

Chinese-international Intimate Relations: An Australian Case Study of Migrant Marriage and Divorce

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Abstract

This paper analyses trends in Chinese-international marriages and divorces, using Australia, a major migrant-receiving country, as a comparative case study. In exploring the recent rise of ‘Chinese-foreign’ marriage in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), we show that Chinese-international marriage within mainland China is a small, gendered phenomenon that largely involves Chinese women marrying men from other Asian societies. By examining unique data published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, we reveal that most marriages involving PRC-born people in contemporary Australia are between two people born in China. But the displacement of Chinese intimate relationships to a non-Asian country results in significant behavioural divergences from couples ‘at home’, especially regarding prior cohabitation. Marriages solely involving PRC-born couples in Australia are also typically less enduring than marriages to non-Chinese. We argue that these differences underscore the roles of country-specific immigration policies and labour mobility patterns in shaping unpredicted family formation behaviour.

Keywords: Australia, China, divorce, marriage, migration

Introduction

Relationships between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and other nations are often examined through the state-centric lens of diplomatic ties, security and military relations, and trade or investment linkages. Less prominently, people-to-people exchanges, including through business relationships, scientific and medical cooperation and a variety of formal or informal exchanges (including sister-city relationships, study and cultural exchanges and so on), are also considered. But the most basic category of societal ties – intimate relationships – rarely features in discussions of the PRC's international connections. This is true despite the large number of citizens with Chinese familial ties or heritage in many countries that engage with China diplomatically.

In migrant-receiving nations such as Australia, the limited focus on more intimate forms of engagement with China is surprising. In a statement on cultural diversity as reflected in the 2016 Australian Census, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) answers the question: 'Who are we now' – that is, what is the ethnic composition of present-day Australia? As the ABS explains, the 2016 Census reveals that Australia is among the most multicultural nations in the world, with one in four Australian residents being born overseas (ABS 2017: Cultural Diversity). The census also identifies more than 300 different ancestries in Australia – ancestry is the cultural or ethnic group that a person most identifies with, rather than simply their place of birth. The top five most common ancestries are: English, Australian, Irish and Scottish, accounting for a combined total of nearly 90 per cent, followed by Chinese at 5.6 per cent. England remains the most common birthplace of migrants to Australia (15 per cent). However, China is now the country's second most common birthplace of migrants at 8.3 per

cent followed by India at 7.4 per cent. The findings underscore Australia's historical ties to Europe and growing ties to Asia.

But classifications such as 'Australia-Australian' and 'China-Chinese' refer to heterogeneous entities and identities rather than rigid ones. This point is underscored by the diverse ethnic composition of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, as discussed above. It is also demonstrated by the complex historical and geopolitical conditions that have helped to shape 'the Chinese' in Australia (Ang 2014: 1186–1187). In the mid-nineteenth century, people (mostly men) from the southern regions of Imperial China came to Australia to participate in the Victorian and New South Wales' 'gold rushes'. In 1901, when Australia became a nation state, there were nearly 30,000 people of Chinese descent living in the country. The 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, which was adopted to keep 'Asians out', contained the numbers of Australian-Chinese until the 'White Australia' policy was overturned in favour of a policy of 'multiculturalism' in the early 1970s. Ethnic Chinese refugees from wars in Vietnam and Cambodia settled in Australia during the 1970s, followed by skilled Chinese-identified migrants from Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan, in the 1980s. After the 1989 suppression of student and worker protests in the PRC – a nation founded under Communist Party leadership in 1949, around 42,000 people from mainland China in Australia on temporary student or working visas were granted permanent residency (Chan 2015). While most Chinese migrants to Australia were Cantonese speakers historically, Mandarin-speaking professionals from the PRC – a nation comprised of 56 official nationalities – are a major new migrant group; and over a third of these migrants become Australian citizens (ABS 2019: 2016 Census).

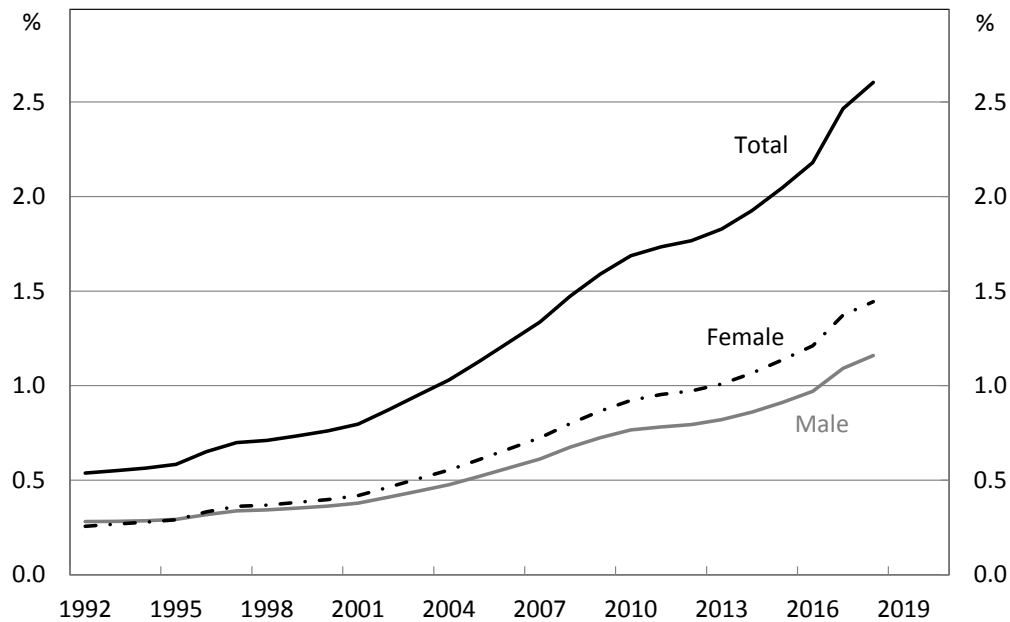
The PRC is now among the top source countries for permanent and temporary migration to Australia. The PRC was the second top source country for Australia's migration program between 2016 and 2018 (Department of Home Affairs 2018, 2019). Most of these places were granted to people in the eligible skilled occupation scheme – the occupations Australia needs to fill skill shortages, which typically attract young, highly educated professionals. The PRC was the top source country during the same period for permanent visas granted to family members, including partners and parents. It was also the top source country for temporary visas relating to students and visitors (tourist and business).

