

## Inside South Korea's Competitive Blind Dating Culture

From exclusive dating apps to matchmaking services for the crazy rich, single people turn to blind dates to find their perfect match.



By [David D. Lee](#)

PAJU-SI, KR

September 3, 2021, 12:48pm

“Jamanchu” is a popular [South Korean](#) slang that means “seeking natural encounters.” It’s a romantic vision of meeting one’s significant other while studying at a cafe, grabbing drinks at a bar, or any other circumstances that are purely coincidental—or with a pinch of fate, for those who believe in such things. [Korean dramas](#) are filled with these meet-cutes but, in reality, jamanchu exists more as an ideal rather than the norm of [dating life](#) in a fast-paced, work-centered society.

## ADVERTISEMENT

Aiden Jeon, a 29-year-old who moved back to South Korea two years ago, gave up on jamanchu as soon as he realized the realities of living in a city of about 10 million. Now, he’s more into “inmanchu” or “seeking artificial encounters.”

“Because I started working as soon as I arrived in Seoul, it wasn’t easy to make time to meet new people,” the program developer told VICE. He just came back after four years of college in the United States. “I would leave for work at 7 a.m. and return home around 8 p.m. with just enough time to squeeze in a nice dinner or a gym workout.”

Finding no other choice, he did what other single people his age were doing and downloaded the app Somoim, where more than 2 million users organize into clubs and hold regular meet-ups. There are clubs for tennis players, hiking enthusiasts, and those who just want to have a drink. Jeon joined one for Japanese speakers but, unlike other members who found love, his language skills were the only thing that benefited from it.

Marriage rates [are declining in South Korea](#). Many prefer [not to date at all](#), but even those who do find it difficult to find a partner.

## ADVERTISEMENT

The workaholic lifestyle partnered with the Confucian emphasis on group and family (including the submission to parental authority) make blind dates an integral part of

meeting, dating, and marriage in the country—it's pragmatic and helped by the fact that it's recommendations from one's circle of trust. Some even schedule at least two dates a month.

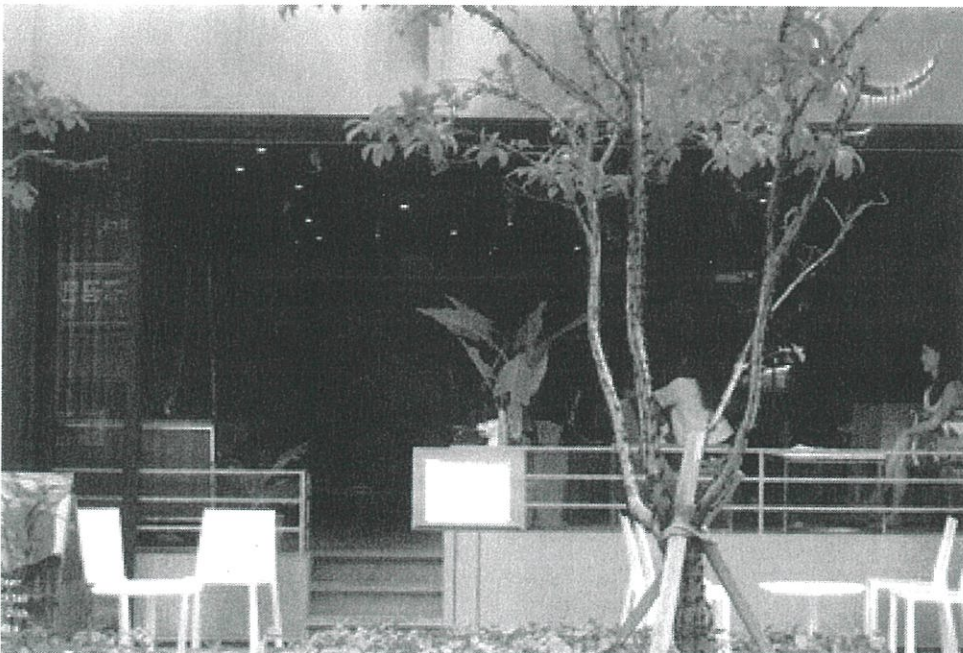
“There are generally three ways to be introduced to blind dates in South Korea today. You can split it into being set up by an acquaintance, receiving service from a matchmaking industry, or using a dating app,” said Kim Ri-na, a couple manager at a matchmaking agency, and the creator of the YouTube channel [RiRiTV Let's Date Let's Marry](#). On the channel, Kim uses her knowledge from 10 years of experience in the matchmaking business and shares dating tips to viewers.

