

The Rise of Chinese-Foreign Marriage in Mainland China (1979–2010)

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This paper examines the growth of Chinese-foreign marriage (涉外婚姻) in mainland China since 1979, and the evolution of legal frameworks governing such marriages. From the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 until the early 1990s, Chinese-foreign marriage was an unusual occurrence in mainland China. Political differences between communist China and ‘the rest of the world’ severely limited the opportunities for such unions to develop in the first place. Restrictions on the capacity of foreign nationals to enter and reside in the PRC, and on the ability of Chinese citizens to obtain passports and travel overseas, further limited the opportunities for such marriages.¹ In fact, government statistics on the number of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China only became available in 1979, that is, after the PRC shifted away from a centralized 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. Data made available by the PRC’s Ministry of Civil Affairs indicate that less than 8,500 couples registered a Chinese-foreign marriage in mainland China in 1979.² That figure climbed to a peak of nearly 79,000 couples in 2001 and decreased to just over 49,000 couples in 2010.³

The PRC’s marriage registration regulations divide Chinese-foreign marriages into three different categories.⁴ The first involves a union between PRC citizens (中国公民) residing in mainland China (内地居民) and ‘Overseas Chinese’ (华侨), that is, PRC citizens who reside in another country. The second involves a marriage between citizens of mainland China and citizens of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan – territories that the PRC Government claims as part of a unified or ‘greater’ China, but have separate legal

jurisdictions. The third category involves a marriage between citizens of mainland China and foreign nationals (外国人, literally ‘people from another country’), which may include former PRC citizens who have acquired foreign citizenship (外籍华人). Data from the PRC’s Ministry of Civil Affairs indicate that the most common type of Chinese-foreign marriage registered in mainland China until the late 2000s was between a mainland Chinese woman and a man from Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan.⁵ However, since 2008, marriages between mainland Chinese women and men from other parts of the world have become the most popular type of Chinese-foreign marriage.⁶

Although the PRC’s Ministry of Civil Affairs provides data on the number and types of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China between 1979 and 2010, the data is insufficient for the purposes of evaluating the demographic and social issues associated with ‘cross-border’ or international Chinese-foreign marriages registered on the mainland. The data includes information about the number of marriages involving a non-PRC national that were registered in mainland China in a given year. It also includes information about the sex and place of residency of PRC nationals registering a Chinese-foreign marriage in mainland China. However, unlike in other parts of East Asia, including Hong Kong and Taiwan,⁷ the Ministry of Civil Affairs does not release data about the age, educational background and occupation of people registering a Chinese-foreign marriage in mainland China, and it only provides information about the previous marital status of brides and grooms registering a Chinese-foreign marriage in mainland China for the years between 1987 and 1998.⁸ In addition, at the moment the Ministry of Civil Affairs provides no information about the place of origin of foreign marrying partners, other than spouses from Taiwan and the PRC’s Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macau.⁹ This situation may change as the PRC’s Ministry of Civil Affairs introduced a national network of marriage registration information in July 2012, and has announced plans to establish an online database of more detailed marriage records in the near future.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the following discussion is restricted to synthesizing the existing data and making some provisional observations.

We examine the emergence of Chinese-foreign marriage in reform-era China in three stages. First, we map the architecture of the PRC’s Marriage Laws and reform-era regulations on marriage registration, showing how Chinese-foreign marriages have been categorized as different types of ‘cross-border’ and international marriages. Second, and on the basis of these classifications, we provide a statistical breakdown of the number,

type and gendered composition of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China between 1979 and 2010. We conclude by highlighting the gendered and spatial dimensions of mainland Chinese-foreign marriages, and pointing to their largely ‘intra-cultural’ as opposed to international bases. In doing so, we contribute to scholarship on the recent evolution of intra-Asian marriage migration, which examines changing marriage trends in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, but not in mainland China.¹¹

Regulating Chinese-foreign marriage

In the PRC, as elsewhere, legal frameworks define who can enter into and exit a marriage. These frameworks reflect and entrench heteronormative sexual mores – marrying partners should be single, adult members of the opposite sex. They also reflect and entrench state-based definitions of nationality and citizenship. These definitions are embedded in the PRC’s marriage regulations, which introduced an international dimension to Chinese family law in 1986 by including the category of Chinese-foreign marriage for the first time, and dividing such marriages into different types of ‘cross-border’ and international marriages. Hence, prior to examining the data on Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China, we first discuss the evolution of the PRC’s Marriage Law and related regulations.

Marriage and family relations in mainland China are governed by the Marriage Law of the PRC (中华人民共和国婚姻法), first promulgated in 1950, and revised in 1980 and 2001. The 1950 Marriage Law abolished polygamy, and arranged and mercenary marriages, and established a new marriage and family system based on the free choice of (heterosexual) partners, monogamy and equality between the sexes.¹² A revised version of that Law was approved in 1980, which contained several amendments designed to promote the one-child family policy of 1979.¹³ The 1980 Marriage Law raised the legal age of marriage from 18 to 20 years for women and from 20 to 22 years for men (Article 5), and it enjoined couples to practice ‘family planning’ (Article 12). It also stipulated for the first time that the People’s Courts would grant a divorce in cases where couples had experienced a ‘break down in mutual affections’ and attempts at mediation had failed (Article 25).

