

Marriage sprang from struggle to master Japanese

By REIJI YOSHIDA

Staff writer

May Uehara, who came to Japan from Hong Kong in 1986, speaks Japanese with such perfect intonation that people may at first mistake her for a native.

But she has a lot of stories about trying to master the language, and how that led to finding a Japanese husband and raising a family in Hatogaya, southern Saitama Prefecture.



Now May leads a busy life filling four major roles — as a busy career woman at a shipping company in

Happy family: May Uehara from Hong Kong enjoys a barbecue with her husband, Fujio, and daughter, Eri, at their home in Hatogaya, Saitama Prefecture, recently.

YOSHIAKI MIURA PHOTO

Tokyo, a board member of an association of Hong Kongers in Japan (the Hong Kong Tai Ping Shan Club), and a wife and mother at home.

"I am always told (by my husband) that I should go to bed early," laughs May, who usually doesn't get home until late at night on weekdays.

"I have the impression that Hong Kong people live life three times (busier) than Japanese people," says her husband, Fujio, who works at an information company in Tokyo. May describes him as "a typical, shy Japanese man."

They married in 1990 and have a 12-year-old daughter, Eri.

May's native language is Cantonese, and she uses Mandarin and English at work. The family speaks Japanese at home. **What brought you to Japan in the first place?** **May:** I came to Japan for the first time on a family trip when I was 17. At that time, I was interested in Japan since I liked Japanese idols, fashion and magazines. Girls in Hong Kong like Japanese fashion very much. **Fujio:** At that time, many TV programs aired in Hong Kong were from Japan. Hong Kong has been affected by Japan very much. **May:** After graduating from high school, I wanted to go to a university, but Hong Kong had only two universities, which are very difficult to enter.

My parents were strongly against it, but I submitted an application form to a Japanese-language school in Tokyo without telling them.

I studied Japanese really hard because you cannot enter a (Japanese) university unless you pass the first-level Japanese-language test. I was under much pressure. **Were there any gaps between your impression of Japan before coming and what you actually found here?** **May:** Yes, coming to Japan on a trip is totally different from living here. First, prices are really high. Rice is particularly expensive. I tried to spend as little money as possible. **Have you ever thought about going back to Hong Kong?** **May:** Yes, I wrote letters to my mom with tears in my eyes about three months after coming to Japan. I couldn't speak Japanese well at first.

But after about six months, I started speaking Japanese and making friends here. In addition, I was determined to enter a university. **Fujio:** I think she is flexible and can adapt to any environment. She is mentally strong and quite cheerful. **How did you get to know each other and start dating?** **May:** When I was attending a university in Tokyo, I started working a part-time job at a company. (Fujio) was there. He was not a guy who particularly stood out from others, but it was he who asked me for a date. **Fujio:** She always made coffee for me. **May:** I used to make coffee for other people, too (laughs). He asked me to make a copy (of a document), and a letter was inside

it. The letter had a phone number. He was asking me to go out for tea. **What was your first impression of her? What did you like about her?** **May:** Cute, right? (laughs). **Fujio:** She is a very cheerful woman. She is quite quick and efficient, and I started thinking a woman like this is nice. **What was your impression of him?** **May:** He is a very typical, ordinary Japanese man. He is quite shy. He often taught me Japanese. **Fujio:** I often taught her words you cannot find in a textbook. **May:** Yes, I think I owe much of my Japanese to him, frankly speaking. **Do you find any cultural differences between Hong Kong and Japan?** **May:** Hong Kong people say yes or no clearly. Sometimes I got irritated (because Japanese are not like that), but now I think it's "shoganai" (can't be helped) because that's the way Japanese people are. **Fujio:** She wrote letters to me often. When back in Hong Kong, she sent me two or three letters a week. I didn't write so often, like once a month. **May:** And Hong Kong women are very quick to make a decision, and they immediately take action. But my husband says you need to buy some books of data and analyze them. (Hong Kongers) are not like that (laughs). **Fujio:** When we bought a TV, she kept saying a Sony is good and didn't examine Panasonic or others at all (laughs). **Have there been any difficulties having a partner from a different country?** **Fujio:** When I talk to her parents and relatives, it's all in Cantonese. When I have a meal with about 20 of them, I am the only Japanese. I can only say some greetings to them. **May:** My husband is very shy. A couple in Hong Kong will hold hands whenever they go out, but he won't. It's impossible in this neighborhood (laughs). After getting married, (Japanese) won't do that, but it's different in Hong Kong.

Fujio: It's a bit embarrassing when you get old, isn't it? **What about some good things?** **Fujio:** You won't have any troubles when you go abroad. U.S., Hong Kong, China, Australia. . . . **May:** He feels very comfortable because I can take care of him. **What are your dreams for the future?** **May:** Mine is that my daughter will go to Canada to study English there after graduating from high school (in Japan). I hope she will learn Chinese, too, by staying either in Hong

Kong or Beijing for two or three years sometime in the future. **Fujio:** Mine is good health for her. She works until so late at night and doesn't get much sleep.. **May:** I think that's why you think Hong Kong women are so powerful (laughs).

Reader participation is invited for this series, which appears every other Saturday. If you wish to be featured, please e-mail hodobu@japantimes.co.jp

The Japan Times: Saturday, May 17, 2008
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