ABS data demonstrate the increasing contribution of PRC migrants to Australia's population growth. ABS data separately classify migrants born in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan: 'China' thus refers to mainland China or the PRC, excluding the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong. Analysis of the ABS migration data reveals that the number of PRC-born residents in Australia increased almost four-fold (from 0.54 per cent to 2.6 per cent of the total population) between 1992 and 2018, with both sexes being more or less equally represented (see Figure 1). Women have comprised the greater proportion of PRC-born residents in Australia since 1996, but by only a small margin – 0.33 per cent females compared to 0.32 per cent males in 1996, and 1.44 per cent females compared to 1.16 per cent males in 2018 (ABS 2019: Estimated Resident Population). The median age of PRC-born residents of Australia has also decreased from around 41 years in the late-1990s and early 2000s to less than 34 years in 2018, due to the influx of young professionals and international students. Most such migrants were born after the late 1980s and therefore comprise a different migrant cohort to the Tiananmen Square protest '89'ers'.

Figure 1

PRC-Born Resident Population, Australia

Share of total resident population



Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics; authors calculations

These figures suggest that Australia-PRC intimate relationships will become a common feature of life in Australia. However, there is limited research to date on mainland Chinese women and men who have registered marriages, births and divorces in contemporary Australia. This paper begins the long-term process of rectifying that gap.

The first section of the paper outlines the recent rise of Chinese-international marriage, discussing the organising concerns of literature about that phenomenon, and analysing trends relating to PRC citizens who have registered ‘foreign-related’ marriages and divorces in mainland China, using data published by the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the PRC (MCA) between 1979 and 2018. The term ‘Chinese-international marriage’ here refers *either* to marriages registered in the PRC where one party holds PRC citizenship and the other does not, *or* to marriages registered in countries other than the PRC in which at least one party is born in the PRC. The second section provides the first comprehensive analysis of emerging

trends relating to mainland Chinese people who have registered marriages, births and divorces in Australia, using data published by the ABS between 1995 and 2018. It also compares the relative incidence and importance of Australia-PRC marital relationships and separations vis-à-vis Chinese-Chinese relationships and separations that occur in Australia and the PRC.

We find that most marriages registered in Australia involving mainland Chinese people are between two people born in the PRC and thus predominantly intra-cultural in nature. This confirms a general principle of classic assimilation theory, which postulates a process by which the characteristics of new migrant groups (originally conceived as European-origin and then Asian-origin immigrants to North America) eventually converge with or come to resemble those of the (white, Anglo-protestant) mainstream in migrant-receiving societies (the global North) (Alba and Nee 1997). The theory predicts that new migrant groups are more likely to marry other migrants from the same country or ethnic background than mainstream members of the host societies because of major economic, linguistic and cultural differences, unless a small migrant population and gender imbalances restrict the potential for same-country-of-origin or intra-ethnic marriage (Qian and Qian 2019). However, contrary to associated claims that new migrant groups tend to replicate and even reinforce the values and behaviours associated with their ‘homeland’, PRC-born people registering marriages in Australia demonstrate a similar propensity to cohabit prior to marriage as the broader Australian population, unlike in China and in Asia where the prevalence of cohabitation is extremely low. Also contrary to claims that Asian marriages, as well as marriages between people with higher levels of education, are predictive of lower rates of divorce (Qian 2013: 2, 22), we find that marriages solely involving PRC-born couples tend not to be the most enduring. Compared to marriages registered in Australia that involve at least one Australian-

born person, couples involving people born in mainland China tend to separate and divorce sooner after marriage. We argue that these differences not only underscore the roles that country-specific immigration policies and labour mobility patterns can perform in shaping family formation behaviour; they also do so in ways that do not necessarily replicate dominant trends in either the ‘home’ or ‘host’ cultures.

The rise of Chinese-international marriage

The subject of Australia-PRC intimate relations has attracted limited scholarly attention to date. Discussions of Chinese-related migration and marriage patterns in Australia are mainly historical or a part of broader studies about the scale of Australia’s migration program and the growth of inter-ethnic marriage (Choi 1972; Inglis 1972; Khoo et al. 2009; Owen 2002).

Exceptions to this rule are psychology studies of the communication and relationship satisfaction of Chinese, Western and inter-cultural Chinese–Western couples living in present-day Australia (Hiew et al. 2014, 2015). However, all of these studies tend to treat the category of ‘Chinese’ in an undifferentiated fashion. They group people born in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and mainland China, as similarly ‘Chinese’, rather than as referring to diverse groups of migrants from territories with distinct socio-political histories.