The 2001 Marriage Law clarifies the conditions for obtaining a divorce.¹⁴ Article 3 prohibits domestic violence, bigamy and the cohabitation of a married person with any third party. Article 32 states that an individual may file a suit for divorce with the People's Courts and that a divorce shall be granted in cases involving the alienation of mutual affection. Subsequent changes to the PRC's marriage regulations in 2003 have facilitated easier divorce proceedings and led to soaring divorce rates. We discuss these issues in the next section on marital trends.

The Marriage Law is supplemented by a national marriage registration system – a marriage is legal in the PRC only when it is registered with an appropriate department of civil affairs. This system has been revised numerous times since the 1980s to accommodate changing social institutions and behaviours. In November 1980, new Marriage Registration Procedures came into effect, replacing procedures that had been in place since 1955.¹⁵ These procedures referred to marriages between mainland Chinese citizens only, reflecting the uncommon nature of Chinese-foreign marriage in mainland China at that time.

In March 1986, the 1980 Marriage Registration Procedures were superseded by revised procedures, which included the category of Chinese-foreign marriage for the first time.¹⁶ Article 14 of the 1986 Marriage Registration Procedures stipulated that marriages between citizens of mainland China and Overseas Chinese, or between citizens of mainland China and their 'compatriots' (同胞) from Hong Kong and Macau, should be administered according to the Rules on Marriage Registration between Chinese Citizens and Overseas Chinese, and Hong Kong and Macau Compatriots (the March 1983 Rules hereafter).¹⁷ It further stipulated that marriages between citizens of mainland China and foreign nationals (外国人) should be managed according to the Rules on Marriage Registration between Chinese Citizens and Foreigners (the August 1983 Rules hereafter).¹⁸ We discuss both of these Rules in detail below with reference to the PRC's laws on nationality.

The 1986 procedures were replaced in 1994 by the Marriage Registration Management Regulations – the first of the PRC's marriage regulations to mention marriages between citizens of the PRC and Taiwan.¹⁹ Article 2 stipulated that marriages between citizens of mainland China and foreigners, or Overseas Chinese, or 'residents' from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan (香港,澳门,台湾地区的居民), should be managed according to the

relevant procedures, namely, the March 1983 and August 1983 Rules. The first document outlining the specific procedures relating to marriages between PRC and Taiwan citizens was the 1988 Notice on Issues Relating to Marriage Registration between Taiwan Compatriots and Mainland Citizens (the 1988 Notice hereafter),²⁰ which was replaced in 1998 by the Interim Measures for Managing the Registration of Marriages between Mainland Residents and Taiwan Residents (the 1998 Measures hereafter).²¹

All of these different marriage registration procedures require parties applying for marriage registration to appear in person before the marriage registration authorities in order to verify their identity, and confirm that they are single and entering into a marriage of their own free will. Prior to 1994, PRC applicants had to produce two types of documentation: a certificate of household registration or a resident identity card (身份证); and a certificate issued by their work unit, indicating the applicant's name, sex, date of birth, marital status, and other identity-related details. Between 1994 and 2003, PRC citizens had to produce four types of documentation: a certificate of household registration; a resident identity card; a certificate issued by the applicant's work unit or local neighbourhood committee verifying their marital status; and a pre-marital health check-up report issued by a hospital designated by the marriage registration department.²² In the context of the one-child family policy, mandatory pre-marital health check-ups aimed to protect the health of the marrying parties and their future children, by ensuring that potential spouses were of good mental and reproductive health, and free of hereditary, major and communicable diseases. Such testing became voluntary in 2002 following domestic and international criticisms of the eugenicist impetus of compulsory testing, which strongly discouraged the marriage and procreation of people with mental and physical health issues.²³

Chinese-foreign marriage registrations were and are still subject to somewhat different procedures because the identity of the foreign marrying party is verified based on proof of nationality/permanent residency. The 1980 Nationality Law of the PRC stipulates that 'any person born in China whose parents are both Chinese nationals or one of whose parents is a Chinese national shall have Chinese nationality', and 'any person born abroad whose parents are both Chinese nationals or one of whose parents is a Chinese national shall have Chinese nationality' (Articles 4 and 5).²⁴ It further states that the PRC does not recognize dual nationality for any Chinese national, which means that PRC citizens who

acquire foreign nationality are defined as ‘Chinese with foreign nationalities (外籍华人)’ or a ‘foreign national’ (Articles 3, 5 and 9).

