

Situated Mixedness

Understanding Migration-Related Intimate
Diversity in Belgium

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First published 2025

ISBN: 978-1-032-77734-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-77829-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-48498-1 (ebk)

Chapter 5

**Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness in
Belgium since 1992**

A quantitative perspective

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003484981-8

The funder of the Open Access version of this chapter is the Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS) awarded to the editor from 2020 to 2023 (with 1 year extension due to COVID-19 pandemic).

5 Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness in Belgium since 1992

A quantitative perspective

Lucas Monteil

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the phenomenon of international (or, more accurately, binational) marriage has garnered significant public, political, and scientific attention in Western Europe, including in Belgium (see Block and Bonjour, 2013; Fresnoza-Flot and Liu-Farrer, 2022; Fresnoza-Flot and Wang, 2021; Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki, 2017; Mascia and Odasso, 2015; Mascia, 2021; Van den Berg and Mortelmans, 2024; Vink et al., 2015). Numerous social science studies have explored this multifaceted issue, emphasising the socio-legal frameworks, lived experiences, social networks, and life trajectories of foreign partners involved in these relationships. Many of these studies, including in the context of Belgium, have employed qualitative methodologies (Fresnoza-Flot, 2022).

A dominant body of literature concerning the quantitative dimensions of mixed conjugality pertains to the field of demography and sociodemographics, and has been published in major journals such as *Population* (INED), *Demographic Research* (Max Planck Institute), and *Demography* (University of Washington). Many countries, especially in Europe, have developed reliable statistical databases about their populations and their evolution over time, which enable detailed analyses to be made of conjugal patterns, including the nationality of partners and various other characteristics (Avdeev et al., 2011). Such analyses frequently synchronically focus on the characteristics of foreign or immigrant partners married to local nationals and examine the demographic impacts on the general population. These impacts include contributions to national fertility levels and divorce rates among mixed couples (Neyrand and M'sili, 1997), offering demographic insights into the stability of mixed marriages, as well as examinations of the levels of social integration induced by conjugal mixedness, or, more recently for example, the mutual cultural influences between national and foreign partners (Crul et al., 2023).

Some studies suggest that mixed couples tend to have higher social positions compared to other couples (Neyrand and M'sili, 1997) and that they tend to have higher fertility rates than non-mixed couples (Prioux, 2008) as well as couples where both parents are immigrants (Avdeev et al., 2011). Some research has indicated that, as a result, the percentage of children born

to mixed couples within the general population is increasing (Prioux, 2006). In evaluating the effect of mixed conjugality on integration levels in the host country, researchers have found that social exogamy is associated with increased migrant integration. Despite this, mixed couples face higher risks of divorce or separation, although this is reduced in the case of unmarried cohabiting couples (Van den Berg and Mortelmans, 2024).

Conjugal mixedness in Belgium

Most research on mixed conjugality between foreign and national partners has focused on the largest populations of foreign (non-EU, in the case of EU countries) residents, often neglecting smaller populations of foreign residents and their partners. This is evident in Belgium, where the situation of mixed couples involving Moroccan or Turkish partners has been extensively examined, including in recent studies (Van den Berg and Mortelmans, 2022, 2024). Consequently, from a quantitative perspective, little is known about the situation of mixed couples involving Asian partners in Belgium.

Historically, Southern Europe, Turkey, and Morocco were long the primary countries of origin of migrants in Belgium, as a result of organised labour immigration after World War II. This brought large numbers of immigrants from Italy, Spain, and other Southern European countries, as well as from Turkey and Morocco (Monteil et al., 2024). As a result, Moroccan and, to a lesser extent, Turkish, are among the main foreign nationalities in mixed couples with Belgians and are the predominant non-EU nationalities in mixed couples. Of foreign men who married Belgian nationals in 2016, Moroccans were the most numerous, followed by French, Dutch, Italians, and then Turks (Statbel Marriage Statistics, 2016). Similarly, among foreign women marrying Belgians in the same year, Moroccans were the second most numerous among all (EU and non-EU) nationalities, after the French and before the Dutch (*ibid.*). This predominance of Moroccans is partly due to the fact that Southern European countries have become less prominent as migration origin countries due to domestic economic development trends. Furthermore, Belgian nationals of Turkish and Moroccan origin show a strong tendency to marry partners from within their national communities of origin, as research has observed in Germany and France (Van den Berg and Mortelmans, 2024), which may contribute to the higher rates of mixed conjugality recorded among nationals from these countries.