Along with the growth of PRC-born residents in Australia, the subject of Australian-Chinese marriage has attracted attention in the Australian media. Newspaper reports variously suggest that: China-orientated migration and marriage introduction agencies are promoting fraudulent, commercial marriages between Australian women and PRC men so that PRC-born men can obtain Australian residency (Chen 2019; Crawford and Marcus 2011); entrepreneurial Chinese women with poor English-language skills are using dating websites to enter

successful marriages with Australian men (Fernbach 2017); and Chinese women comprise the largest group of applicants for Australian permanent residency following separation from an Australian spouse due to domestic violence (McPhee 2017).

Such accounts reiterate popular stereotypes of marriage-related migration from developing Asian countries to developed Western nations as being motivated primarily by opportunities for upward socio-economic mobility (hypergamy) rather than ‘genuine romance’. They also invoke narratives portraying migrant Asian wives as the frequent vulnerable, ‘victims’ of patriarchal oppression exacerbated by their lack of familiarity with or access to citizenship rights and services in the host countries (for academic discussions, see below). However, these mediatised representations of marriage-related migration relate to a small number of individual cases and imply that the spouses of the PRC-born parties are not ethnically Chinese, which suggests the need for a more systematic analysis of the rise of Chinese-international marriage and PRC-related marriages in Australia.

Chinese-international marriage became a focus of broader academic attention in the 2000s as a part of studies of cross-border and transnational marriage, which expanded the Euramerican focus of early migration studies to also consider issues of migration, gender, culture and citizenship in Asian-to-Western and intra-Asian contexts. The terms ‘cross-border marriage’ and ‘transnational marriage’ are often used interchangeably and can refer to intra-ethnic/same-culture and inter-ethnic/cross-cultural marriages (Yang and Lu 2010: 25). However, the term cross-border marriage tends to emphasise the geographical, national, socio-economic, racial and gendered borders that are constructed in developed migrant-receiving societies. Cross-border marriage is generally understood as a female-dominated migration flow, with the women in question often not holding basic citizenship rights in the receiving countries.

Hence scholarship on cross-border marriage has focused on the impact of marriage migration on the host societies in terms of population pressure and social security; the political and social citizenship of marriage migrants and their degree of integration into the host society; and the question of how to empower migrant wives in exploitative situations. Studies of transnational marriage focus instead on the transnational networks and spaces created by the diverse actors in such marriages, and the ways in which these networks may transform the nature of cross-border marriages, and local development and social practices in both the sending and receiving communities (see also Charsley 2012; Clark 2001; Constable 2005).

The PRC became an object of such studies because of the growth in migration through marriage of mainland Chinese women to men from North America and Europe, and Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan, starting in the 1980s, and especially during the 1990s. After 1949 and up until the early 1990s, the opportunities for mainland Chinese citizens to enter international marriages were severely limited by political differences between communist China and the rest of the world, as well as by restrictions on the capacity of foreign nationals to enter and reside in the PRC, and on the ability of PRC citizens to obtain passports and travel overseas (Jeffreys and Wang 2013: 347–348). PRC government statistics on the number of Chinese-international marriages registered in mainland China only became available after the country shifted away from a centralised planned economy and a position of relative international isolation, and adopted a policy of market-based economic reforms and opening up to the rest of the world in December 1978. The number of Chinese-international marriages registered in the PRC began to rise after the Law of the People's Republic of China on Control of the Exit and Entry of Citizens became effective on 1 February 1986. This was the first law to guarantee PRC citizens the right to travel outside of and to leave mainland

China, although obtaining a passport remained a complicated bureaucratic procedure until the 2000s.

In keeping with studies of cross-border and transnational marriage, research on Chinese-international marriage has focused on the specific ‘marriage-scapes’ that are created by existing and emerging historical, social, cultural and political-economic factors in both the PRC and migrant-receiving countries (Constable 2004, 4). Scholars of Chinese-international marriage have compared country-specific laws and policies on marriage and migration/immigration to reveal the challenges and discrimination experienced by couples in cross-cultural marriages living in and outside of mainland China (Friedman 2010; Rosenblatt and Stewart 2004). They have looked at the diverse personal, economic and political motivations of PRC citizens for marrying non-PRC citizens, and vice-versa, and the changing opportunities for PRC citizens, and especially women, to meet and marry non-PRC citizens, for example, through changes to travel visa requirements, and the expansion of the Chinese internet and commercial dating sites. They have also examined media representations of Chinese-international marriages to reveal how contemporary marriage-scapes both reflect and are encouraged by gendered fantasies and stereotypes about life and sexuality in developing and developed countries (Erwin 1999; Farrer 2010; Wang 2015; Yang 2016).

Our analysis of data made available by the PRC’s Ministry of Civil Affairs about marriage registration *within* mainland China between 1979 and 2018 contributes to this growing body of literature by indicating that Chinese-international marriage is a recent, gendered phenomenon that is largely intra-Asian in nature (MCA, 1979–1992, 1994–1999, 2000–2017; www.ceicdata.com). The data categorise ‘foreign-related marriages’ (*shewai hunyin*) as involving three types. The first type involves a union between a PRC citizen residing in

mainland China and an ‘Overseas Chinese’, that is, a PRC citizen who resides in another country. The second involves a marriage between a citizen of mainland China and a citizen of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan – territories that the PRC claims as part of a unified or ‘greater’ China, but have separate legal jurisdictions. The third type involves a marriage between a citizen of mainland China and a foreign national, which may include former PRC citizens who have acquired foreign citizenship. However, the PRC marriage registration data provide no information about the specific country of origin of ‘foreigners’ registering a marriage with a mainland Chinese citizen.