Blind dates are such a big part of the dating culture that there are several types, depending on the age and intentions of the people involved. While college students opt to attend “kwa-tings,” or mass blind date sessions between students from different campuses, those from an older crowd who are looking for more serious relationships go to one-on-one dates called “mat-sun” to look for potential marriage partners.

“There is a strong tendency for South Koreans to be quite cautious and to use safer methods to find their significant other,” said Cheon Su-hyeon, a PR representative from DUO Information Corporation, a popular matchmaking agency in the country. “In a collectivist society where relationships are of the utmost importance, it's common practice to introduce and to be introduced to one's significant other through an acquaintance.”

#### ADVERTISEMENT

Jeon's friends, for example, once set him up on 10 blind dates in just four months.



MANY BLIND DATES HAPPEN IN SEOUL'S CAFES. PHOTO: DAVID D. LEE

“There’s a saying that some people don’t find the person for them even after 100 blind dates, and I was beginning to think that that could be me,” he said. “Even when my friends connected me with women they thought I would get along with, things did not work out as planned.”

“There’s a saying that some people don’t find the person for them even after 100 blind dates, and I was beginning to think that that could be me.”

So, he decided to change his approach and downloaded a popular dating app called SKY People. Here, the app is the matchmaker. Unlike popular dating apps like Wippy, NoonDate, and Tinder, only those who attended top universities in South Korea or abroad can sign up for SKY People. The app led Jeon to his current girlfriend a few months after downloading it. After over a year of dating, they’re now talking about getting engaged.

“South Koreans these days are too busy and live in an extremely competitive environment to want relationships that will eventually go nowhere and become a waste of time in the end,” said Kim from RiRiTV. “That’s why people in their 20s and 30s want to meet and be introduced to people under conditions that are most suitable for them.”

Sometimes, looks and personality are the bare minimum when people look for the “right one.” Many consider factors like education, profession, income, and family background. This is why more exclusive apps like SKY People and Goldspoon (a term to distinguish people from wealthy families) are popular.

#### ADVERTISEMENT

“One thing I’ve learned after meeting tons of single people through work is that there is a definite limit in the people your environment and acquaintances can introduce you to,” said Kim. “You may want to be in a larger playing field, and that is why marriage information companies are in high demand.”

Such high demands have turned marriage agencies into a developed and mainstream industry in South Korea. And when referrals from friends, family, and apps don’t work, professionals step in.



GANGNAM IS WHERE MANY SINGLE PEOPLE LOOK FOR LOVE ON A FRIDAY NIGHT. PHOTO: DAVID D. LEE

## The Matchmaking Industry

Matchmaking agencies are widely known in South Korea as “marriage information companies.” Instead of leaving it all up to fate and dating app algorithms, matchmaking agencies have agents who, with the help of computerized systems, connect clients with the closest thing to their ideal type in terms of age, looks, occupation, and educational and familial background. In addition to collecting fees, these agencies require members to hand in official documents including marriage and family relation certificates and licenses that prove one’s professional background.

Lee Kyeong-eh is the director of Noblesse Spring, a premium matchmaking agency. Like others in South Korea, her agency uses couple managers to match men and women according to their preferences (many agencies only cater to straight relationships).

“People have always been passionately involved in the matchmaking of others,” Lee told VICE. “In fact, there were marriage brokers even in the Joseon period a few hundred years ago.”

### ADVERTISEMENT

There was a caste system during Korea’s Joseon period, and marriages within the upper classes were arranged by a broker in each of the villages. Usually, this was someone who was well-acquainted with at least one of the families. Back then, most couples only found out each other’s names after they were matched. Before that happens, elders from each family inspected a man’s or woman’s qualities and background. It was only after the rise of industrialization and the consequent flattening of social statuses in modern times that the couple’s opinions were considered.

“Even with the arrival of professionals called ‘madam matchmakers’ later on, parents would accompany their children on the dates,” Lee said.

Parental involvement in dating still exists today.

Many members of Noblesse Spring who are in their 20s or early 30s were signed up by their mothers in secret, Lee said. In South Korea, it's not uncommon to see marriages called off due to families not seeing eye-to-eye during the wedding planning process. But the westernization of values has given people more freedom when it comes to dating and, now, parents are relatively more hands-off.

"The increasing influence of Western culture in our society has made us more individualistic," she said. "So, that's when people started to see the need for third-party experts who can identify and find the desired partner for oneself."

#### ADVERTISEMENT

But it's a tough task even for professional matchmakers.

"It's not enough for two people to fall in love with each other," Lee said. "It's possible to meet people who match your style or preferences, but meeting expectations is something else. What kind of house you will live in after marriage and how much income is expected are all realistic details that need to be met before the match."

And the higher the expectations, the harder they are to meet.

