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## Cross-cultural Marriage in Mainland China: Trends, Prospects and Challenges

### Abstract

In the process of rapid globalization and transformation, cross-cultural marriage has turned into a major concern for the social scientists including sociologists and demographers in this present century. In China, with the largest population in the world, cross-cultural marriage has occurred significantly since the market economy reformation in 1980s. But the studies on cross-cultural marriages are not well documented in Mainland China where the country is experiencing the transition between tradition and modernity. The present paper is an attempt to examine the trends, patterns and challenges of cross-cultural marriages in Mainland China. The results show that cross cultural marriages have been increasingly accepted in Mainland China while their divorce rate is also significantly increasing. Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam are contributing to social bridge by approving this pattern of marriage with each other as Chinese female brides are the most preferable due to marriage behavior. In another context, a few social scientists have predicted, that China will soon find itself with a marriage-age population remarkably out of balance as there is a significant gap in the sex ratio currently, which may have a strong impact within society. A marriage squeeze can operate as a “pull” factor to marriage migrants as well as an excess of one gender can also provide a potential for an emigration “push”. At the same time, as a result of the prevalence of cross-cultural marriages, there is the optimistic prospect for a reduction in cultural conflicts among the territories neighboring with Mainland China.

**Key words:** cross-culture, international marriage, marriage squeeze, divorce, Mainland China

### Introduction

In recent years, globalisation has presented a challenge to the traditional relationship between the state and the family. The extent of globalization is evident in the sharp growth in the number of international marriages, where marriage has no national boundaries. As a result international marriage became a major concern amongst academics as to whether this event occurs in an accelerated rate and if it has a strong impact on various dimensions in regions of East Asia in the present century. In East Asia, Mainland China, Cross-Straights Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam are trying to create a social bridge by approving this pattern of marrying each other over recent decades. Since the reformation, China is increasingly





However, the calculated percent of foreigners involved in Mainland registered marriages (in person) related to foreigners, overseas (Chinese in origin) and special administrative regions were 30,44%, 34,40% and 32,30% in 2000, 2003 and 2005 respectively.

### The Case of Shanghai

In case of Shanghai among the 3300 registered internal marriages, nearly half in 2001 were made up of Shanghai women and Japanese men. Most of these women who married Japanese men are divorced or from Shanghai suburbs. There was a time shortly after the country began to open up that Shanghai women were keen on marrying a foreign men, from any country, with the purpose of going abroad. Those women, thinking that marriage to a foreigner meant gaining a large and easily acquired fortune, took great risks without worrying much about their future life. In 2001 the city experienced or witnessed a 10 percent increase in number of international marriages ("Shanghai Star" 2002). Local citizens registered for marriage with people from over 60 countries in 2001. It is an indication that the city is opening more and more to the outside world. As more foreign capital flows into Shanghai, more foreigners appear to work there, which increases the likelihood for international marriages. No doubt, international marriage is popular in Shanghai ("Shanghai Star" 2002). But at the same time divorce rate in international/interracial marriages in Shanghai is also noticeable. Mixed marriages between Shanghai Chinese and foreigners rose by 67% in 2001 in relation to 1991, but the unions also break up at a quicker rate. More than 2100 Shanghai Chinese married foreigners in 2001, which accounts for 3,5 percent of the total number of marriages in 1996, as survey by the city's Civil Affairs Bureau reports. Far more Chinese women than men marry foreigners and more mixed couples set up homes in Shanghai rather than move overseas. The survey also shows that divorce rate between Shanghai Chinese and foreigners has more than doubled since 1991. The survey reports around 168,000 people registered for marriage in Shanghai, the mainland's largest cosmopolitan city. More than 24,600 couples divorced in Shanghai in 1990, a rise of 43,9% over 1991 (Crouch 1997)<sup>1</sup>. As more foreigners visit or settle down in this city, the age gap in international marriages has become less of a contrast than years ago. Shanghai's citizens have chosen marriage partners from continents across the globe. Statistics show that the age difference of such international couples is around 10 years and it keeps on narrowing as locals become more selective about choosing foreign partners. The case was totally different two decades ago when young Shanghai women tended to marry foreign men, perhaps choosing wealth and support over love. Since male foreigners generally had obvious advantages in terms of economic and social status, Shanghai women tended to be less picky about their age. There are more risks in international marriages due to inherent problems over different cultural ideals and customs which lead finally to divorce. Referring to the "Wenhui Daily" ("People's Daily" 2004) it was reported that 120 international