Analysis of the PRC marriage registration data suggests that Chinese-international marriage within mainland China is a recent and small phenomenon – approximately 1.6 million couples in total from 1979–2018. Fewer than 8,500 couples registered a Chinese-international marriage in mainland China in 1979 (MCA 1979). That figure climbed to a peak of nearly 79,000 couples in 2001 and then steadily decreased to an average of around 44,000 couples per year between 2014 and 2018 (www.ceicdata.com). This decline is perhaps a result of increasing numbers of marriages involving at least one PRC-born person being registered outside of mainland China. International travel has become commonplace for mainland residents since the 2000s, with migrant-receiving countries such as Australia and Canada becoming major destinations for PRC migrants and temporary visitors.

These figures comprise a small proportion of the total number of marriages registered in mainland China as a whole. In 1979, nearly 6.4 million couples registered a marriage in mainland China and over 10 million couples registered a marriage in 2018 (MCA 1979; www.ceicdata.com). Chinese-international marriage therefore accounted for only 0.1 per cent of the total number of registered marriages in mainland China in 1979; it peaked at around 1

per cent in 2001 (79,000 couples) and gradually decreased to less than 0.5 per cent in 2017–2018. Chinese-international marriage is thus a far from common occurrence in the PRC.

Analysis of the PRC marriage registration data further suggests that Chinese-international marriage is a gendered phenomenon that is largely intra-Asian in character. More than three-quarters of the PRC-born partners in a total of 1.6 million registered marriages are women (MCA 1979–1992, 1994–1999, 2000–2017). More than half of these marriages involve people from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan (54 per cent), that is, territories which the PRC claims as part of China, and a further 11 per cent of these marriages involve overseas Chinese. Hence, the majority of Chinese-international marriages registered in the PRC to date (65 per cent) involve two people of Chinese ethnicity. Nonetheless, such marriages might be considered as inter-cultural given the distinct recent political histories of Hong Kong, Taiwan and the PRC.

It is not possible to estimate how many of the Chinese-international marriages that have been registered in the PRC involve Australian citizens or citizens of other migrant-receiving countries such as North America and Canada. The PRC marriage registration data provide no information about the country of origin of people registering a marriage with a mainland Chinese citizen, other than spouses from Taiwan and the PRC's Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau.

However, as we discuss below, data provided by the ABS facilitate a comparative analysis by covering the high-level demographic characteristics of PRC-born people registering marriages, births and divorces in Australia.

Counting PRC-born families in Australia

We analyse emerging trends relating to people born in mainland China who have registered marriages, births and divorces in Australia between 1994 and 2017, using unique data published by the ABS. The available data sets correspond to the year 1994 and each of the years from 1996 to 2017, and cover the high-level characteristics of: (1) women and men registering marriages in Australia (by country of birth); (2) women and men registering divorces in Australia (by country of birth) (excluding the year 2002); and (3) parents of children born and registered in Australia (by country of origin) (ABS 1995–2018: Births, Marriages and Divorces). Marriages of overseas residents visiting Australia temporarily are included in the ABS marriage statistics, but divorces can only be legally registered in Australia if one spouse is domiciled in Australia.

Data published by the ABS since the 1990s are unique in their unusually precise delineation of Chinese people, by separately providing data for people born in ‘Hong Kong’ and people born in (mainland) ‘China’. The ABS data offers a record of women and men registering marriages, divorces and births in Australia based on country of birth, rather than ethnicity. This stands in marked contrast to the use of broad ethnic classifications such as ‘Asian’ and ‘Chinese’ in British, Canadian and North American statistics (Lofquist et al. 2012; Office for National Statistics 2014; Statistics Canada 2014).

It nevertheless remains the case that the categories ‘born in Australia’ and ‘born in the PRC’ are heterogeneous and comprise different groups of people. Given that nearly half of Australia’s resident population in 2016 were either born overseas or had at least one parent who was born overseas, the classification ‘born in Australia’ refers to people of diverse

ethnicity, who may or may not possess Australian citizenship (ABS 2017: Cultural Diversity). Similarly, the category ‘born in the PRC’ refers to people residing permanently or temporarily in Australia, including Australian citizens who may have been raised and educated in mainland China and/or Australia.

The conclusions we draw from the examination of these data are thus about broad trends in the characteristics of mainland Chinese-born women and men who have registered marriages, births and divorces in Australia, rather than about the detailed sociological characteristics of Australian-Chinese intimate relationships. The aggregated nature of the data also makes it difficult to draw specific conclusions about intimate relationships between ‘non-Chinese’ Australians and ethnic Chinese people.

Marriages

Data provided by the ABS regarding the country of birth of both parties to registered marriages permit a restricted examination of the nationality of the marriage partners of PRC-born women and men in Australia over the period 1994–2017 (ABS 1995–2018: Marriages and Divorces). (The discontinuation of data on the birthplace of marriage partners by country in 2019 prevents extension of the time series for these data at present). However, these data only indicate whether the marriage partner was born in Australia, the PRC or another (unspecified) country. The numbers of marriages for both men and women in all three groups have risen in absolute terms since the mid-1990s, consistent with an increased number of PRC-born residents in Australia. Although the proportions of each type have varied over time, it appears that the majority of marriages involving PRC-born people that are registered in Australia have been between two people born in mainland China.