Interestingly, when examining the situation of foreign women who married Belgian nationals in 2016, two additional non-EU nationalities appear among the top ten most numerous nationalities in mixed couples with Belgians. These nationalities are Filipino and Thai, both from Southeast Asia, and they rank just before Turkey, which is in 11th position. This observation, along with the current lack of quantitative knowledge on this subject, highlights the need for a more in-depth comparative analysis of both current and past trends of conjugal mixedness involving Asian partners, as well as

for a gender perspective on this analysis in order to fully understand these dynamics. Analysing these patterns has the potential to shed new comparative light on the trends of conjugal mixedness observed among more numerous migrant populations in Belgium, providing valuable insights into these less frequently studied groups.

This chapter aims to contribute towards the understanding of the dynamics of conjugal mixedness by analysing quantitative data regarding Belgian-Asian marriages in Belgium since the creation of the Schengen area in 1992. It explores the main sociodemographic characteristics of these marriages and their evolution over time, with a particular focus on nationality and gender. By developing both synchronic and diachronic approaches, this chapter aims to examine current and past trends of conjugal mixedness between Belgians and foreign nationals. In doing so, it develops a comparative and historical understanding of Asian populations involved in mixed marriages in Belgium, taking into consideration nationalities, contexts, and policies specific to Belgium and countries or wider regions of origin, as well as gender.

The chapter first compares the current situation and trends over the past three decades of mixed marriages involving partners from seven East and Southeast Asian countries: China, Japan, Laos, the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam. It identifies key factors influencing these trends, both in the countries of origin and within Belgium. The chapter then extends and complements this analysis by incorporating a gender perspective. It compares the current sex ratios among these Belgian-Asian couples and examines changes in these ratios since 1992. This approach provides a deeper understanding of the gender dynamics at play in these mixed marriages and highlights the changes that have occurred over the past three decades.

Research methods

This research was conducted as part of a postdoctoral study at ULB within the framework of the research project entitled “Situated Mixedness in a ‘Super-Diverse’ Context: The Case of Belgian-Asian Couples in Belgium”. It was also part of the BelMix collective research project on conjugal mixedness in Belgium. Both projects are coordinated by Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot. The study mainly used quantitative methods, supplemented by mixed research methods, to approach the issue from various angles. It focused on a number of themes, including the social characteristics of both partners (nationality, gender, and an array of complementing social categories), the formation of the couple, and their experience of conjugal life (covering aspects such as interculturality, migration, and family life). It also explored the socio-cultural affiliations of these couples (both in Belgium and transnationally) and their plans for the future. This comprehensive approach allowed for a multifaceted exploration of the dynamics and characteristics of Belgian-Asian mixed couples.

This chapter focuses on variations of conjugal mixedness according to time, nationality, and gender, and primarily employs a descriptive statistical approach to data obtained from Belgium's Demobel and census databases. This data was accessed in the form of semi-aggregated data frames through collaboration with Statbel, the Belgian public statistics agency. The data consisted of three-variable cross-tabulation tables, specifically including nationality, gender, age, level of education, district of residence, and number of children of partners in registered Belgian-Asian couples. Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness is defined in this study, and throughout the chapter, as registered unions (either marriage or legal cohabitation) residing in Belgium, where one partner is Belgian and the other is an Asian national (Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Laotian, South Korean, Thai, or Vietnamese).

The studied population comprises individual partners in legal unions (including marriage and legal cohabitation) contracted between 1 January 1992 and 31 December 2020. For legal cohabitants, the period considered spans from 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2020, coinciding with the institution of legal cohabitation in Belgium in 2000. The data includes both same-sex and different-sex relationships since 2003 when same-sex unions were legalised in the country. This comprehensive dataset allows for a detailed examination of the sociodemographic characteristics and trends of Belgian-Asian couples over nearly three decades.

The nationality dimension of Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness

Conjugal mixedness, like migration itself, is a phenomenon that varies significantly across different nationalities. Factors such as post-colonial links between origin and destination countries, migration policies, domestic economic development, labour and education patterns and policies, and the social characteristics of (aspiring) migrants all heavily influence patterns of conjugal mixedness (Mascia, 2021; Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki, 2017; Mascia and Odasso, 2015; Neyrand and M'sili, 1997). This section provides a comparative analysis of the current trends and the recent historical evolution of the populations of Belgian-Asian couples. It highlights the types of migration that underpin these trends and examines the underlying factors both in Belgium and the countries of origin.

Global and comparative trends regarding Belgian-Asian couples

The main nationalities of partners in registered Belgian-Asian couples on 1 January 2020 were Chinese (1,891 individuals), Thai (1,579 individuals), and Filipino (1,287 individuals). These were followed by Japanese (564 individuals), Vietnamese (306 individuals), South Korean (108 individuals), and lastly Laotian, with only 39 individuals (see Figure 5.1).