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<sup>1</sup> J. Crouch (1997), *Divorce in International/Interracial Marriages in Shanghai*, <http://www.divorcereform.org/sha.html> [06.12.2011].

couples sought divorce with the civil affairs bureau, but no figures were mentioned from local courts where international couples would usually go to seek divorce. "People's Daily" reports that after a seven-year-boom, the number of international marriages taking place in Shanghai each year is gradually shrinking. However, now there is a new tendency. The number of these marriages ending in divorce is escalating every year. In the first half of 2004 alone, 120 cross-cultural couples split up. This was more than in the whole 2002. Since the reform and opening policy was adopted, the number of registered international marriages in Shanghai has grown infrequently. The first period of continued growth occurred from 1980 to 1985. By the end of 1985, there were 826 mixed couples in Shanghai. A second boom started in the mid 1990s with over 3000 marriages a year being registered. The record was set in 2001 with 3442 pairs ("People's Daily" 2004)<sup>2</sup>.

Cross-cultural love is as usual. However, the partners can face further tensions arising from cultural differences and practical troubles like where to live and how to bring up the children. Later as they become accustomed to each other, they may have to deal with other problems for the time being. "People's Daily" in 2004 also reports that statistics point to about 90 international divorces in 2002. By 2003, the number had grown by 60% to more than 140. Numbers have increased further with 120 in the first half of 2004 alone. Nowadays, Shanghai folk are choosing their foreign spouses from 40 different countries and regions. More than 50% are from Japan, USA and Canada. A study of the Population Research Institute of East China Normal University explored that 88,9% of 21,000 international marriages that entered Shanghai between 1996 and 2002 comprised a foreign husband and a local wife. Most of the foreign husbands were in the age from 25 to 54 and married at an average age of 41,9 years. Meanwhile their Shanghai wives were mostly aged 20–39 and married younger at 31,4 years on average. With husbands tending to tie the knot some 10,5 years later than their wives, the age gap is thought to be a major factor contributing to the high divorce rate. "People's Daily" reports in 2004 that the new "Marriage Registration Regulations" now in force have helped to boost the rising divorce rate of enquiries at the Civil Affairs Bureau. Here it can be noted that Shanghai is not unique in the country in witnessing a boom in international (inter-racial) marriages and accelerating divorce rates, but it should be a major concern at the right time.

### **The Cases of Guang Xi and Yunnan**

Demographic figures indicate an increasing female deficit in China over the past decades. Partly resulting from rising discrimination against females, this sex imbalance has important and long-term implications. It is revealed that the cost of the shortage of females in China is the transnational migration and trafficking of women across the China-Vietnam border. Within China, two provinces sharing a border with Vietnam – Guang Xi and Yunnan – are among those with the highest

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<sup>2</sup> "People's Daily", 21 September 2004, [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200409/21/eng20040921\\_157779.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200409/21/eng20040921_157779.html) [02.01.2012].

gender imbalances. This female deficit is creating a market for foreign wives and foreign female workers. Other factors such as the high cost of marriage (bride price) for Chinese men and the need for agricultural labor also create a demand for foreign wives and daughters-in-law. Persistent inequalities in gender and intergenerational relations make foreign wives attractive. For the Vietnamese, the opening of the border has translated into increasing opportunities to migrate to China for social and economic reasons. Women, in particular, have crossed the China-Vietnam border in search of a spouse or a job. Single women, considered too old to marry in Vietnam, see in migration an opportunity to find a spouse and have children. The dynamic Chinese economy and booming border region make migration to China particularly attractive for Vietnamese women facing poverty and unemployment. Two key factors come to explain the demand for wives from Vietnam. The first factor is demographic, reflected in the important female deficit in the Chinese southern provinces. The second factor is economic, since the inflation of the bride price on the Chinese side makes the marriage to a Vietnamese woman a lot cheaper. For some poor Chinese families, it is the only way to find a spouse for their son (Duong, Le Bach 2005; CEPED 2005).