In the 1980s and 1990s, heightened claims by the PRC to sovereignty over Hong Kong and Macau meant that concepts of Chinese nationality were extended to include people from Hong Kong and Macau who were defined as Chinese ‘compatriots’ who lived in greater or not-mainland China. This understanding first appears in the March 1983 and August 1983 Rules and was later given formal expression in the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the PRC, and the Basic Law of the Macau Special Administrative Region of the PRC.²⁵ The ‘Basic Laws’ define people from Hong Kong and Macau of Chinese descent who were born on Chinese territory, including Hong Kong and Macau, as Chinese nationals (中国公民), irrespective of the particular passports they may hold. The Basic Law for Hong Kong was adopted in 1990 and came into effect when Hong Kong returned to PRC sovereignty in July 1997, and the Basic Law for Macau was adopted in 1993 and came into effect when Macau returned to PRC sovereignty in December 1999.

The March 1983 and August 1983 Rules divide foreign applicants for marriage registration into three different categories: Overseas Chinese, Hong Kong and Macau compatriots, and foreigners per se. According to Article 2 of the March 1983 Rules, applicants categorized as Overseas Chinese had to produce four types of documentation: a valid passport; evidence of their single status issued by a notary office and confirmed by the Chinese embassy or consulate in the country of residence; a work certificate or proof of a reliable source of income issued in the country of residence; and a pre-marital health check-up report issued by a designated hospital in the PRC.²⁶ People categorized as Hong Kong and Macau compatriots had to produce similar documentation, except they had to produce a Hong Kong or Macau identity card rather than an overseas passport. A document titled ‘Reply from the Ministry of Civil Affairs to [the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau] on Issues Related to Foreign Applicants for Marriage Registration’ in 1983 suggests that the ‘work certificate/proof of reliable income’ requirement for Overseas Chinese, and Hong Kong and Macau compatriots, aimed to protect mainland Chinese citizens (read women) from deception (受欺骗). In other words, it aimed to ensure that such spouses were capable of supporting PRC citizens financially once they relocated to regions other than mainland China.²⁷

Marriage registration applicants categorized as foreigners – people with foreign nationality/passports, including Chinese people with foreign citizenship – had to produce four types of certification according to the August 1983 Rules. First, they had to produce a passport or another appropriate document proving their identity and citizenship. Second, they had to produce a Residence Permit for Foreigners (外国人居留证), issued by a public security department, an identification certificate issued by a foreign affairs department, or an entry permit and residence permit for foreign nationals staying in China on a short-term basis. Third, they had to produce a certificate confirming their single status issued by a notary office in their country of origin and confirmed by the Chinese embassy or consulate in that country, or by their embassy or consulate in China. In cases where the foreign marrying partner had become a permanent resident of China, they had to obtain appropriate certification as per PRC citizens from government departments and work units. Finally, all foreign marrying partners had to present a pre-marital health check-up report issued in the PRC (Article 3).²⁸ Unlike Overseas Chinese, and Hong Kong and Macau compatriots, marriage registration applicants categorized as foreigners did not have to demonstrate a reliable source of income, perhaps because visa and permanent residency requirements for foreigners entering into China at that time required proof of income and work.

Additional regulations were introduced in 1988 to clarify for local government departments the procedures for registering marriages between PRC citizens and people defined as ‘Taiwan compatriots’ (台湾同胞).²⁹ The number of such marriages began to increase slowly following the abandonment of Martial Law in Taiwan in October 1987, and the lifting of the blanket ban on travel between Taiwan and the PRC that had been in place since 1949, when the Chinese Nationalist Party and its army retreated from the communist forces in mainland China and set up government in Taiwan.³⁰ In 1990, the PRC’s Ministry of Civil Affairs began listing the number of marriages registered in mainland China between citizens of the PRC and Taiwan, with 518 marriages being registered that year.³¹ The use of the term ‘compatriot’ to describe the Taiwanese spouse affirms the PRC’s historical claim to be the legitimate ruler of ‘China’ understood as a single political entity that encompasses mainland China and the island of Taiwan.

The 1988 Notice divides Taiwan compatriots into different categories and outlines different marriage registration procedures for each type.³² Article 1 stipulates that Taiwan compatriots with permanent resident status in the PRC should be handled according to the

1986 Marriage Registration Procedures, but must also provide a certificate issued in Taiwan verifying their single status before they became permanent residents of mainland China. Article 2 states that Taiwan compatriots visiting mainland China temporarily for the purposes of seeing family, or for travel and business purposes, should be ‘dissuaded politely’ (婉言劝阻) from registering a marriage. However, if such persuasion failed, they had to produce five documents: a valid travel certificate of Taiwan Compatriots or a travel certificate to the PRC with the term ‘Taiwan compatriots’, or a PRC passport; a temporary resident permit for the PRC issued by the public security department; a personal identity card from Taiwan; a certificate verifying their single status, and a pre-marital health check-up report issued in the PRC. Article 4 stipulates that Taiwan compatriots with foreign nationalities should be handled according to the August 1983 Rules; and Article 5 states that Taiwan compatriots with permanent resident status in Hong Kong, Macau, or an overseas country, should be handled according to the March 1983 Rules.