However, when considering the total size of each national population of residents, a more insightful comparison can be drawn between different

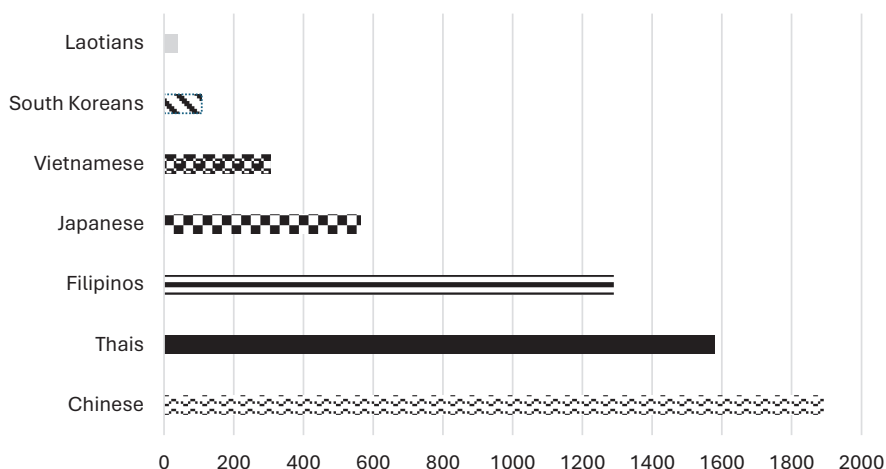


Figure 5.1 Belgian-Asian couples in Belgium (2020)

Source: Statbel (Direction générale statistique – Statistics Belgium) – author's presentation. The data in this figure and the subsequent ones (except those specifically mentioned as related to marriage statistics only) correspond to marriages and legal cohabitation of spouses in Belgium as registered on 1 January 2020.

nationalities based on the prevalence of mixed couples among them. It then becomes evident that Southeast Asian nationals residing in Belgium exhibit higher rates of mixed conjugality with Belgian partners than East Asian residents. Notably, Thais have particularly high rate of 44.2 per cent, meaning that nearly one in two Thai nationals living in Belgium is in a relationship with a Belgian, followed by Laotians at 41 per cent, and Filipinos at 32.5 per cent. Vietnamese residents also have moderately high rates (19.9 per cent). In contrast, Chinese, Japanese, and South Koreans all present lower rates of mixed conjugality, with 14.7 per cent, 13 per cent, and 9.5 per cent, respectively (Figure 5.2).

The prevalence of new international marriages involving a Belgian partner exhibits a conspicuous disparity between selected Southeast Asian residents and selected East Asian nationals. Indeed, international nuptiality rates – defined as the proportion of new international marriages contracted in a given population and a given year, expressed in per thousand (per cent) – is noticeably higher among the former than those among the latter. This discrepancy becomes even more pronounced when comparing selected Southeast Asian nationals to all non-EU foreign residents. By means of illustration, data from 2016 show that the rate of international nuptiality among Thai, Filipino, and Vietnamese nationals residing in Belgium was three times the rate observed among non-EU residents: specifically, 26.3 per cent, 24.1 per cent, and 26.6 per cent, respectively, in contrast to 8.3 per cent among the latter group. Comparatively, the rate among Chinese residents was 6.9

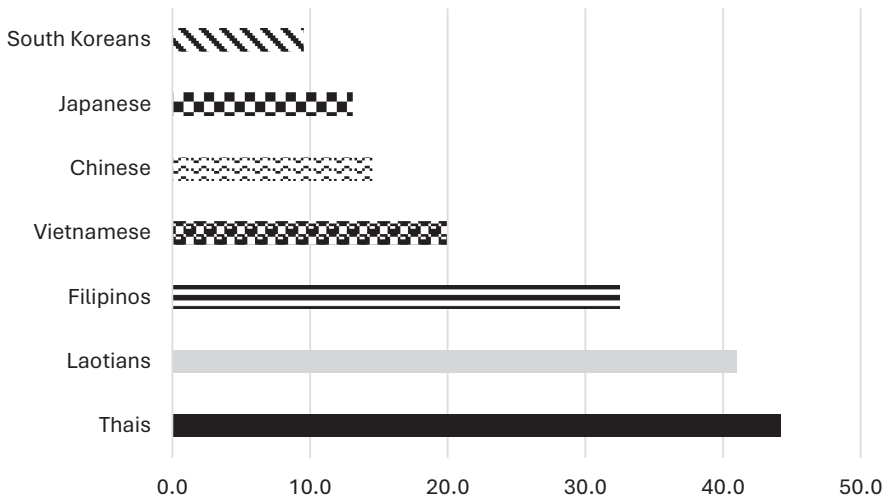


Figure 5.2 Mixed conjugality rates among Asian residents in Belgium, 2019 (in per cent)

Source: Statbel (Direction générale statistique – Statistics Belgium) – author's calculation.

per cent, among Japanese residents it was 5.2 per cent, and among South Koreans it was 7.3 per cent (according to Statbel Marriage Statistics 2016 and Statbel Structure of the Population Statistics, 2016, as per the author's calculations) (Figure 5.3).

