increase of male clients. "Many women are now well-established in their careers and they are self-sufficient. They do not necessarily have to rely on men for their survival, which makes them feel strong. On the contrary, I wonder if male adults are becoming more emotionally vulnerable."

Nishizawa says this type of business may continue to do well in Japan.

"Many Japanese are used to following a manual to get things done," said Nishizawa. "But in real life, you cannot rely on a manual for everything."

"Some people are so used to turning to others to learn how to solve problems -- getting tips on how to pass a school entrance exam, for example," he said. "They may think turning to such a service provides them a means to handling relationships. We human beings are a little more complex than a school entrance exam."

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