

In Japan, the Setup Precedes the Breakup

JAPAN, From A1

A display case beside him holds his work tools—electronic gadgets to eavesdrop and spy. Nakamura says his contribution to the array is a cell phone that can be left in a room and silently activated to record conversations.

Many of the couple-busting companies are private detective agencies that have branched into a new line of work.

"It used to be that our job ended once we collected evidence that a husband was having an affair. Now the wife wants us to break up the affair," said Kazuya Yoshii, a burly 23-year-old operative who works with Nakamura.

There are now dozens of firms advertising the service—*wakaresase-ya*, or "business to force breakup of a couple" in Japanese—on the Internet and in more restricted terms in the yellow pages. Their fees are not cheap, starting at \$100 an hour for the preliminary investigation. A full-scale operation typically costs \$5,000 to \$20,000; a complex case can run hundreds of thousands of dollars at the outfits that claim political figures and actors among their clients.

Their strategies are sometimes clever and intricate. Just the right rumor planted in a neighborhood or business can frighten a wayward husband into good behavior, for example. Other strategies are tried and true: a videotape of a straying wife entering a hotel room with her lover usually is all that is needed to force a breakup of the marriage or the relationship—whatever the client wishes, according to the owners of the firms.

But increasingly, these firms employ a version of bait-and-switch. A husband who wants to dump his wife will hire a couple-busters firm to engineer an "accidental" meeting between his wife and a good-looking, attentive man who is secretly an agent. Soon, the wife is in an affair with him, and willingly grants her husband a divorce. The agent then fades away, his cell phone turned off, the address he gave her vacant, his workplace number a fake.

The variations are endless. Say a wife learns her husband is cheating. She wants to stop the affair but knows he will refuse and doesn't want a messy divorce. She pays a couple-busting firm to send someone like Takako to lure the husband from his girlfriend, and then disappear.

It's especially easy when the targets are men, said Takako, whose straight auburn hair frames sleepy eyes that settle on a man with practiced fascination. "They almost never say no. I'd say I succeed 85 to 90 percent.

Women are more suspicious."

She is a long-legged former model and sometime-actress. She thought this line of work fit well with those skills, and walked into a company that calls itself "Ladies Secret Service" to apply.

Her first job was to seduce a husband at the request of a wife who wanted him gone. "We became lovers, and then I broke up with him. It went very smoothly," she said.

Two years later, she has been on "dozens" of cases, making—and breaking—affairs with men young and old, married or otherwise involved. She lives with her parents, who think her night hours are spent working in a convenience store.

"She's the perfect girl-next-door type," said her boss, Kiyoshi Hiwatashi, offering a clinical assessment. "She's not a pitcher. I'd say she's a shortstop with a good batting average." He grins. "Better than Ichiro," he said in reference to the Seattle Mariners' outfielder Ichiro Suzuki.

Takako, who gives only her professional name, said she has no qualms about her work. "I feel good that the client gets what they want," she says. "That's my satisfaction."

The money is good, too. But Takako acknowledged that her thrills come with the hunt—the stalk and the capture. "What I like is the moment I meet the man. It is rare here for a woman to approach a man," she said. "I have to be forward, bold, and each time I do it with a different man. It is so different from my real life.

"After I get to know them, it's routine, just like any other affair."

Once, she recalled, she tried and tried to lure a target, but the man ignored her. "It really hurt my pride," she said. "Maybe I wasn't his type." She pondered for a moment, considering the unlikely prospect that "maybe he was a straight guy."

Hiwatashi, who favors seersucker suits and expensive jewelry, sits in his posh office in the glitzy Ginza section of Tokyo in front of a five-inch stack of glassine files. Each is of one of his agents—"secreters," he calls them. He flips through them "Mission: Impossible" style.

Each file has a glamorous picture, a short bio with fictional names and a rundown of the kinds of cases the person handles. Some wear uniforms; posing as a flight attendant is favorite ploy.

Some really are flight attendants. Some are bored housewives. Some are young men who work nights and weekends for income—and excitement—they don't get at their day jobs, Hiwatashi said. He said he employs ex-

cops, former TV personalities and struggling actors, among others.