An indication of comparatively higher international nuptiality rates among Southeast Asians is also discernible in the proportion of visas secured for family reunification purposes. In other words, the higher international nuptiality (and overall mixed conjugality) rates observed among selected Southeast Asian residents in Belgium are also reflected by the higher proportion of visas obtained for familial (including conjugal) reasons to new residents from these nationalities. In 2019, the percentage of initial visas granted for family-related reasons was notably high, with Thais at 64.5 per cent and Filipinos at 60.7 per cent, followed by Laotians at 50 per cent, Japanese at 49.5 per cent, Vietnamese at 39.8 per cent, South Koreans at 33.4 per cent, and lastly, Chinese at a mere 23.6 per cent (according to Eurostat, 2024).

Similar patterns of international conjugality among Southeast Asian nationals residing in Belgium become evident when we narrow our focus further to the issuance of first visas specifically for joining spouses, while simultaneously broadening it to include spouses of all EU nationalities residing in Belgium. In 2019, among all initial visas granted, the proportion of visas issued for joining an EU spouse was notably high, standing at 39.3 per cent for Thais and 33.3 per cent for Filipinos. This trend also extended, albeit to a lesser extent, to Laotians at 25 per cent and Vietnamese at 16.6 per cent. Conversely, the percentage was substantially lower among South

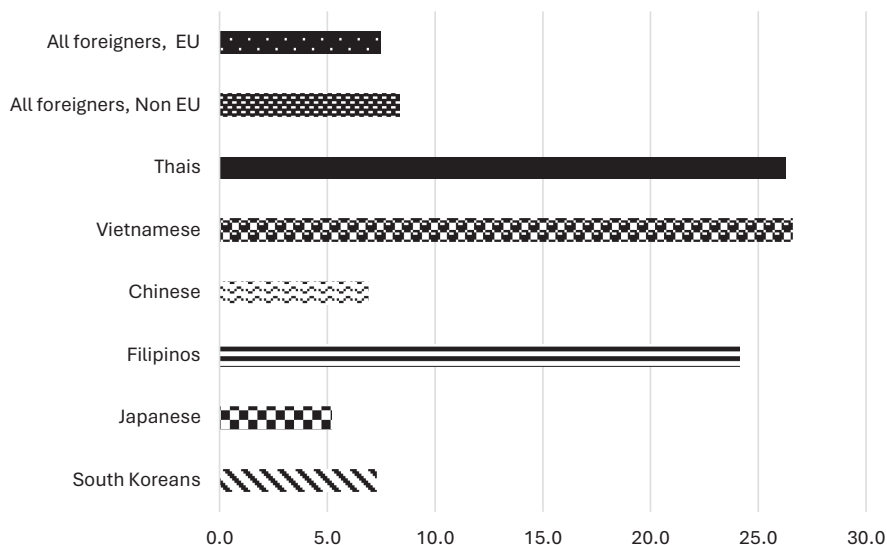


Figure 5.3 Rates of international nuptiality with a Belgian in 2016 for foreigners residing in Belgium, by nationality (in per cent)

Source: Statbel (Direction générale statistique - Statistics Belgium) – author’s calculation.

Koreans (4.7 per cent), Chinese (4.6 per cent), and Japanese (only 3.9 per cent) (Eurostat, 2024).

The significance of mixed conjugality within each national population of residents in Belgium fluctuates partly in accordance with the dynamics of new immigrant arrivals associated with international conjugality on one side, and with other reasons for immigration on the other. These variations can be elucidated by examining the rates of first visas granted to each selected nationality for reasons other than familial and conjugal purposes. It becomes apparent that a considerably higher number of visas are issued overall to selected East Asian nationals for educational and/or employment reasons, revealing significant disparities in the prevalence levels of both types of visas among selected nationalities.