The 1988 Notice was replaced in 1998 by the Interim Measures for Managing the Registration of Marriages between Mainland Residents and Taiwan Residents, replacing the term ‘Taiwan compatriot’ with the expression ‘Taiwan resident’, defined as ‘Chinese citizens residing in the Chinese region of Taiwan’ (居住在中国台湾地区的中国公民) (Article 2).³³ The 1998 Measures also omit references to discouraging marriage between Taiwan-based compatriots and mainland Chinese. Instead, they outline the procedures required to register a marriage between (Chinese) ‘residents’ of mainland China and Taiwan, describing them as a legal framework designed to protect the rights and interests of couples in such marriages (Article 1). Taiwan residents with permanent resident status in the PRC applying to register a marriage with a citizen of mainland China had to provide documents similar to those outlined in the 1994 Marriage Registration Management Regulations and undergo a pre-marital health check. For the purpose of verifying their identity and marital status, they had to provide a Taiwan resident identity card, a valid exit-entry permit, and a certificate verifying their single status issued by a notary office in Taiwan, and a certified copy, valid for three months, of their permanent residence book (Article 16). Other Taiwan residents applying to register a marriage with a PRC citizen had to produce the following four forms of documentation: a Mainland Travel Permit for Taiwan Residents or another valid travel pass; a Taiwan resident identity card and a valid exit-entry permit; a certificate verifying their single status issued by a notary office in Taiwan and a certified copy, valid for three months, of their

permanent residence book; and a pre-marital health check-up report issued in the PRC (Article 4).

In 2003, the 1994 Marriage Registration Management Regulations and all supplementary regulations governing the procedures for registering a Chinese-foreign marriage in the PRC were replaced by the current Marriage Registration Regulations.³⁴ The 2003 regulations simplify the procedures for registering a domestic marriage by removing the requirements for marital status certificates issued by work units and abolishing mandatory pre-marital health check-ups. Domestic applicants for marriage registration now have to produce a certificate of household registration, a resident identity card, and a signed declaration stating that they are single and not a close blood relative of their intended spouse (Article 5). Marriages between two people of direct lineal descent or collateral consanguinity within three generations is viewed from a medical standpoint as increasing the possibility of congenital disorders in children.

The 2003 regulations simplify the registration procedures for applicants from all three categories of Chinese-foreign marriages. Applicants are no longer required to undertake a pre-marital health check-up; applicants categorized as Overseas Chinese and residents of Hong Kong and Macau no longer have to demonstrate a reliable source of income; and applicants from Taiwan are no longer required to present a certified copy of their permanent residence book from Taiwan. Applicants from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan now need to provide a valid entry-exit permit for the PRC, a resident identity card, and a declaration issued by a notary public office in their place of domicile indicating that they are single and not a close blood relative of their intended spouse (Article 5).³⁵ Overseas Chinese applicants need to provide a valid passport, and documentation proving that they are eligible to marry and are not a close blood relative of their intended spouse, issued by a notary office in their country of residence and certified by the consulate of the PRC in that country. Foreign nationals need to provide a valid passport and documentation verifying their single status, issued by a notary office and certified by the consulate of the PRC in their country of residence.

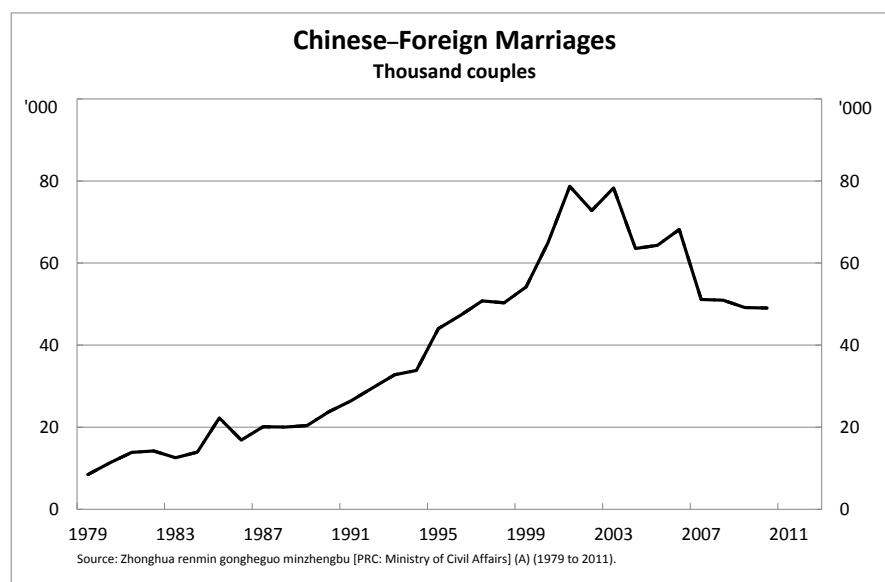
Along with rapid economic development, the relaxing of entry and exit requirements for the PRC, and the introduction of more accommodating legal frameworks, Chinese-foreign marriage has become a publicly visible if still far from common feature of life in mainland China. Wen-Shan Yang and Melody Chia-Wen Lu explore the recent evolution

of intra-Asian marriage migration in an edited volume called *Asian Cross-Border Marriage Migration: Demographic Patterns and Social Issues*.³⁶ Various contributors to that text note that mainland China has become the main country of origin for cross-border marriages registered in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and the Republic of Korea.³⁷ However, the text does not contain a discussion of trends relating to cross-border and international marriage in mainland China. The next section therefore contributes to the existing literature by outlining the number, type and gendered composition of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China between 1979 and 2010.