"The rewards are good for an operative," said Koji Ozawa, 33, president of an agency called Yoi Room. "An operative can make \$2,500 to \$50,000 in a case. The cases usually last for three months." He said he fires operatives who fail three times out of five. "They have to succeed. They have to fall in love seriously, and then give it up like it's a business. It's like a job in the sex industry— unless you can do it, you can't become number one."

Raisuke Miyawaki, a nationally known expert on organized crime, believes the wakaresase businesses are not as legitimate as they claim. He contends many of them are willing—or unwilling—fronts for *yakuza*, Japan's counterpart to the Mafia.

"The *yakuza* have very long antennae and good ears. They very quickly hear about business opportunities that involve profit and danger," he said. And they are familiar with the scheme: couple-busting has been a field for gangsters, who used threats and strong-arm tactics to cut spouses out of inheritance rights, he said.

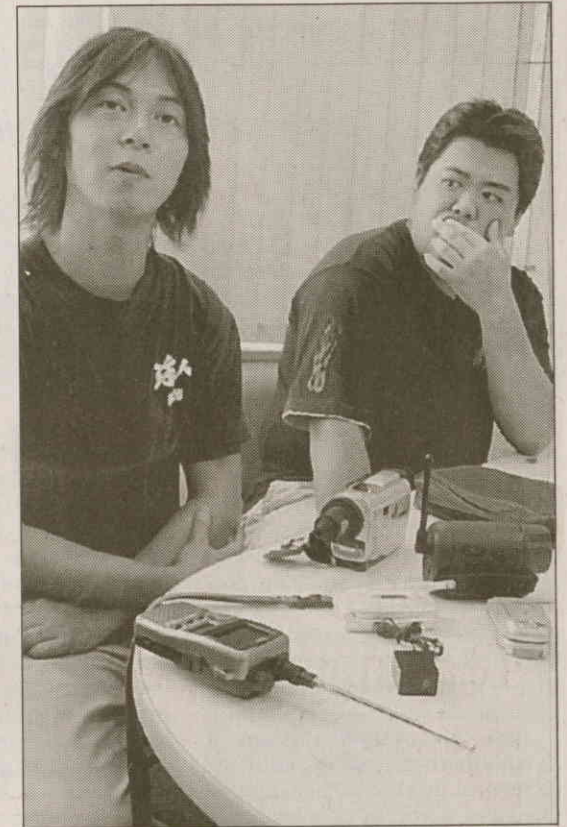
"This is a kind of business that involves danger, and hovers between the legal and illegal. And, it makes a profit," he said. "The *yakuza* wouldn't ignore that. They would either own the companies or control the people who did.

"Sometimes, the good-looking young people who work there wouldn't even know it. They would only occasionally see some strange character around the office."

Most of the firms, like Ladies Secret Service, insist they operate within the law. Hiwatashi, the company's founder, is sometimes credited with starting the wakaresase business. He said that in the eight years he's been in business, his agency, which operates under a variety of names, including the Japan Research Institute on Male-Female Issues, has handled nearly 15,000 couple-busting cases. He has eight offices in Japan, another in Australia that does more traditional detective work and a roster of 347 operatives, he said.

Hiwatashi, 36, married for 11 years and the father of one, said he has developed a "realistic" view of life and love: "When it comes to men and women, I don't know if anybody can say they have never cheated."

People who have come to his agency to end relationships include wives who are abused, husbands whose wives run up big debts, parents who don't like their daughter's boyfriend and men and women who feel they are being stalked by an ex-lover, he said.



BY DOUG STRUCK—THE WASHINGTON POST

Masaru Nakamura, left, and Kazuya Yoshii, work for the JRI agency in Tokyo, whose clients have used the private detective firm to help break up their relationships.

He's been approached by husbands who want to find lovers for their wives, spurned lovers who want revenge, stalkers, their prey, and by the wife of a Japanese corporate bigwig with a Hollywood starlet mistress, he said. He and some other couple-busting companies say they reject some cases they feel uncomfortable with.

He is also blunt about the limits of his company's work. One of his operations is unlikely to salvage a relationship damaged by an affair, even if it is successful in breaking up the affair, he said.

"I personally think the moment you decide to hire an investigator like me, that's the end. There's no trust left. Of course, I don't say that to my clients, because it's my business," he shrugged. "But I think at that point, it's better to get a divorce."

Special correspondent Sachiko Sakamaki contributed to this report.