While up to 55.3 per cent of Chinese newcomers in 2019 obtained a visa for education reasons, this was the case of only 12.9 per cent of Filipinos, 18.9 per cent of Thais, and 25 per cent of Laotians who obtained a first visa in the same year. While only 13.8 per cent of first visas delivered to Japanese nationals in 2019 were given for education reasons, as many as 35 per cent were issued to this group for employment reasons, by far the largest proportion among all selected nationalities. Inversely, 45.5 per cent of first visas delivered to Vietnamese nationals were issued for educational reasons, the highest proportion among selected nationalities after Chinese, but only 6.9 per cent for employment reasons, the second lowest, just above Thais (6.2

per cent). In contrast to their high rate of visas for education reasons, Chinese nationals also presented a relatively low rate of visas for employment reasons (14.3 per cent), below that of Filipinos (16.5 per cent).

The number of mixed (Belgian-Asian) couples within each selected nationality and, more significantly, the proportion of mixed couples within each vary significantly according to the relative prevalence of different reasons for migration, such as family and spouse reunification, education, and employment. However, to gain a deeper understanding of these variations, it is imperative to analyse the diachronic evolution of mixed conjugality levels among each selected nationality over time and related factors. The figures presented above not only offer insights into the current status of mixed couples but also reflect the historical formation of mixed couples in Belgium. Thus, they encapsulate not only new couples, as reflected by visa figures and nuptiality rates, but also the continuum of past mixed couple formations, which warrant more in-depth analysis.

Evolution of Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness

When examining the quantitative evolution of Belgian-Asian couples since 1992, it becomes evident that the number of such couples was generally on the rise, at least until recently, in the mid-2010s. However, this statement needs qualification. The trend varies significantly according to nationality, with more pronounced increases observed among Southeast Asian nationals such as Thais, and to a lesser extent, Filipinos, as well as among Chinese, for instance.

In terms of absolute figures, Thai, Filipino, and Chinese nationals have constituted the largest nationalities in couples with Belgians since at least the late 1990s, and even since the beginning of the period under study (1992) for the former two. Over the past three decades, the number of Asian nationals in a conjugal relationship with a Belgian national rose consistently between 1992 and 2016 (see Figure 5.4). While this upward trajectory of mixed relationships encompasses all studied Asian nationalities, it is particularly notable among Thais, Filipinos, and Chinese partners. In contrast, the trend is slower among Japanese and South Korean nationals and remains relatively stable, or even slightly decreases, among Laotian and Vietnamese nationals throughout the entire period under consideration.

A decrease in recorded Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness in absolute figures becomes discernible after 2016, albeit with variations. This decline is particularly rapid for Thais and Filipinos, although it seems less pronounced among Vietnamese and even less so among Japanese, Chinese, and Laotians. In addition, a slight upward trend among South Koreans can be discerned.

When examining the relationship between the number of Asian residents and the number of Belgian-Asian couples among them, i.e., the mixed conjugality rates among each resident Asian population, several trends emerge over the period. First, there is an overall increase in mixed conjugality rates

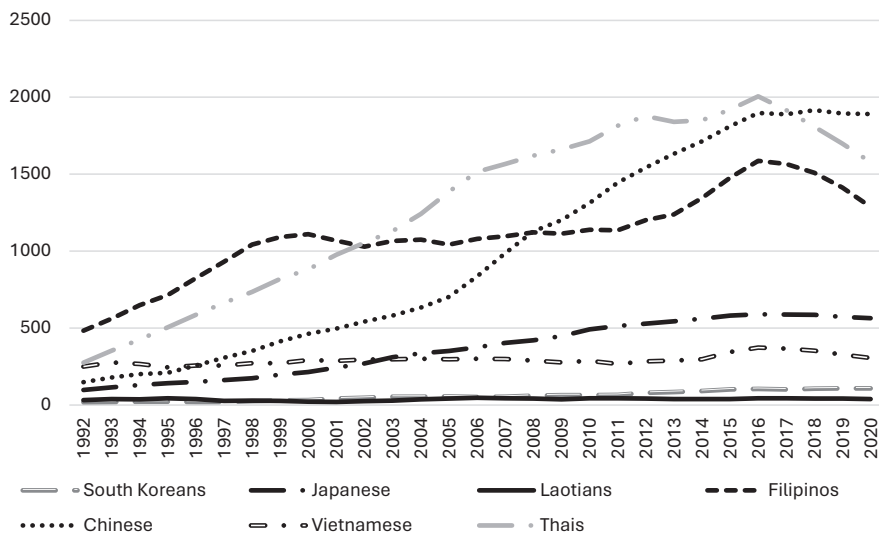


Figure 5.4 Belgian-Asian couples in Belgium from 1992 to 2020, by nationality

Source: Statbel (Direction générale statistique - Statistics Belgium)

throughout the period, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, this progression subsequently halts or slows down, before stagnating for most nationalities in the mid-2010s, punctuated by slight upward or downward fluctuations. Second, mixed conjugality rates appear to be stable or even decreased for Thais, Vietnamese, and Filipinos between the early 2000s and 2016, with a marked decline since 2017.