Chinese-foreign marriage trends

Statistics provided by the PRC's Ministry of Civil Affairs indicate that the number of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China rose dramatically throughout the 1990s and early 2000s and has since declined. Figure 1 below shows that less than 8,500 couples registered a Chinese-foreign marriage in mainland China in 1979; that figure reached a peak of over 78,500 couples in 2001 and decreased to around 49,000 couples in 2010.³⁸

Figure 1



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 domestic marriage in mainland China and over 8 million couples registered a marriage in 2001.³⁹

Chinese-foreign marriages therefore accounted for only 0.1 per cent of the total number of registered marriages in mainland China in 1979 and only one per cent in 2001, when the registered numbers of Chinese-foreign marriages reached a peak. Chinese-foreign marriages are thus a far from common occurrence in the PRC, and the majority of these marriages are ‘cross-border’ rather than international, as figures for the different types of Chinese-foreign marriages that are registered in the PRC show.

Figure 2 below offers details of the types of ‘foreign’ parties involved in Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China between 1979 and 2010. The majority of such marriages until recently were between citizens of mainland China and citizens of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, i.e., territories that have separate legal jurisdictions from mainland China, but are associated politically and/or culturally with notions of ‘Chineseness’ and a unified ‘One China’. Nearly 8,000 people from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan married mainland Chinese citizens in 1979.⁴⁰ That figure peaked at slightly more than 48,000 people in 2003.⁴¹ However, the number of such marriages has been declining on average since 2003, with less than 18,000 people from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan marrying mainland Chinese citizens in 2010.⁴² In short, the type of marriage that accounts for the largest number of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China since 1979 has become less popular.

A breakdown of the figures made available by the PRC’s Ministry of Civil Affairs indicates that marriages registered in mainland China that involve citizens of Taiwan have increased relative to the number of marriages that involve citizens of Hong Kong. Between 1979 and 1989, citizens of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan were counted as one category of spouses registering Chinese-foreign marriages in mainland China, with nearly 109,500 such marriages being registered in total.⁴³ Between 1990 and 1998, citizens of Taiwan were treated as a separate category, with over 151,000 marriages being registered that involved a citizen of Hong Kong or Macau, and over 54,000 that involved a citizen of Taiwan.⁴⁴ Since 1999, citizens of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan have been treated as three different groups of spouses registering Chinese-foreign marriages in mainland China. Between 1999 and 2010, there were over 264,000 Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China that involved a citizen of Taiwan, around 133,000 that involved a citizen of Hong Kong, and less than 17,000 that involved a citizen of Macau.⁴⁵ However, data on the number of marriages registered in mainland China and

Taiwan that involve a Taiwanese and PRC citizen indicate that the number of such marriages peaked in 2003 and have since declined.⁴⁶

Marriages between PRC citizens and ‘*waiguoren*’ – referring to people from countries outside of mainland China that are classified as neither Overseas Chinese nor as residents of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan – comprise the second largest category of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China between 1979 and 2010. Around 300 foreign nationals entered into this type of Chinese-foreign marriage in 1979.⁴⁷ That figure rose to reach a peak of over 26,000 people in 2001 and declined to nearly 23,000 people in 2010.⁴⁸ The number of marriages registered in the PRC between mainland Chinese and people categorized as foreign nationals has thus grown significantly since 1979 and remained relatively stable since the early 2000s.

There is no reliable statistical information available regarding the countries of origin of marriages registered in mainland China between PRC citizens and ‘*waiguoren*’. However, scholars suggest that, during the early reform period, such marriages were often between mainland Chinese and people from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, i.e., countries that once claimed a political affiliation as communist with the PRC. As China has integrated further into the global economy, marriages now occur between PRC citizens and people from around the globe.⁴⁹ Media reports indicate that foreign spouses of PRC citizens in the twenty-first century, whether ethnically Chinese or not, come from diverse regions including Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Holland, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, Spain, Korea, the UK, the USA, and countries in the African continent, such as Ethiopia and Tanzania.⁵⁰

Marriages between mainland Chinese citizens and Overseas Chinese account for the smallest number of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in the PRC between 1979 and 2010. In 1979, less than 200 Overseas Chinese registered such a marriage in mainland China.⁵¹ That figure increased to a high of more than 7,500 people in 2005 and declined to a figure of just over 6,000 people in 2010.⁵² The number of such marriages has therefore remained fairly constant since the early 2000s.