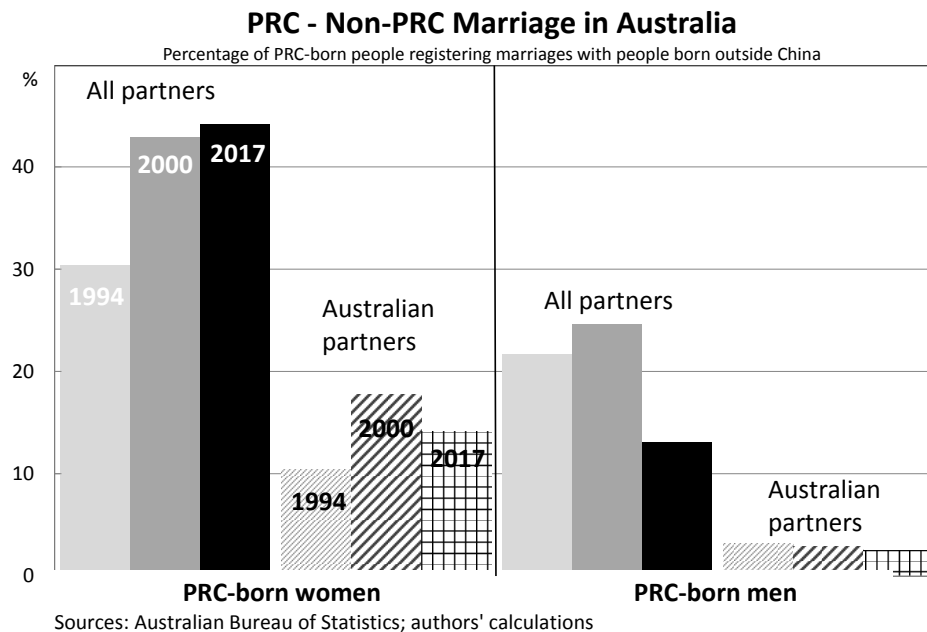
Of the 6,428 marriage registrations in Australia in 2017 that involved a spouse born in mainland China, 60 per cent were between two people born in mainland China, up from a low of 46 per cent in 2001 (ABS 2018: Marriages and Divorces). Around 87 per cent of the PRC-born men who married in Australia in 2017 had married women who were born in the PRC. This represents a modest increase from the early 1990s (78 per cent in 1994) (ABS 1995: Marriages and Divorces). Less than 3 per cent of PRC-born men had married women born in Australia in 2017, which suggests that media reports of Chinese men fraudulently marrying Australia women for immigration purposes either represent a very small minority or involve non-Australian-born females (Chen 2019; Crawford and Marcus 2011). By comparison, only 56 per cent of the PRC-born women who married in Australia in 2017 had married men who were born in the PRC, down from 70 per cent in 1994 (ABS 1995; 2018: Marriages and Divorces).

In other words, the majority of marriages in Australia between PRC nationals and non-PRC-born people are between PRC-born women and men born in countries other than mainland China. PRC-born men in Australia have historically shown a strong tendency to marry PRC-born women that has become stronger over time. In contrast, PRC-born women have consistently shown a greater tendency to marry non-PRC-born men.

The ABS data do not allow the ethnicity of the non-PRC-born marriage partners of PRC-born people to be assessed (the data refer to: (1) partners 'born in Australia'; (2) partners 'born in the same country'; and (3) partners 'born in different countries'). Thus, marriages between PRC nationals and non-PRC born men and women could include ethnically Chinese people born in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan or indeed other regions such as South-east Asia. Bearing

this caveat in mind, the share of PRC-born men marrying non-PRC-born women (of any nationality) declined overall between 1994 and 2017, while the share of PRC-born women marrying non-PRC men increased over the same period (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