## Millionaire Matchmakers

At Noblesse Spring, men are expected to be doctors, lawyers, CEOs, or other highly-respected professions, but there are no such requirements for women. It's the same in other matchmaking services, a trend that's deeply rooted in Korea's deeply patriarchal gender roles.

Best Class is like a VIP club in the matchmaking industry. Although it's located in the same affluent neighborhood of Gangnam as Noblesse Spring, Best Class is even more exclusive.

"We try to be honest in our approach to matchmaking," Lee Kang-ho, the director of Best Class, told VICE. "If the ability to hunt animals was what made you a sought-after bachelor in the stone ages, it's economic capabilities that give you the competitive edge today."

Members of Best Class include famous TV personalities, professional athletes, and well-known businessmen, the company claims. There is a 300-member ceiling for men and they each need to either make at least 100 million South Korean won (\$86,287) a year, have a family with a fortune over 2 billion South Korean won (\$1.7 million), or run a corporation worth 5 billion South Korean won (\$4.3 million). It costs anywhere between 2 million South Korean won (\$1,725) to 100 million South Korean won (\$86,287) for clients to meet the women registered with the company.

#### ADVERTISEMENT

The selection process for women is competitive in a different way—they are rated according to their looks and personality. Usually, out of 10 women who apply to become a member, only half make it to the in-person screening stage where they have “tea time” with one of the couple managers at Best Class’ headquarters. After this final stage, only one of the five women tends to become a member. There are no fees for women, only a deposit of 100,000 South Korean won (\$86). Women members get to dine in fancy restaurants, stay at expensive resorts, and get treatments at premium hair salons and dermatologist and plastic surgery clinics as part of their membership, so they can get accustomed to luxurious dates.

According to Lee, Best Class finds these women through personal connections, social media, and applications sent through their website. He said that sometimes, couple managers roam the streets of Apgujeong in Gangnam to recruit women who are a “10 out of 10.”



THE STREETS OF APGUJEONG IN GANGNAM. PHOTO: DAVID D. LEE

Their client pool is usually seven women to every three men, leaving women with fewer options. There’s also a significant age gap between the sexes. While men range from their early 20s to their 50s, most of the women don’t exceed their late 30s. Men can see the faces of the women when choosing a potential date but men’s faces are initially hidden from the women.

Lee acknowledged that Best Class’ process is controversial but maintains that it’s efficient and reflects the desires of successful men and young, beautiful women.

#### ADVERTISEMENT

“Our system of profiling our members in person before accepting them was considered provocative at first, and some people even used to think that we were sponsoring women for rich men,” said Lee from Best Class. “But the perceptions have changed. Our way of setting up blind dates among only a certain class of people saves a lot of time for everybody and has become a model for other dating services to copy.”

Some even go to extreme lengths just to join these exclusive agencies to meet the “right one.”

“There was a man who applied to our agency but failed to get in due to his economic status,” Lee from Best Class said. “A year later, he showed up with a Ferrari and successfully became a member.”

But even with all of their prerequisites, matchmaking agencies don't always get it right. It sometimes takes more than 30 dates for a match to be made, Lee from Best Class said. Some claim to have a success rate of 90 percent, but Lee from Noblesse Spring estimates that her agency's rate is closer to 60 percent.

And as people grow pickier, prioritizing a multitude of factors apart from attraction, finding love often feels like an endless cycle.

Lee from Best Class finds that “even when people are matched with someone who fulfills their preferences on paper, they continue the quest to chase their ideal type.”

circumstances, coincidental, the norm, enthusiast, integral, pragmatic, work out, tons of, passionately, call off, not see eye-to-eye, give someone an edge, controversial, provocative, picky, prioritize

What is your ideal type? Have you ever dated someone who is your ideal type?

Would you like to meet someone by jamanchu? Have you ever met someone this way?

Have you ever used a dating app? Were you successful in meeting someone?

In your opinion, why do some people prefer not to date at all?

Has a friend or someone you trust ever arranged a blind date for you? Have you ever been on a kwa-ting?

What is your opinion of the Sky People app?

What factors do you take into consideration when dating? What factors will you take into consideration for marriage?

How do you intend to meet your significant other? Would you use a matchmaking agency?

Should parents be hands on or hands off about dating and marriage?

Gentlemen, do you want to be rated by your wealth?

Ladies, do you want to be rated by your looks?



What is your vision of a perfect date?

Some times it isn't easy to make tim to .....

..... is a big part of dating.

..... was a waste of time in the end.

What couldn't you get accustomed to?

I would go to extreme lengths to .....

What is something that you and your parents see eye-to-eye on?

What will give you an edge when you go to get a job?