**“Mom Wants You Married? So Does the State”**

**By SU-HYUN LEE from The New York Times.**

SEOUL, South Korea — As hopeful singles at the speed dating event shifted from table to table introducing themselves, Park Chang-won, a 32-year-old firefighter, grew more and more morose.

By the time he reached the last table, Mr. Park, whose dark eyebrows give him a brooding look, was uttering only his name and age. Then he sank into silence.

“It felt awkward from the outset,” Mr. Park said later, as he explained that a lifetime spent around men — at boys’ schools, the military and now as a fireman — had made meeting women harder.

Anywhere else, Mr. Park’s dating woes might have been strictly personal. But in South Korea, fretful about plummeting birthrates but still tied to conservative ideas about matchmaking, solving the difficulties of the lovelorn has become something of a national priority. In perhaps the surest sign of that anxiety, the event he attended was one of dozens of dating parties nationwide sponsored by an unlikely matchmaker, the government.

In a country where arranged courtships are fading into the past, the Ministry of Health and Welfare began promoting the idea of dating parties in 2010. Under the enthusiastic leadership of its minister at the time, Cheon Jae-hee, it held four parties that year that brought together its workers and employees at local corporations — making a splash in the news media. Ms. Cheon officiated at the wedding of the first couple who met at one. Featured in a magazine article before the wedding, the 31-year-old groom-to-be thanked the government profusely and wondered if two children would be enough to meet expectations.

Since then, sponsorship of the parties has shifted mainly to ministry affiliates and local governments, which can win financial rewards for activities that promote marriage and childbirth. The municipal government that threw the party Mr. Park attended has been named a role model by the city of Seoul. One government-financed agency, the Planned Population Federation of Korea, claims a different kind of victory: by hosting parties, it is working to undo its past success when it encouraged vasectomies as a booming South Korea feared being held back by population growth.

The difficulties in meeting potential spouses have exacerbated an increasing tendency among South Koreans to marry late. As young women have gotten better jobs, analysts say, many are loath to give them up to shepherd children through a hypercompetitive education system and care for aging in-laws.

In 2011, the average age of a first marriage for South Korean women hit 29.14, up from 24.8 in 1990; for men it jumped to 31.8 from 27.9 in 1990. The birthrate sunk to 1.15 children per woman, the lowest among the world’s most developed countries.

Young people and researchers say the situation has worsened as South Koreans born into greater wealth have become more materialistic and status conscious.

**Discussion Questions.**

* At what age do most people in your country get married? At what age do you want to get married?
* Do you think it is okay for a couple to live together before getting married? Why or Why not?
* Do you think marriage is necessary?
* How old were your parents when they got married?
* What would your parents think if you don't get married?
* Would you marry someone ten years older than you? How about ten years younger than you?
* Would you marry someone that your parents didn't like?
* What do you think is the most important ingredient in a good marriage?
* What are your worse fears to face during marriage?
* Would you marry someone of another nationality?
* What are some advantages of an international marriage? What are some disadvantages?
* Do you know anyone who married someone from a different country? If yes, what is their experience like?

**Personal Reflection:** On the back of this paper write a letter to your future husband or wife. You can tell them whatever you want about them: your dreams, your fears, whatever. Imagine you are really writing to them and speak from your heart. Afterwards, if you want, you can tell the class something you wrote but you don’t have to if it is too private.