Figure 2



The majority of Chinese citizens registered as entering into Chinese-foreign marriages in mainland China are women, both historically and in the present day. Table 1 below indicates that over 8,000 female citizens of mainland China registered a marriage with a foreign spouse in mainland China in 1979. That figure rose steadily throughout the 1980s and 1990s and reached a peak of nearly 68,000 women in 2001. Since then, the number of mainland Chinese women registering a marriage with a foreign groom in mainland China has declined steadily to reach a figure of slightly less than 40,000 women in 2010, which is lower than in the mid-1990s.

The number of men from mainland China registering a marriage with a foreign spouse in mainland China has remained consistently low when compared to the number of women. In 1979, less than 250 men from mainland China registered a marriage with a foreign spouse in mainland China. That figure rose in a variable fashion throughout the 1980s and 1990s, reaching a peak of around 20,000 men in 2005. Since then, the proportion of men from mainland China registering a marriage with a foreign bride in mainland China has remained at a relatively consistent albeit low level, with less than 12,000 men registering such a marriage in 2010.

Table 1: Gender Composition of Chinese-Foreign Marriages Registered in Mainland China (1979–2010)

Year	Total number of Chinese-foreign marriages (couples)	Citizens of Mainland China				
		Total (persons)	Male		Female	
			<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
1979	8,460	8,415	247	3.0	8,168	97.0
1980	11,317	11,287	295	2.6	10,992	97.4
1981	13,866	13,834	581	4.2	13,253	95.8
1982	14,193	14,166	613	4.3	13,553	95.7
1983	12,540	12,527	713	5.7	11,814	94.3
1984	13,921	13,895	776	5.6	13,119	94.4
1985	22,249	—	—	—	—	—
1986	16,851	16,820	1,219	7.2	15,601	92.8
1987	20,084	20,049	1,441	7.2	18,608	92.8
1988	20,021	19,980	1,885	9.4	18,095	90.6
1989	20,389	20,363	1,581	7.8	18,782	92.2
1990	23,762	23,700	2,030	8.6	21,670	91.4
1991	26,382	26,342	2,438	9.3	23,904	90.7
1992	29,589	29,497	3,518	11.9	25,979	88.1
1993	32,769	32,568	3,331	10.2	29,237	89.8
1994	33,829	33,760	2,660	7.9	31,100	92.1
1995	44,028	43,976	3,059	7.0	40,917	93.0
1996	47,227	47,104	4,138	8.8	42,966	91.2
1997	50,773	49,533	5,503	11.1	44,030	88.9
1998	50,320	50,373	4,431	8.8	45,942	91.2
1999	54,163	54,076	5,862	10.8	48,214	89.2
2000	64,881	64,569	9,038	14.0	55,531	86.0
2001	78,672	78,328	10,489	13.4	67,839	86.6
2002	72,778	70,730	8,529	12.1	62,201	87.9
2003	78,285	76,745	13,485	17.6	63,260	82.4
2004	63,544	61,973	7,972	13.0	54,001	87.0
2005	64,305	63,225	20,011	31.7	43,214	68.3
2006	68,183	66,881	16,158	24.2	50,723	75.8
2007	51,130	49,730	7,113	14.3	42,617	85.7
2008	50,955	49,815	7,701	15.5	42,114	84.5
2009	49,151	48,552	8,134	16.8	40,418	83.2
2010	49,036	51,573	11,682	22.7	39,891	77.3

Sources: Zhonghua renmin gongheguo minzhengbu (PRC: Ministry of Civil Affairs) (1979 to 2011); Zhonghua qingguo funü yanjiusuo (1991).

Statistics provided by the PRC's Ministry of Civil Affairs indicate that the number of Chinese-foreign divorces registered in mainland China also increased significantly in the 2000s. This increase correlates with revisions to the PRC's marriage laws and regulations, which clarified the meaning of the alienation of mutual affection as a ground for divorce in 2001, and removed the need for supporting letters for divorce applications from work units in 2003 (Article 32).⁵³ Although the PRC's first Marriage Law of 1950 theoretically granted Chinese citizens the right to terminate an unhappy marriage, divorce for personal and private reasons was discouraged in practice until the 1990s. Only 319,000 couples registered a divorce in mainland China in 1979.⁵⁴

Divorce has become a commonplace rather than an unusual occurrence in China, along with rapid social change and the introduction of more accommodating legal frameworks. In 1980, a revised version of the Marriage Law specified a ‘breakdown in mutual affections’ (感情确已破裂) as appropriate grounds for divorce for the first time (Article 25).⁵⁵ When the Supreme People’s Court provided the courts with guidelines on how to assess such a breakdown in November 1989, divorce rates started to rise. The revised marriage regulations of 1994 supported easier divorce in theory by stating that the marriage registration department would process divorce applications which met the criteria for divorce within one month (Article 16).⁵⁶ However, PRC citizens could only meet the criteria by providing a supporting letter from their work unit or an equivalent authority (Article 14), which was extremely difficult to obtain in practice because of an emphasis on the mediation rather than the dissolution of troubled marriages.⁵⁷ The removal of these obstacles in 2003 has led to soaring divorce rates: just over 1 million couples divorced in mainland China in 1995, whereas more than 2.6 million couples divorced in 2010.⁵⁸

As Figure 3 below shows, the number of divorces registered between mainland Chinese citizens and foreign nationals rose from around 80 couples in 1979 to over 1,000 couples in 2000. That figure increased to over 3,000 couples in 2003, before skyrocketing to nearly 9,500 couples in 2008. It then decreased to around 5,700 couples in 2010.