However, mixed conjugality levels remain consistently higher over the period among all selected Southeast Asian nationals resident in Belgium compared to East Asians. They are notably higher among Thai and Filipino nationals throughout the entire period and have been significantly higher since the late 1990s among Laotians and since the early 2000s among Vietnamese, despite a subsequent significant decrease among the latter. Notably, at least 30 per cent of Thai and Filipino nationals in Belgium have been in mixed couples with Belgians throughout the entire period, and the same holds true for Laotians since 2004. Thai nationals have also consistently remained the largest population in mixed couples among selected residents, accounting for more than 36 per cent and up to 55 per cent of mixed couples depending on the year. Moreover, at least one in two Thai nationals resident in Belgium was in a mixed couple between 1998 and 2017.

Levels of conjugal mixedness rose notably among Thai nationals during the 1990s, among Vietnamese in the late 1990s, and among Laotians in the first half of the 2000s, while they remained relatively more stable among Filipinos throughout the period, hovering near or above 30 per cent.^{5.5}

Comparatively, the rates of Belgian-Asian couples among selected East Asian nationalities, namely Japanese, Chinese, and South Korean, also exhibited an overall upward trend throughout the period, although they remained significantly and consistently lower than among selected Southeast Asians. These rates ranged between 3.1 per cent (among Japanese in 1992) and 16.2 per cent (among Chinese in 2016). However, they showed a more continuous and significant increase between the late 1990s and the mid-2010s. After 2016, there was a decline in these rates, although this was less pronounced than among selected Southeast Asian nationals, particularly Thais.

Comparing conjugal mixedness across time and nationalities

The comparative evolution of mixed conjugality rates among Asian nationals resident in Belgium depends on various factors. These factors include different types of immigration (here defined as the reasons for a visa being issued) and factors in the countries of origin or transnational factors. In addition, factors in Belgium that specifically influence the number of mixed couples, such as international marriage policy or reforms of family reunification policy, seem to have played a role, especially since the mid-2010s.

Since 2018, the Chinese population has emerged as the most numerous nationality in terms of mixed conjugality with Belgians. However, the mixed conjugality and nuptiality rates among them remain relatively low and are nearly on par with other selected East Asian nationals and even slightly lower than among all non-EU foreigners as a whole (see Figures 5.3 and 5.5). There was a significant increase in the total population of Chinese nationals resident in Belgium in the early 2000s (from 3,764 individuals in 2000 to 13,479 in 2020), while their mixed conjugality rate also experienced growth in the same period (from 9.5 per cent to 16.2 per cent, see Figure 5.5). When considering the period as a whole, the total number of Chinese residents in a relationship with a Belgian national surged by a factor of 12.78, significantly surpassing the multiplication factor of the total population of Chinese residents, which was multiplied by 4.8.

These findings underscore the rapid development and internationalisation of China since the 1990s, particularly evident in the increasing global circulation and settlement abroad of Chinese citizens. This rapid development has led to a sharp increase in mixed couples involving a Belgian and a Chinese partner in Belgium, alongside the growth of the wider population of Chinese immigrants and various types of immigrants, starting with students. Notably, in the 2000s, China became the world's leading country of origin for international students – a trend supported by government policies and accelerated by its entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001. This phenomenon was further facilitated by robust economic growth, which also fuelled the migration of educated Chinese workers abroad (Shen, 2007, 2008; Li et al., 2021).

The consistently low rate of mixed conjugality among South Koreans, which has been the lowest among selected nationalities since the 2010s, is