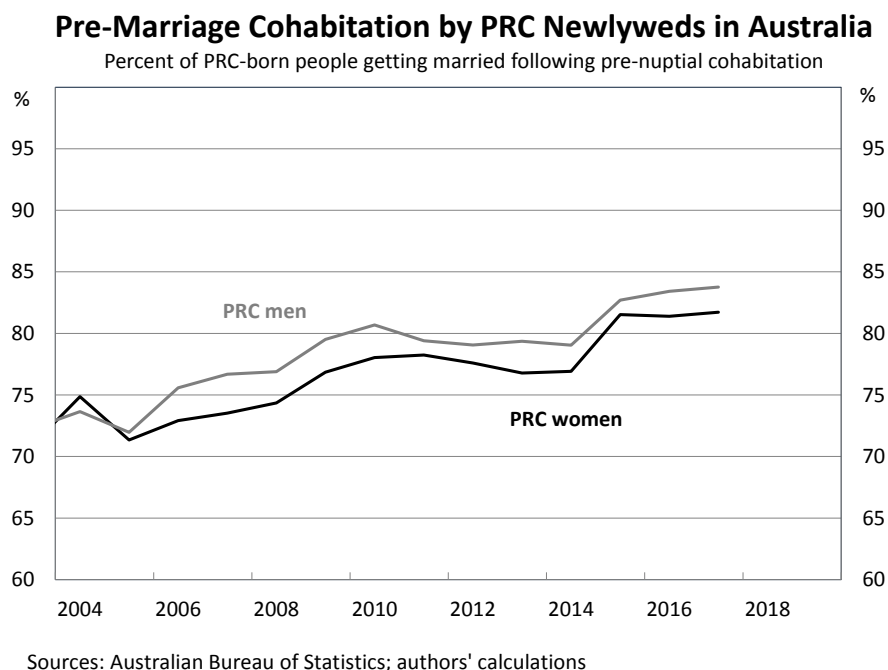


Looking more specifically at marriages between PRC nationals and *Australian*-born women and men in Australia, the absolute number has increased in step with increased migration but the proportion of overall registrations has fallen since the early 2000s, mainly due to a reduced tendency of PRC-born women to marry Australian-born men. The majority of marriages between PRC-born and Australian-born people are between PRC-born women and Australian-born men. In 2017, for example, 975 PRC-born women married Australian-born men while only 110 PRC-born men married Australian-born women (ABS 2018: Marriages and Divorces). However, the proportion of PRC-born men who married an Australian-born female in Australia has been low and stable, fluctuating around 2–3 per cent for much of the past two decades (ABS 1995–2018: Marriages and Divorces). In contrast, around 14 per cent

of the PRC-born women who married in Australia in 2017 had married an Australian-born male, down from as high as 18 per cent in the early 2000s.

The majority (around 80 per cent) of marriages in Australia involving PRC-born people represented the first marriage for the PRC citizen and in most cases the couple had cohabited prior to marriage. The cohabitation rates of PRC-born people getting married in Australia have tended to converge with the broader population over time. In 2005, around 72 per cent of PRC-born people registering a marriage had cohabited with their partner prior to marriage (compared with 76 per cent for all marriages). By 2017, 82–84 per cent of PRC-born people had previously cohabited (compared with 81 per cent for all marriages) (see Figure 3). As the majority of marriages in Australia involving mainland Chinese people represent the first marriage for the PRC-born person, it appears that cohabitation is typically a precursor to marriage.

Figure 3



The prevalence of marriages in Australia involving two PRC-born people raises the question of whether the characteristics of these marriages resemble, or differ from, those of marriages between couples in the PRC itself. Marriage is a nearly universal experience for young adults in mainland China, despite growing numbers of divorcees and people who self-identify as gay and lesbian. According to the 2010 Population Census of the PRC, only 1.9 per cent of men and women aged forty years and over had never married (Jeffreys and Yu 2015, 15), whereas the rate of marriage in Australia has been falling since the 1970s. In fact, the Australian crude marriage rate in 2017 was 4.6 marriages per 1,000 Australian residents, which is the lowest rate recorded to date (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2019b).

The ABS aggregate data allow us to estimate a crude marriage rate for the PRC-born resident population in Australia and compare it to an equivalent marriage rate for the PRC. The crude marriage rate is estimated as the ratio of the number of married people to the total resident population, which we calculate separately for males and females. For PRC-born couples in Australia, the crude marriage rate was 16 per 1,000 men and 18 per 1,000 women in 2017. This is more than twice the crude marriage rate in mainland China (7.2 per 1,000 people in 2018) and more than four times the crude marriage rate for couples married in Australia (4.6 in 2017).

The higher tendency of PRC-born couples to marry in Australia compared to the PRC is worth investigating further, but is likely to reflect a number of factors. These could include, for example, the potential for intra-cultural marriage to alleviate the effects of social isolation and alienation in an adopted community, greater access to like-minded young people from similar age cohorts (who have a similar interest in travel or study abroad), and the scope for a

formalised marital relationship to be administratively convenient by facilitating applications for permanent residency (see below).

Similarly, the high cohabitation rate of PRC-born people getting married in Australia (82–84 per cent) contrasts with the increased but low prevalence of cohabitation prior to first marriage in the PRC (8 per cent for males and 6 per cent for females) (Jia and Yu 2015: 615). While the reasons for this are not clear and also merit further investigation, it could reflect the relative absence of religious and familial pressures to avoid cohabitation, and the youthful nature of Chinese migrant cohorts. Around 95 per cent of marriages involving PRC-born people that are registered in Australia involve a civil rather than religious celebrant (ABS 1995–2018: Marriages and Divorces). While familial pressures and the absence of independent living arrangements often prevent premarital cohabitation in the PRC, such obstacles may be diminished for young professional Chinese migrants living in Australia.

The median age of PRC-born people registering a marriage in Australia is lower than the Australian median age at marriage but higher than that in the PRC. The median age of PRC-born people registering a marriage in Australia has fallen from 32–34 years in 2000 to around 29 years in 2017. In contrast, the median marrying age of couples registered in Australia rose over the decade to 2017 (from 29 to 32 years for men and 27 to 30 years for women). The falling marriage age of PRC-born people also contrasts with the rise in the average age of marriage documented in the PRC's 2010 census to 26.3 years for men and 24.9 years for women, from 25.3 years and 23.4 years respectively in 2000 (Shiji Jiayuan 2012).

The higher median age of PRC-born people registering a marriage in Australia compared to the PRC is likely to be connected both to higher levels of education and Australian

immigration requirements. PRC-born people who apply for Australian permanent residency as ‘invited skilled workers’ are advantaged in terms of meeting ‘point-based criteria’ when they are aged between 25–33 years of age; have Australian higher educational qualifications, professional work experience and high English-language proficiency; and a similarly qualified spouse (Department of Home Affairs 2019). These considerations underscore the importance of considering how country-specific immigration policies and changing opportunities for labour migration also shape family formation behaviour.

