

More older Singaporean men are marrying younger foreign brides

# The groom with white hair

Jamie Ee Wen Wei

When you work 15-hour days, chances are, it is not easy to find a girlfriend.

Indeed, that was the case for fruit-seller Soon Sze Han, 46, who logged long, punishing hours at Pasar Panjang Wholesale Market.

"Any woman will be scared off by my working hours," said the 46-year-old.

But he was keen to get married. So, three years ago, Mr Soon, who had never dated, walked into a matchmaking agency to explore the possibility.

Of the three Vietnamese women he met there, he chose one from a village in Ho Chi Minh City. Aged 25, she was 18 years his junior.

"She was the oldest there already. I walked by and she winked at me," he said.

They married in December 2006 and now live in a three-room flat in Chinatown with his parents.

Matchmaking agencies said such marriages between couples where there is a big age gap are common.

More proof of such unions has come from the National Population Secretariat (NPS).

Last week, it revealed that marriages between men above 40 and non-Singaporean women doubled from 18 per cent in 1998 to 35 per cent last year.

Of these marriages, four-fifths of the brides are aged under 40. Over 90 per cent of them are from Asia, though the NPS did not specify the countries.

In the past few years, the mushrooming of matchmaking agencies has brought an influx of brides from Vietnam and China.

Singaporean men, usually in their 30s to 50s, pay between \$5,000 and \$20,000 for a match.

Some go overseas to check out their prospective brides while there are also agencies which fly the women in to meet the men.

Agencies said men above 45 make up between 30 and 50 per cent of their clients. They usually say it is hard to find a Singaporean wife.

The foreign brides tend to be young, between 18 and 30.

Mr Mark Lin, owner of Vietnam Brides International, observes that out of 100 men, "95 would want a pretty girl. More than 70 would want a young girl".

His oldest client is 82; he married a 21-year-old.

Matchmakers also said it is difficult to find eligible, older foreign women.

Mr Francis Toh, who runs First Overseas International Matchmaker, said that as Vietnamese women tend to marry young, those in their late 20s would usually already have boyfriends or are married.

The Vietnamese women he brings in are mostly between 18 and 25 years old.

In contrast, the women from China tend to be older, with some in their 30s. They tend to marry later and are more selective.

Vietnam Brides' Mr Lin, who has brought together more than 200 couples, said about 30 per cent of the women do not mind an older man, even if he is more than 20 years their senior.

"What they want is security. If their husbands are loving and financially stable, age is not an issue," he said.

"If they are looking for young and handsome men, they can find them in Vietnam; why would they want to come to Singapore to get married?"

But other matchmakers are more wary; they feel that a big age gap could hurt a marriage.

In fact, some agencies regularly turn away men aged above 50. One of them is Life Partner Matchmaker which specialises in Vietnamese brides.

Its owner Janson Ong feels there is no point helping this group of men find a match. "If something happens to them, what's going to happen to their wives and children?" he asked.

He noted that most women would not be willing to marry a much older husband. "It's human nature. Who will want to marry an old man?"

Another matchmaker, Mr Loi Eng Tuang of South Phoenix Marriage Centre, said he does not encourage his clients or the women to marry someone 25 years apart in age.

He said the age difference may lead to communication problems. He has heard of young foreign brides who have affairs with younger men as a result of that.

But not every man is looking for a very young bride.

Matchmakers said some men pick older women as they are seen as more stable and mature.

Take the case of Mr Tong Boon Hai, 52. When his wife died of lung cancer three years ago, the car painter flew to Hainan Island for five days to look for a bride.

His criteria? She must be of good character, know how to take care of a family and be in her 30s.

"I didn't want a bride who's too young. I think the age gap shouldn't be too wide or else we won't be compatible," he said.

Of the six girls he met, he ended up marrying Wang Yan, who was 31 then.

Today, they are proud parents of a 14-month-old daughter. Mr Tong also has three children aged 15, 24 and 25 from his first marriage.

All live together in a four-room flat in Jurong East.

"She gets along well with my children and she helps me run the household. I'm very happy with my decision," he said.



ST PHOTOS: NG SOR LUAN

Mr Yap Hock Soon, 53, a director of an electronics firm, with his wife Ngo Thi Nhan, 19, a petrol attendant from Vietnam, in their bedroom (right), decorated with pictures from their wedding in February. Their wedding album is seen above.



## 34-year gap is no barrier for newly weds

Mr Yap Hock Soon is 53 and his wife is 19.

But looking at them, you'd think that such a wide age gap is no barrier to love.

They are affectionate to each other – holding hands and hugging each other while showing off their wedding video to The Sunday Times.

In February, Mr Yap married Ms Ngo Thi Nhan, a petrol attendant from Vietnam.

The divorcee, who has two sons aged 21 and 23, decided to find a new bride when his marriage ended five years ago.

"My sons encouraged me to find someone to take care of me. They are English-educated and very liberal in their thinking," the director of an electronics company said in Mandarin.

Over the next few years, he made several trips to matchmaking agencies here and screened tens of women, but did not go on any dates or find a suitable match.

In November last year, he met Ms Ngo at Vietnam Brides International, a foreign bride agency in Orchard Plaza.

Mr Yap said it was love at first sight for him. "It's very hard to explain it. It's just an affinity," he said.

Ms Ngo was sitting at the agency with about 10 other women, all waiting to be chosen.

A few days later, he called the agency to set up a wedding date with Ms Ngo. She agreed to the marriage through the agency.

During the three months before their wedding, they went out every day, mostly to attractions such as Sentosa and East Coast Park.

Although she could speak only a smattering of Mandarin, they managed to communicate.

Ms Ngo is from a village near the Vietnam-Cambodia border. She is the fourth child in the family and her parents sell noodles.

Her eldest sister, who is in her 20s, also married a foreigner – a Taiwanese.

In February, Mr Yap and his new bride threw a lavish 20-table dinner in her hometown. There was even a concert to entertain the guests.

Mr Yap said he did not buy any other gifts for her family.

In Singapore, they hosted a 10-table dinner for Mr Yap's relatives at Hung Kang restaurant near Hong Lim Park. His ex-wife did not allow their sons to attend.

All in, he said he spent about \$20,000 on the matchmaking fees and wedding.

He is applying for permanent residency for Ms Ngo, who is on a long-term visit pass valid for a year.

They live in a condominium in Serangoon with his 93-year-old mother and a maid.

Signs of their newly wed status are evident in their spacious bedroom. The walls are decorated with blown-up pictures from their wedding. Two traditional "xi" paper cuttings – an emblem used in Chinese weddings – are pasted on the walls.

They still go on dinner dates and enjoy evening walks at East Coast Park.

Even though friends have mistaken her for his daughter, Mr Yap said he is not embarrassed about their age gap.

"When my wife and I go for meals at coffee shops, the men will stare at my wife. But I'm not angry; in fact, I feel very proud because this just shows that she is very beautiful."

He said he did not set out to marry a young bride.

"I heard that in Vietnam, most women marry young. If you are not married after you are 22, you are considered overaged," he added.

He would encourage friends to marry foreigners. "They don't have such high expectations, not like Singaporean women."

Asked if he is worried that Ms Ngo would leave him when he grows old, he quipped: "If she doesn't want me, then I change another one, lor."

They have no plans to have children yet.

"She wants a child but we will go slow. At my age, it will be quite difficult to raise a child. They can be quite a headache."

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**Do you think a big age gap is bad for a marriage?**  
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