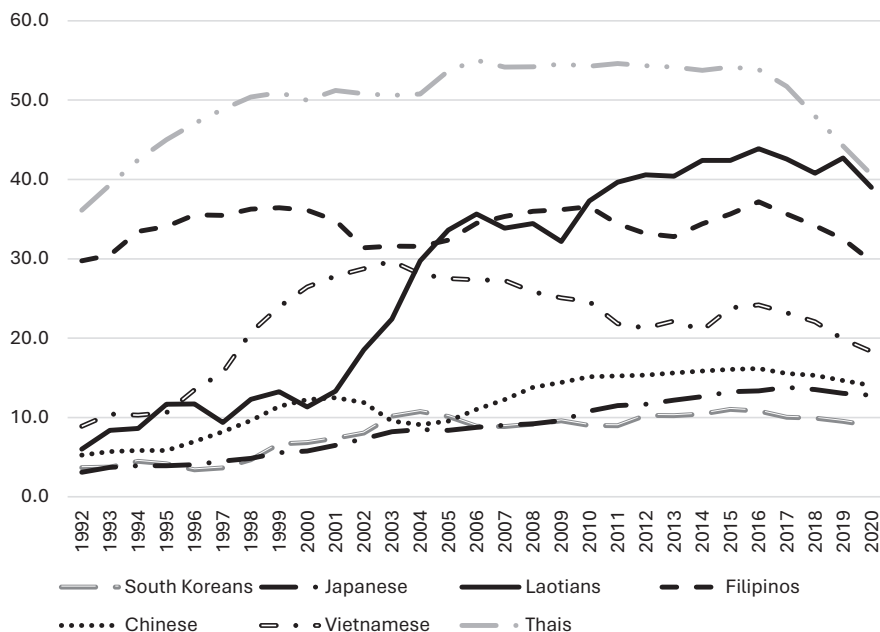


Figure 5.5 Mixed conjugality rates among Asians in Belgium, 1992–2020 (in per cent)

Source: Statbel (Direction générale statistique – Statistics Belgium)

attributable, at least in part, to the relatively high prevalence of student and labour migration to Belgium. South Korea experienced economic growth earlier than China. In 2019, nearly 40 per cent of new visas granted to South Koreans were for educational purposes, and 22.2 per cent were issued for employment reasons (Eurostat, 2024), leaving proportionally less room for family and conjugality as reasons for migration. This also holds true in the cases of Chinese and Japanese nationals.

The low perceived strategic importance of international study for Japanese individuals explains the relatively low prevalence of student migration among Japanese nationals in Belgium, ranking as the second lowest among all selected nationalities in 2019, at only 13.8 per cent (Eurostat, 2024). However, due to Japan's even earlier economic and educational development, labour migration is prominent, with 35 per cent of first visas being obtained for employment reasons in 2019. This phenomenon is largely fuelled by temporary intragroup transfers, commonly known as “expatriation”, of employees of multinational companies or government agencies (Monteil et al., 2024). Spouses of these employees also contribute significantly to this trend, as evidenced by the proportion of 18 per cent of first visas granted to Japanese individuals for joining their non-EU spouse in Belgium in 2019 – markedly higher than that of other selected nationalities, with South Koreans

ranking second at 10.6 per cent. These factors collectively contribute to the ongoing relatively weak proportion of mixed conjugality in Japanese migration to Belgium.

In contrast, mixed conjugality and international marriage have long been recognised as one of the factors, if not the primary factor driving migration from Southeast Asian countries (Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017). This phenomenon experienced a surge in the 1970s, although its roots extend further back, and can be traced to intimate encounters and a form of sexual racialisation of Southeast Asian women by Western men in the colonial context (*ibid.*). In addition, aspirations for social class and upward economic mobility among women from the region, along with their romanticised perceptions of affluent Western men, further contributed to the prevalence of international marriage practices (*ibid.*).

Conversely, due to the relatively lower and later economic development of these countries, coupled with increasing restrictions on labour immigration in Belgium, particularly targeting poorer workers and migrants, and favouring highly qualified labour migrants (Monteil et al., 2024), the number of workers from these countries remained relatively low throughout the considered period. While family reunion has become the primary reason for legal migration to Belgium (excluding international protection) for all foreign nationalities considered since the 1990s, it is particularly true for Southeast Asian migrants, most notably for Thai nationals, whose rate of mixed conjugality has remained the highest since 1992.

Different factors, however, contribute to variations in mixed conjugality among the various selected Southeast Asian resident populations in Belgium, beginning with the relative significance of other migration types or reasons among each group. For instance, Filipino nationals outnumber other Southeast Asians in terms of migration for employment. In 2019, 16.5 per cent of visas issued to Filipinos were for employment purposes (Eurostat, 2024), revealing established patterns and routes of labour migration, particularly in sectors such as the international care sector (Cheng and Choo, 2015; Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017), as well as in other sectors like international seafaring (Galam, 2022).

Vietnamese residents in Belgium exhibit a lower mixed conjugality rate compared to other Southeast Asians, particularly since 2005, and this rate has been almost constantly decreasing since then, despite a persistently high international nuptiality rate. This trend is largely attributable to the growing number of Vietnamese international students, with 45.5 per cent of first visas issued to Vietnamese in 2019 being for educational purposes (Eurostat, 2024). Vietnam has become one of the leading sources of student migrants worldwide, as a result of the Vietnamese government's efforts to enhance the qualifications of its workforce (Nam and Jin, 2021; Nguyen, 2018).