Figure 3



This decline is consistent with the fall in the number of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China starting in the early 2000s. The PRC's Ministry of Civil Affairs began to disaggregate Chinese-foreign divorce statistics in 2005, by including separate figures for those involving '*waiguoren*'. Unsurprisingly, given the higher proportion of other categories of Chinese-foreign marriage until recently, most divorces relate to the 'Chinese' categories of Chinese-foreign marriage.⁵⁹

The gendered geographies of Chinese-foreign marriages

Data from the PRC's Ministry of Civil Affairs indicate that Chinese-foreign marriages have gendered and spatial dimensions – the mainland Chinese marrying partners are usually women, and the majority of Chinese-foreign marriages were registered in major cities and provinces with an early history of economic development on China's eastern seaboard. The areas with the largest number of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China between 1979 and 2010 were the provinces of Guangdong (nearly 370,000 marriages in total), Fujian (nearly 227,000 marriages), and Zhejiang (around 57,000 marriages), and the city of Shanghai (nearly 63,000 marriages).⁶⁰ These areas are geographically close to Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, and trade between mainland China and these regions has expanded since the 1990s and especially since the 2000s. Similarly, there were around 53,000 Chinese-foreign marriages registered in total between 1979 and 2010 in the northern province of Heilongjiang, 50,000 in the northern province of Jilin, and 20,600 in Beijing.⁶¹ These areas are geographically close to Korea and Japan, and trade between mainland China and these regions has also expanded since the 1990s and especially since the 2000s.

Ma Zhongdong, Lin Ge and Frank Zhang's study of marriages involving Hong Kong grooms and mainland Chinese brides between 1998 and 2005 suggests that the initial growth of such marriages was influenced by increased economic and other interactions, the prosperity of Hong Kong vis-à-vis mainland China, and skewed sex ratios.⁶² Decreasing sex ratios in Hong Kong meant that there were fewer women of marriageable age in Hong Kong than men. This created a 'marriage squeeze' for certain groups of Hong Kong men, because Hong Kong women tend to marry men of equivalent or higher social and economic standing. Data from the Hong Kong marriage registry show that Hong Kong men with mainland brides are usually older and have a higher occupational status than their wives, and many are divorcees. At the same time, Hong Kong men with

mainland brides are generally older and have a lower occupational status than Hong Kong men who marry Hong Kong women, highlighting their disadvantaged position in the Hong Kong marriage market.

Despite Hong Kong's strict immigration quotas, marriage to a man from Hong Kong would have meant improved standards of living on the mainland for many mainland Chinese women, with the possibility of eventually relocating to Hong Kong and raising their children there. Yet many mainland China-Hong Kong marriages display what Nicole Constable calls the 'paradoxical' nature of global hypergamy.⁶³ Mainland brides frequently have higher educational qualifications than their Hong Kong spouses, and thus find that cross-border marriage migration may lead to the overall betterment of their economic position and life opportunities, but their social position in relation to family and kinship networks may be lower in Hong Kong than on the mainland.⁶⁴

A comparison of the available data shows that the number of mainland China-Hong Kong marriages has stabilized. Data from the PRC's Ministry of Civil Affairs indicate that the number of mainland China-Hong Kong marriages registered in mainland China declined from a high of 18,300 in 2006 to just over 4,000 in 2010.⁶⁵ However, data from Hong Kong indicate that the number of such marriages registered in Hong Kong increased from around 3,000 in 1998 to over 21,500 in 2006 and over 20,000 in 2011, with most marriages involving a Hong Kong groom and a mainland Chinese bride.⁶⁶ The pick-up in marriages registered in Hong Kong has led to a stabilization overall in the level of mainland China-Hong Kong marriage registrations.

The number of China-Taiwan marriages peaked in 2003, several years earlier than mainland China-Hong Kong marriage registrations, and has only recently levelled out following a period of trend decline. While marriages on the mainland have fallen steadily since 2003, the overall numbers have been held up by registrations in Taiwan, which have been broadly stable since 2004. The number of China-Taiwan marriages registered in mainland China decreased from a high of over 37,000 in 2003 to around 12,300 in 2010, and the number of such marriages registered in Taiwan decreased from a peak of nearly 34,700 in 2003 to under 13,000 in 2010.⁶⁷ Most of these marriages are between mainland Chinese women and Taiwanese men. More than 12,000 mainland Chinese women registered a marriage with a Taiwanese spouse in Taiwan in 2010, whereas fewer than 700 mainland Chinese men registered such a marriage.⁶⁸