### **The Case of Taiwan**

In the past few decades, Taiwan has experienced dramatic changes including demographic transition, economic liberalization, political democratization and social diversification. In the process of globalization, the major aspect is human interaction with the rest of the world through migration, especially the inflow of foreign workers and the immigration of spouses married to Taiwanese. Ching-lung Tsay's study (2004) reports that the number of foreign workers did not reach 100,000 until 1993, but surged to its peak of 330,000 in 2000. In addition, there are irregular migrants of unknown number, mainly from Mainland China, working in Taiwan. Slightly more recently, there has been an increasing number of Taiwanese who married foreigners and who have brought their spouses to Taiwan. In early 2004, the total number of marriage immigrants exceeded 300,000. The majority of them are women (93%), mainly from China and Southeast Asia. Both the immigrant spouses and the migrant workers have become significant groups in Taiwan in the past decade. The survey also indicates that 16% of the 145,976 Taiwanese marriages registered in 1998 were with foreigners (8,5% with Chinese and 7,2% with other foreigners). The proportion was doubled in 2003. In case of marriages with the Chinese, the input increased continuously from 8,5% in 1998 to 20,7% in 2003. Unlike the Chinese case, the role played by marriages with other foreigners increased, but has stabilized at the level of 11% since 2000. For the whole period of 1998–2003, 1/4 of the registered marriages were international marriages, slightly more of them with Chinese than with other foreigners. In terms of a trend, the category of marriages with the Chinese has been experiencing increasing importance when compared to marriages with foreigners from other countries (Ching-lung Tsay 2004).

## Cross-cultural Marriages Between Chinese and Japanese

The occurrence of international marriages in Japan has been gradually rising. Population statistics for 2000 confirm that 4,5% of registered marriages were international, (Curtin 2002<sup>3</sup>). Between 1980 and the year 2000 the number of Japanese men married to non-Japanese women increased 6,5 times as reported in the background description of the conference on “International marriage, rights and the state in Southeast and East Asia”, 2006<sup>4</sup>. Chinese women are currently the most popular foreign brides in Japan, followed by Philippines, South Korean and North Korean ones. In Shanghai from among 3300 registered marriages in 2001 half were comprised of Shanghai women and Japanese men (“Shanghai Star” 2002). When one considers that foreigners represent just over 1% of the entire population of Japan, this is a rather high figure. Chinese women are currently the most popular foreign brides, followed by Filipinos, South Koreans and North Koreans. In marriages involving foreign grooms, Koreans were the number one choice, followed by Americans, though Americans made up only 2,6% of foreigners in Japan in 2001 (Curtin 2002). Among international couples, foreign husbands and Japanese wives make up about 20 percent. Foreign wives and Japanese husbands make up about 80%, led by Chinese (10,242 marriages), followed by Filipinos (7794 marriages), Koreans (5318), Thai (1445) and Brazilians (296). It should be pointed out that there is an imbalanced structure in Japan’s population between men and women looking for marriage which can be a reason for the increase in international marriages. At present, men aged 20–50 are about 10 million and the women in this age group about 8 million. There are approximately 2 million men aged 35 to 50. If they want to have children, their target will generally be women between 30 to 35 years old. However, the number of women in this age group is about one million. That shows that one out of two men in their late 30’s and 40’s faces difficulties finding a partner if they only target Japanese women. There are two prominent features about Japanese international marriages. One is that the majority of partners are from neighboring countries including China, Korea and the Philippines. This is due to geographical and historical relations. The tendency of international marriages is that not only in Japan, but also internationally men are in favor of downward partners while women are for upward partners. This means that men want women whose educational background, income and height are less than theirs. Women are just the opposite. In Japan in the late 80s there were 36,039 international marriages between Japanese and non-Japanese, according to the statistics from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. This is about 5% of the 740,191 couples who married in Japan, which means that one out of 20 marriages were mixed. It was one out of 22 in 2000. Thus, the number of international couples in Japan has increased.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Sean Curtin (2002), *International Marriages in Japan: Part Four – Basic Data on International Marriage in 2002*, [http://www.glocom.org/special\\_topics/social\\_trends/20021112\\_trends\\_s16/index.html](http://www.glocom.org/special_topics/social_trends/20021112_trends_s16/index.html) [02.01.2012].