Births

Given that the bulk of marriages involving PRC-born people in Australia are to other PRC-born people, it is unsurprising that most children born as part of such marriages have two PRC-born parents. For a child born in Australia to a PRC-born father, it has become increasingly common for the child’s mother to be mainland Chinese (rising from around 80 per cent to more than 90 per cent in recent years). For a child born in Australia to a PRC-born mother, the likelihood that the child’s father also will be mainland Chinese has been relatively stable in the range of 70–80 per cent (ABS 1995–2018: Births). It is becoming more common for children with a mainland Chinese mother to have an Australian-born father (averaging 9.2 per cent in the 2010s compared with 5.8 per cent in the 1990s), although an unknown proportion of these Australians could be ethnic Chinese. Conversely, it is becoming increasingly uncommon for children with a mainland Chinese father to have an Australian-born mother (averaging 1.3 per cent in the 2010s compared with 2.4 per cent in the 1990s).

The median age of a PRC-born mother registering a child born in Australia has decreased from 33.1 years in 2000 to 32.0 years in 2017 (ABS 1995–2018: Births). This is slightly

higher than the 30.7 year median age of an Australian-born mother in 2017, and the PRC median age of 28–29 years for women living in urban areas and 25–26 years for women living in rural areas (Sun 2014). As the median marrying age of PRC-born women getting married in Australia is 29.1 years, it appears that marriage is soon followed by childbirth. Only 8.8 per cent of PRC-born women registered a child born outside of wedlock in Australia in 2017, down from a peak of 12.4 per cent in 2001 (ABS 1995–2018: Births). This is consistent with the documented low levels of non-marital childbearing in mainland China and in East Asia more generally (Raymo et al. 2015). By comparison, 41.2 per cent of Australian-born women had registered a child born outside of marriage in 2017.

Around 33 per cent of PRC-born women who registered divorces in Australia in 2017 had a child or children, compared to 38 per cent in 2001, which is lower than the Australian average. On average, more than 50 per cent of Australian-born women who register divorces in Australia have a child or children. A possible reason for this difference is the higher rate of early divorce for marriages registered in Australia that involve PRC-born people, as discussed below.

Divorces

A comparison of divorce rates in Australia and the PRC complicates scholarly and popular claims that rates of divorce are higher for cross-cultural relationships than for same-culture relationships, and (traditional) Chinese marriage values are likely to make marriages happier and at lower risk of divorce than Western marriages (Hiew et al. 2014, 88; Horin 2012).

Divorce is a relatively recent but commonplace phenomenon in the PRC. In 1979, there were only 319,000 divorced couples in China and the crude divorce rate was 0.3. The PRC's

divorce rate stayed below 1.0 throughout the 1990s but began to steadily rise after 2002. More than 4.4 million couples divorced in the PRC in 2018 and the divorce rate in 2017–2018 was 3.2 (www.ceicdata.com). This rate is higher than the Australian divorce rate of 2.0 in 2017 (as well as for most of the preceding decade), and is presumably related to the near-universality of marriage in the PRC compared to in Australia.

The PRC's divorce rate remained low between the 1960s and until the 2000s for structural and legal reasons (Jeffreys and Yu 2015: 18–26). During the Mao era (1949–1976), divorce was permitted in theory, but the dissolution of marriages that had occurred after the founding of the PRC was discouraged in practice. The introduction of a new Marriage Law in 1950, which abolished polygamy and arranged and mercenary marriages, was followed by a spate of divorces; and, by the late 1950s, it was assumed that all 'feudal' forms of marriage had been eradicated or dissolved and only 'good, socialist forms' remained. Divorces were subsequently mediated by Party organizations, with relevant procedures being geared towards reconciliation. Divorce was also complicated by the introduction of centralised economic planning, involving state-allocated work and housing, and restrictions on population mobility. This system dissuaded many couples from applying for a divorce because there was no practical way to exit an unhappy marriage. Prior to the economic reforms and opening of China's labour and property market, most potential divorcees would have been unable to move and access other work and accommodation; applying for a divorce also meant making one's 'private' circumstances known to other members of the 'geographically-fixed' local community. As sociologist Deborah Davies puts it: 'In the socialist era, people were really nailed to a place. You were stuck with the neighbors you had, as well as the spouse you had' (cited in Jeffreys and Yu 2015: 21).

Although revisions to the PRC's Marriage Law in 1980 introduced a 'breakdown in mutual affections' as grounds for divorce, applicants still needed a supporting letter from their government-allocated work unit or an equivalent authority until the 2000s (Jeffreys and Yu 2015: 22–26). The PRC's divorce rate started to soar after this condition was removed in 2003, aided by increased job mobility and access to private housing, among other factors. Similarly, the Australian divorce rate peaked at 4.5 in 1976 following the introduction of the 1975 *Family Law Act*, which allowed no-fault divorce (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2019a).