Many Taiwanese residents are from families who originally came from mainland China and have familial connections across the straits. These ties are reflected in government surveys on spouses of foreign origin in Taiwan, which indicate that approximately 60 per cent of China-Taiwan marriages flow from introductions by family and friends.⁶⁹ The ‘first wave’ of China-Taiwan marriages following the ending of Martial Law in Taiwan in 1987 was between mainland Chinese women and elderly Chinese civil war veterans who had gone to Taiwan with the Nationalist Army in 1949. This was followed by a growth of China-Taiwan marriages in areas of Taiwan where farmers and low-skilled manufacturing workers reside.⁷⁰ Prior to August 2009, strict immigration rules meant that mainland Chinese spouses in Taiwan typically experienced a two-year delay in obtaining work and residency rights, and faced an ‘eight-year time frame to citizenship’. Foreign spouses in Taiwan now obtain work and residency rights immediately upon arrival and are eligible for citizenship within four years.⁷¹ The combination of previous obstacles and China’s rapid economic growth presumably contributed to the declining rate of China-Taiwan marriages registered after 2003. Since 2009, the number of such marriages registered in Taiwan has stabilized at slightly less than 13,000 per year. However, it is unclear whether the rates of China-Taiwan marriages will increase along with the new immigration policies or not.

The gendered character and spatial distribution of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China points to the localized and changing nature of the new opportunities created by China’s rapid economic growth, and the continued importance of patri(viri)local and hypergamous marriage patterns – women not men typically move/migrate for marriage, and preferably in order to marry someone from a higher socioeconomic background. It also suggests that many Chinese-foreign marriages may be premised on ‘intracultural’ rather than international relationships, at least when these terms are interpreted in a strict fashion. This claim requires qualification because ethno-linguistic cultural boundaries clearly exist within China itself. However, it is supported not only by the high proportion of Chinese-foreign marriages that involve citizens of Hong Kong and Taiwan, but also by data from Korea and Australia.

The claim that many Chinese-foreign marriages may be premised on ‘intra-cultural’ relationships is partly supported by data from the Republic of Korea. Doo-Sub Kim’s study of cross-border marriage and divorce in Korea reveals that the number of marriages

registered in south Korea between Koreans and mainland Chinese increased from around 5,000 marriages in 1990 to over 40,000 in 2005, with China becoming the main sending country for cross-border marriages registered in Korea. However, the majority of these marriages are marriages between (male) Koreans in rural parts of Korea and (female) ethnic Koreans from the northern Chinese provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning.⁷²

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that in Australia, of the 6,324 marriage registrations in 2011 that involved a spouse born in mainland China, 60 per cent related to marriages between two people born in mainland China, up from a low of 46 per cent in 2001.⁷³ This raises the prospect that a significant proportion of marriages between mainland Chinese and Australian citizens are in fact between two people who were both born in mainland China. The proportion of marriages regarded as ‘intra-cultural’ could be even higher if Australian- or foreign-born Chinese spouses were accounted for in these data.

The ‘intra-cultural’ nature of many Chinese-foreign marriages does not mean that marriage immigrants are viewed positively in the receiving societies. Despite racial, linguistic and cultural affinities, ‘mainland brides’ are a focus of negative media reportage in Hong Kong and Taiwan. They are often portrayed as poorly educated women with limited opportunities for socio-economic advancement, and hence as ‘passport hunters’, ‘gold diggers’ and ‘prostitutes’.⁷⁴ The prevalence of such stereotypes underscores the inferior political and economic position of mainland China vis-à-vis economically developed parts of the Asian region until recently. The question of how China’s emergence as a regional and global power will impact on the gendered and spatial distribution of Chinese-foreign marriages obviously remains to be seen.

Concluding remarks

Our summary of the data on Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China between 1979 and 2010 suggests three key points. First, Chinese-foreign marriage is a recent and small phenomenon in mainland China. Second, Chinese-foreign marriages are gendered. The mainland Chinese marrying partners in marriages registered in mainland China are predominantly women. Finally, Chinese-foreign marriage has a spatial dimension. The majority of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China are

cross-border or intra-Asian rather than international, and such marriages are usually registered in the economically developed provinces and cities along China's eastern seaboard, that is, in areas with the likelihood of increased contacts between citizens of mainland China and those of neighbouring regions.

However, the demographic characteristics of Chinese-foreign marriages registered in mainland China may be entering a new period of transition. Academic articles indicate that the (usually male) foreign marrying partners of mainland Chinese citizens are increasingly choosing to live and work in the PRC, in keeping with mainland China's increased economic prosperity and the introduction of more accommodating legal frameworks.⁷⁵ Media reports suggest that mainland China is becoming a 'receiving' rather than strictly a 'sending' destination for 'foreign brides', especially for women from rural areas of Vietnam, Myanmar and Laos.⁷⁶ Both factors may contribute to different rates and types of Chinese-foreign marriage being registered in mainland China in the future.

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