<sup>4</sup> “Conference on International marriage, rights and the state in Southeast and East Asia”, Singapore, 21–22 September 2006, [http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/events\\_categorydetails.asp?categoryid=6&eventid=238](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/events_categorydetails.asp?categoryid=6&eventid=238) [02.02.2012].

## **Cross-cultural Marriages Between Chinese and South Koreans**

Between 2001 and 2004 International Marriages in South Korea more than doubled – from 4,8% to 11,4% of all marriages (Paston, Morrison 2005). According to Korean National Official Statistical Data, there were 5700 internationally married couples in the Korean farm regions in 2004, a huge increase from 1600 in 1999. Chinese women make 49% of foreign wives of Korean men in farming villages; Vietnamese women comprise 31%, Filipinos 11% and Mongolians 3% (“Joongang Daily” 2005<sup>5</sup>). Between 2001 and 2004 the percentage of international marriages in Korea more than doubled, rising from 4,8% to 11,4% of all marriages (CEPED 2005). It can be noted that international marriage unites two cultures. While some marriages of Korean farmers and foreign brides founder, many thrive. Other nationalities include Thais, Uzbeks and Cambodians. Although most come to Korea believing they will have a better life than in their home countries, news reports have highlighted unhappy outcomes for some, citing violent domestic disputes or financial hardships that lead to divorce (“Joongang Daily” 2005).

## **Prospects and Challenges of Cross-cultural Marriages**

From the above discussions it is evident that there is a marriage relation between mainland China and other neighboring areas and this type of marriage is increasing day by day and Chinese women are more vulnerable than men. In a positive sense international marriage can serve as a bridge of communication between different cultures. From this perspective, it should be encouraged in case of Mainland China. But due to the actual differences, such as cultural clashes, economic gaps and moral concepts, China has not yet fully opened services in this area (“China Daily” 2002). In this regard state interventions should occur in relation to the issues of national boundary, cultural conflict and exchange, as well as religious identity.

## **Increasing Divorce Rate**

Here it can be noted that the dissolution of marriage is also increasing at the same time. Dissolution of cross-cultural marriage is also increasing along with the increasing number of cross-cultural marriages in Mainland China (Table 3). It was found that divorces between Shanghainese and foreigners have more than doubled since 1991. For example, the number of international divorces in Shanghai was 90 in 2002 and 140 in 2003. A research findings of the Population Research Institute of East China Normal University reports that the age gap (10,5 years) is a major factor for the high divorce rate – foreign husband’s age range is between 25 and 54 years; married at an average age of 41,9 years whereas for a local wife it is on average 31,4 years (“People’s Daily” 2004).

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<sup>5</sup> “Joongang Daily”, 17 August 2005, <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/200508/17/200508172113513809900091009101.html> [08.12.2011].



**Table 3.** Divorce related to foreigners, overseas (Chinese origin) and special administrative regions in Mainland China, 1993–2004 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2005)

Year	Total divorce (per 10 thousand pairs)	Related to foreigners, overseas (Chinese), special regions and other factors (in pairs)
2005	178,5	8267
2004	166,5	5830
2003	133	3333
2002	117,7	5221
2001	125	2856
2000	121,3	1075
1999	120,2	975
1998	119,2	948
1995	105,6	813
1993	91	968

### Imbalanced Sex Ratio and Marriage Squeeze

Moreover, a few demographers and sociologists are more concerned about the existing sex ratio which is more imbalanced and they have predicted that China will soon find itself with a marriage-age population remarkably out of balance, with about 23 million more young men than women available for them to marry in this decade and the next one – what demographers call a “marriage squeeze”. This has been questioned by Dudley Poston (2005) in *China's Unbalanced Sex Ratio at Birth: How many Bare Branches Have Been Born since the 1980s?* Poston reported from the estimation of reputed scholars that there would be 1 million more men per year after 2010 in China (Poston 2005).