Given that the bulk of marriages registered in Australia that involve PRC-born people are to other PRC-born people, it is unsurprising that most of the divorces registered in Australia that involve PRC-born people are between PRC-born men and PRC-born women (ABS 1995–2018: Marriages and Divorces). The crude divorce rate in 2017 for PRC born couples residing in Australia was 6.3 per 1,000 women and 6.2 per 1,000 men, double the rate in the PRC itself, commensurate with the higher crude marriage rate for PRC-born couples in Australia. While PRC-born women make sole applications for divorce more frequently than PRC-born men, most divorces involving a PRC-born applicant are joint applications. In 2017, 88 per cent of divorces registered in Australia that involved PRC-born men represented the dissolution of a marriage with a PRC-born woman, up from a little more than 80 per cent in the early 2000s. For divorces involving PRC-born women, the reverse is true, consistent with these women marrying non-PRC-born men to a greater extent. In 2017, the share of such divorces involving a PRC-born man was 69 per cent, down from a peak of 77 per cent in 2000.

The ABS figures for divorces involving PRC-born and Australian-born marriage partners are generally in line with the marriage statistics. Between 2000 and 2015, Australian–PRC divorces have been growing at roughly the same rate as Australian–PRC marriages on an annual basis. (Data for 2016–2017 is not analysed owing to peculiarities in the ABS figures reported for that period). Divorces between PRC-born women and Australian-born men have grown faster than divorces between PRC-born men and Australian-born women, but the latter represent a minority of PRC–Australian marriages. Around 15 per cent of the PRC-born women who divorced in Australia in 2015 had divorced an Australian-born male, whereas less than 5 per cent of the PRC-born men who divorced in Australia had divorced an Australian-born female.

The share of divorces involving PRC-born women in which the husband is born in Australia has risen sharply over the past fifteen years, from as low as 7 per cent in 2000 to 15 per cent in 2015. The share of divorces involving PRC-born men in which the wife is born in Australia trended lower for much of the past two decades but since 2010 has also risen a little (from 1.5 per cent to nearly 5 per cent).

Couples involving at least one PRC-born person have tended to stay together for shorter times than was apparent in the early 2000s. The average time to separation and divorce are correlated for both males and females, which is unsurprising as most separations would result in divorce. The average time to separation fell from its peak of 4.7–5.3 years in the early 2000s to 3.8 years in 2017 while the average time to divorce fell from 7.0–7.6 years to 6.1 years.

Compared to couples involving at least one Australian-born person, couples involving PRC-born people have tended to separate and divorce sooner after marriage. Couples with at least one Australian-born person stay together for an average of 9 years after marriage, compared to less than 4 years for couples involving two PRC-born people. The average time to divorce for couples involving Australians is similarly higher at around 13 years. While the time to separation and divorce has been falling over time for couples involving Chinese partners, it has gradually risen for couples with Australians on average since the early 2000s. Thus marriages registered in Australia that solely involve PRC-born couples tend not to be the most enduring, despite suggestions that cultural compatibility and ‘Chinese’ marriage values make such marriages at low risk of divorce (Hiew et al. 2014: 88).

Concluding remarks

This paper analyses unique data collected by the ABS to shed light on Australia-PRC intimate relationships. Our key finding is that the majority of marriages registered in Australia that involve PRC-born people are intra-cultural rather than inter-cultural in nature. That is, most of these marriages are between two people born in mainland China, and hence children born in such marriages usually have two PRC-born parents. This finding confirms a general principle of classic assimilation theory, namely, that new migrant groups are unlikely to enter into inter-cultural marriages with members of migrant receiving communities, unless a small migrant population restricts the potential for intra-ethnic marriage. The fact that most of these marriages are intra-cultural in nature suggests that focus of recent scholarly research on (hypergamous) marriage between PRC-born female and non-Chinese male partners may be too narrow and misses the bigger picture, at least in the Australian context.

However, another key finding is that the marriage and divorce behaviour of PRC-born couples in Australia diverges substantially from the behaviour of their counterparts in mainland China. The estimated crude marriage and divorce rates for PRC-born couples in Australia are roughly double those of couples in the PRC. Similarly, unlike in China, where the rate of cohabitation prior to marriage is extremely low, more than 80 per cent of PRC-born people registering marriages in Australia do so following a period of cohabitation. This rate is comparable to but slightly higher than that recorded for the broader Australian population. Compared to couples involving at least one Australian-born person, couples involving two PRC-born people have also tended to separate and divorce sooner after marriage, indicating that a shared country-of-origin does not ensure marital stability for PRC migrants. These variations suggest that intra-ethnic marriages between new migrant groups do not necessarily replicate and reinforce the values and behaviours associated with their 'homeland'. It is necessary to consider how country-specific immigration policies and opportunities for professional labour migration can alter and shape family formation behaviour.

Although these findings provide a high-level overview of the state of play for Australia-PRC intimate relations, an obvious limitation is the inability to dig beneath the surface of aggregate statistics to reveal how international migration and national identity are experienced, and hence what the concepts of intra- and inter-cultural marriage mean from the perspectives of the diverse individuals, families and communities that may be involved. Such analysis is complicated by the fluidity of cultural identity in contemporary societies with sophisticated transportation and communication technologies. Unlike the experience of early generations of Chinese migrants in Australia, for example, socio-economic changes in the PRC combined with modern transportation and communication technologies make it possible

for PRC-born people to live in Australia and be Australian citizens, while engaging in regular economic, political and social activities with people at ‘home’. To obtain a more complete picture of Australia-PRC intimate relationships, the broad findings of this paper would benefit from being supplemented by qualitative interview-based information about how different generations of marriages and divorces registered in Australia involving at least one PRC-born person have been and are being negotiated, and what kinds of transnational economic, political and social fields are connected to, and being created or attenuated by, such relationships. This represents a fruitful line of enquiry for future research.

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