

LIFE

The Face of Asian Mixed Marriage in BC

All about 'NAAAPs, CBCs, and Egg-Yellows'

By **Amy Chow**

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On Mother's Day, Josh shocked his mother, Trudi, when he revealed that he had eloped with his Chinese girlfriend. His mother later told a relative how disappointed she was that only strangers had been at the ceremony. "I would have stood up for them," she said.



But Josh isn't so sure. His mother had always made it clear to him that, when the time came, she expected her son to settle down with a Jewish girl. Trudi admits, "I never expected to have a Chinese daughter-in-law." She was aware that Josh had been dating a non-Jewish girl for seven years, but she "did not think Nancy was 'the one' for her youngest son. It just took a little while to adjust to the whole thing, she's a lovely girl".

Prior to meeting Nancy, Josh never dated non-Jewish girls. Even when he met Nancy at the bar, they didn't start dating until a year later. He knew it was going to be a problem with his parents. Even now, he is unsure if he's changed his mom's opinion that Nancy is the "right woman" for him.

But instead of worrying about that, Josh likes to emphasize the similarities between the Jewish and Chinese cultures; how they value hard work and a good education for success. Parents of both cultures want their children to be white-collar professionals. "Chinese people have close-knit families, they respect their parents, and the divorce rate is lower." Josh can't think of anything that he doesn't like about the Chinese culture. But mixed marriage is still lower for Chinese Canadians than most other groups, and there are many feelings against it.

I'm a NAAAP

Josh proudly states, “I’m an honorary member of NAAAP: the National Association of Asian American Professional club (<http://www.naaap.bc.ca>), plus a lot of my friends are Chinese.” Some people joke, I’m an egg-yellow on the inside, white on the outside.

Handel Wright, a University of British Columbia associate professor of cultural studies, says people think mixed marriages are a new phenomenon and that they’re always difficult, but neither is true.

Wright says “there’s a long history of mixed relationships and biracial offspring in Canadian and BC history.” He points to the Metis “as living example of an entire ethno-racial group formed out of such unions.”

But Wright agrees that today there are several differences in the current phenomenon: people of different backgrounds meet more easily now due to increased diversity in neighbourhoods and workplaces, mixed raced couples are more accepted both by their families and by society, and “mixed raced” is more frequently and easily claimed as an identity.

Post-racial?

But he criticizes the mainstream media for its celebratory tone about interracial couples. “It’s as if we are on the verge of leaving the problems of racism and ethnic and cultural discrimination behind, as if some perfect post-racial society is just around the corner and this not necessarily the case.” But he concedes that interracial unions are a sign that “race is not as much of a factor in people’s decisions about who to have relationships with, in general.”

According to Statscan, Josh and Nancy fit the standard profile of mixed unions: young, highly educated urbanites. Since 1991, mixed unions have increased 35% according to the 2001 census. Just over three percent of all existing Canadian marriages or common-law unions are mixed.

However while the Chinese are one of the largest minority groups in Canada, they have the second lowest rate of mixed unions at 16% of the married population. (South Asians have the lowest rate at 13%.)

Madeline Kalbach, a University of Calgary sociologist and expert in ethnic intermarriage, explains that while Asians have a large population in Canada, they are relatively recent immigrants.

Kalbach explains that foreign-born, first generation immigrants are more likely to have spouses of the same background. While the second generation begins to have mixed marriages, “the third generation is the key to see who will intermarry”. Among Asians in Canada, the third generation is very small, as this number grows, so will mixed marriages.

She notes that men are more likely to marry outside their race, and prestige could be a factor. She also says divorced men are more likely to enter into a mixed marriage.

‘Love is ideal’?

However, she states mixed unions aren't easy. "Most people don't realize the number of cultural differences in mixed marriages; they think love is ideal and it will override all other problems. This is not always the case".

Josh and Nancy are expecting their first child to be born within the next few days. Nancy has decided to convert to Judaism and they are going to raise their son Jewish. Nancy thinks that it will be less confusing for their son if his parents share the same religion.