This looming surplus of single young men could be a driving force behind the increased international migration and also marriages in the future. If international marriage is subjugated by Chinese women in the Mainland then it will also affect badly the local marriage market. The demographic effect is now perceptible. Most societies reveal biologically natural sex ratios at birth of around 105 baby boys born for every 100 baby girls, yielding roughly equal number of prospective brides and grooms as generations reach marriageable age. But China has departed distinctly from this natural pattern since the 1980s. Its sex ratio at birth has hovered between 115 and 120 baby boys for every 100 baby girls in recent years, a level that renders surplus roughly one out of every eight men in a generation. China's legal marriage age is 22 years for men, 20 for women, which means that more than 23,5 million young men will not be capable of finding Chinese wives during the period from 2000 to 2021, due to the inadequate supply of Chinese women in the marriage market. Neither a spontaneous shift toward a later average age of first marriage nor care-less enforcement on the supply side to allow teenage brides would substantially lessen this market imbalance, is the view of demographers and sociologists. They also predict that the surplus of boys and shortage of girls “made in China” could soon become not just a concern for China, but for the world (Poston 2005). China has the

most severe shortage of girls compared to boys of any country in the world today, as documented by China's surveys and censuses up to 2000.

**Table 4.** Sex ratio at birth in China, 1981–2010

Year	Sex Ratio at Birth
3 <sup>rd</sup> Population Census, 1982	108,5
1% of Population Sampling Survey, 1987	110,9
4 <sup>th</sup> Population Census, 1990	111,3
1% of Population Sampling Survey, 1995	115,6
5 <sup>th</sup> Population Census, 2000	116,9
6 <sup>th</sup> Population Census, 2010	118,06

Source: *China Population Today*, August 2005, p. 18, National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2010

One study indicates that the high sex ratio at birth will hit a peak around 2040 and in 2020 China will face a shortage of brides (Sheng-Li 2006). The sex ratio continues to increase over recent years (Table 4). According to the 6<sup>th</sup> national population census conducted in 2010, the sex ratio at birth rose to 118,06, far beyond the normal range. Great disparities also exist between regions (municipalities and provinces) and in terms of rural–urban location. Table 5 indicates that the ratio remained in the normal range for the first birth in all three surveys but it rose drastically to a higher level for the second birth and even higher for the third and above.

**Table 5.** Sex ratio at birth, by birth parity

Year	Total	1st birth	2nd birth	3rd birth
1990	111,3	105,2	121,0	127,0
1995	115,6	106,4	141,1	154,3
2000	116,9	107,1	151,9	159,4

Source: *China Population Today*, August 2005, p. 19

Most of the births which appear to be missing from the registration system and even from the censuses are of females. Migrants and those in the private sector may be willing, for future legitimacy or other advantage, to record a son but are much less likely to report a daughter. In addition they provide a possible kin network through which others can hide a daughter from local investigation (Kane 1999, p. 200–201). Trends in reported sex ratios at birth have risen from 108,5 males in 1982 to 116,9 in 2000 (Table 5) for every 100 females. Son preference, low fertility and technology combine to cause the loss of daughters in China today, as well as compulsory family planning and the one-child policy advocates the problem (Benister 2004). In this respect an example can be referred here. One factor reflects the important female deficit of the Chinese southern provinces and that is the demographic factor. The second factor is economic, since the inflation of the bride price on the Chinese side makes the marriage to a Vietnamese woman a lot cheaper. For some poor Chinese families, it is the only way to find a spouse for their son. Demand creates supply and trafficking in women (including young girls) from Vietnam is responding to this wife market drive (CEPED 2005). Ren mentioned in his study (Ren 2004) that

the abducting, kidnapping and sale of young girls for forced marriage is a common practice in many Asian countries, especially in China and the Mekong region, and many ethnic Chinese girls were also sold for forced marriage in Laos, Thailand and Malaysia (Ren 2004).

### Other Challenges

To face the challenges of the “marriage squeeze” multiple marriages may be turned into a temporary solution as reputed by the U.S. sociologist and demographer, Dudley Poston. It has been predicted that the consequences might be crime, explosive epidemics of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases and even international threats to the security of other nations (Poston 2005).

### Conclusion

International or cross-cultural marriage is the classic example in the present context of the modern society where love, trust and understanding help people from different cultural backgrounds to get to know each other better and sometimes help to pave the way for happy marriages which may last for dissolution. Here it can be noted that in the context of changing global patterns of immigration and settlement, as well as a range of more fluid migrations which may be transnational, circular or multiple, the “transnational family” as a new shape of living pact in which familial relations may reside and develop is becoming more common across the broad spectrum of the society. In this regard international marriage is becoming an important concern for Mainland China (due to the reasons and opportunities for people to contract marriages with partners from different nationalities – especially neighbouring countries and regions) and is contributing to make the web of social networks with possible threats (e.g. dissolution of marriage) within modern era. It can be noted that Chinese females are more vulnerable than males in this respect. On the other hand, due to the existing sex ratio imbalances international marriage and migration may be accelerated among male people in the near future in search of bridal destiny. Both the direct and indirect consequences possessing various dimensions can be assembled here under the reforming social setting with hope and dissatisfaction. “Love is borderless, the world is just a big family” – in this context international marriage should be encouraged. But a “marriage squeeze” can operate as a pull factor to marriage migrants as well as the excess of one gender can also provide potential for a “push” of emigrants. The looming surplus of single young men could be a driving force behind increased international migration and also marriages in the future. In this respect, due to the reported existing sex ratio imbalances, international marriage and migration may be accelerated among male people in the near future to search for bridal. High existence of international marriages may also challenge the state and its boundaries. More careful concern and efforts are needed to understand this type of marriage and its future direction and for comprehensive social development with stability and harmony in the new millennium.

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### Streszczenie

Gwałtowne procesy globalizacyjne i transformacyjne XXI wieku czynią małżeństwa międzykulturowe przedmiotem szczególnego zainteresowania przedstawicieli nauk społecznych, m.in. socjologów i demografów. W Chinach, z ich najliczniejszą w świecie populacją, małżeństwa międzykulturowe zaczęły w znacznej ilości występować po reformach rynkowych w 1980 roku. Problematyka ta nie została jednak wystarczająco zbadana w Chinach, które znajdują się właśnie na etapie przejściowym pomiędzy tradycją i nowoczesnością. Artykuł jest próbą uchwycenia nie tylko tendencji i wzorów, ale również wyzwań wiążących się z międzykulturowymi małżeństwami w Chinach. Wyniki badań świadczą o tym, że małżeństwa takie są coraz częściej akceptowane, jednak częstotliwość ich rozwodów także znacznie wzrasta. Chiny, Tajwan, Japonia, Korea Południowa i Wietnam wzajemnie popierają śluby pomiędzy swoimi obywatelami, przy czym preferowane są chińskie narzeczone ze względu na ich postawy małżeńskie. Z kolei niektórzy socjologowie prognozują, że wkrótce Chiny może czekać znaczące zachwianie równowagi wśród populacji w wieku odpowiednim do zawarcia małżeństwa ze względu na istniejącą nierównowagę stosunku płci. Może to mieć istotne konsekwencje społeczne. Spadek ilości małżeństw może być czynnikiem *przyciągającym* migrantów, zaś przewaga jednej z płci – potencjalnym czynnikiem *wypychającym* z kraju, emigracji. Pozytywnym skutkiem rozpowszechnienia mieszanych małżeństw może stać się zmniejszenie konfliktów kulturowych na terytoriach sąsiadujących z Chinami.