Josh's mother is very happy that "Nancy plans to assimilate herself into their family by converting". She is out actively looking for Hebrew classes for Josh and Nancy to take together.

They will have a bris (Jewish circumcision ceremony) for the baby eight days after it is born; they will not celebrate the one-month birthday celebration which is common among Asians, much to the disappointment of Nancy's mother.

While Nancy's mother has never had a problem with Josh, they have trouble communicating, since she can't speak English. So Josh plans to learn Cantonese.

Bad luck babies

But the grandparents do have different approaches to the impending birth. Nancy's mother has set up the baby room and she has bought lots of baby clothes. Josh's mother doesn't believe in buying anything for the baby before it is born, as she believes it brings bad luck.

Of course, the differences go beyond this, which makes Josh admit that while it may be easier for them to have an interracial marriage than their parents' generation, they will have to work at it. "It's less vanilla than a non-interracial marriage, it'll make life more interesting having different cultures, and it'll be an interesting life for our baby".

Even couples who have been married longer still find surprises. Wayne and Janice have been married for 21 years. They have three kids Leah, 17, Kayla, 14 and Joshua, 6.

Janice is Asian. Her dad "realized that Asians aren't perfect" when her older and first-born sister married someone Asian "who wasn't that great". Janice's dad changed his attitude to "she can marry anyone she wants, as long as he's a nice person." Wayne's dad "was completely open to whomever, he only cared that she was a polite, good person." They've never had any problems with either side of the family.

Asian wives are 'meek'?

Wayne says you can “start out with the misconception” that an Asian wife will be meek and that she’ll cook and clean the house. But you quickly learn that this stereotype isn’t true.

By not marrying Asian, Janice has escaped some of the politics of an Asian family, such as a son’s obligation to his parents, favoritism due to their birth position and power struggles between the in-laws. Janice and Wayne both agree ‘there is more freedom marrying white’. While dating, Wayne admits he did not take into consideration the complexities of Asian culture. Wayne jokes “Asian girls are trying to get away from their oppressive families”. But he says more seriously, “There are no expectations or obligations in Caucasian families”.

Their kids hardly seem to notice. Kayla doesn’t refer to herself as biracial, but rather as ‘halfies’. None of the kids can speak Cantonese. Janice, who calls herself a ‘CBC’ (Canadian born Chinese), can only order certain foods in Cantonese.

Kalbach says the biggest issue for biracial children’s is identity, because they “may not feel totally accepted by either culture.” They will search for a sense of community; if the parents help them, they will have a stronger sense of self. Losing their native language is common because they want to fit in and it may not matter to them.

Kayla says, “people know you’re mixed but not what.” She is sometimes mistaken for First Nations or Spanish. Janice points out that Vancouver is quite multicultural and none of them have ever had a bad experience.

But Janice and Wayne do notice that in places like Saltspring Island or in the Okanagan where there isn’t a large Asian population, people do stare at their family. Janice says people look at her children and “think they look unusual.”

Leah likes the difference. If people ask, she says she is half-Chinese. But if she’s not asked, she won’t mention it.

Wayne and Janice say race won’t be an issue for them when their children get married. He states “it doesn’t matter what colour they are, what matters is their behavior, their personality and their faith”.

Amy Chow is a writer in Vancouver.

Editor’s note: all first names are accurate but last names have been left out to protect the subjects’ privacy.

Handel Wright will be conducting a study comparing American and Canadian versions of multiculturalism. He is looking for biracial and multiracial youth (between 15-24 years old) who do not fit into neat categories such as recent immigrants from Africa, queer youth, or any category that multiculturalism might find difficult to pinpoint and represent. He is “interested in how they think

about their identity, how they feel they relate or don't relate to various communities and what multiculturalism means to them.” He can be contacted at handel.wright@ubc.ca (mailto:handel.wright@ubc.ca) 📧