Conversely, the rapid increase in the mixed conjugality rate involving Vietnamese nationals in Belgium during the 1990s can be explained by the absolute decrease in their general population throughout that decade. This

decrease was due to Belgium's restrictive labour migration policies and the ageing of the wave of Vietnamese refugees who arrived in Belgium in the 1970s (Phong et al., 2000, p. 186), as well as the ageing of the Vietnamese nationals who initially settled in French-speaking areas of Belgium due to the common language, a post-colonial inheritance from French colonisation. Finally, this decrease is also due to the fact that family reunion became the primary legal reason for new Vietnamese migration.

Laotian nationals experienced the most significant increase in mixed conjugality rates between 1992 and 2020 among all selected nationalities (see Figure 5.5). The proportion of mixed couples among them underwent the most significant rise during the 2010s, following the most substantial surge recorded during the early and mid-2000s. Overall, this notable increase over the period is less due to the rise of mixed couples in absolute terms (which only multiplied by 1.25 between 1992 and 2020, compared to 2.7 times among Filipinos and 5.7 times among Thais) than to the decrease of the entire Laotian population in Belgium, which was divided by five, while the Filipino population multiplied by 2.67 and the Thai population by 5.11.

As in the case of Vietnamese nationals, but even more significantly, this surge can be explained as a consequence of the labour migration restrictions adopted since 1974 and the absolute decrease in the previously established Laotian population in Belgium. This decline resulted in family reunification becoming the major source of Laotian immigration since then, coupled with the absence of dynamic student immigration, unlike the case of Vietnamese migrants.

Finally, a significant decreasing trend in Belgian-Asian couples in Belgium has been observed since 2016, both in terms of absolute numbers and in percentage of each selected population of Asian nationals (mixed conjugality rates). This decline affects all selected nationalities but is more pronounced among Thais, Filipinos, and Southeast Asians in general (Figure 5.5). This systematic yet uneven evolution may be interpreted as a delayed effect of the stricter migration policies that Belgium implemented from the early 2000s, particularly regarding family reunification and the so-called “marriage and legal cohabitation of convenience” (Fresnoza-Flot, 2024; Mascia, 2021; Mascia and Odasso, 2015).

Initially, this political and administrative shift led to a rapid decrease in mixed nuptiality rates among non-EU foreigners overall. However, it seems that this did not immediately impact Asian nationals as much, probably because they were not the primary focus of the original legislative intent (see the author's interview with a high-level government official in Monteil et al., 2024). The trend observed since 2017 suggests that this restrictive turn, which is class-based and targets poorer, aspiring migrants, has increasingly affected (poorer) Asian migrants and their spouses (ibid.; Monteil et al., 2024), particularly Thais and Filipinos.

Overall, Southeast Asian nationals in Belgium have consistently shown higher rates of mixed conjugality (and international nuptiality rates) with

Belgians, compared to East Asians from 1992 to 2020. The varying levels of conjugal mixedness among the different selected nationalities primarily reflect the prevalence and proportion of migration for family and spouse reunification, as well as other types of migration and visa issuance reasons such as employment and education. These migration patterns are influenced by several macro factors, including the level of development in the countries of origin, public policies shaping emigration patterns (such as types of labour emigration or the frequency of student emigration), the legacy of the colonial past (which influences patterns of international marriage), and changes in Belgium's migration policy.

By examining these dynamics, it becomes clear that the higher rates of mixed conjugality among Southeast Asians is not merely a contemporary phenomenon but is deeply rooted in historical, economic, and policy contexts that have evolved over time. The influence of Belgium's restrictive migration policies, particularly since the early 2000s, also plays a critical role in shaping these patterns, affecting different nationalities in different ways based on their economic and migration histories.

In addition, analysis of the highly gendered distribution of selected Asian migration to Belgium and mixed conjugality patterns within it provides a more detailed understanding of this phenomenon and the contexts shaping it. For instance, women from Southeast Asia often migrate through marriage, driven by aspirations for social and economic mobility, whereas East Asians might migrate more frequently for education or employment, influenced by their countries' different development levels and public policies. By taking into account these gendered migration patterns we may be able to develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of these complex social phenomena, and better understand the complex interplay between personal aspirations, historical legacies, and macroeconomic factors in shaping migration and mixed conjugality trends in Belgium.

Gender and Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness

The phenomenon of South-to-North international marriage is disproportionately feminised, meaning more women migrate from the global South to marry male partners in the North. Several factors exacerbate this trend among East and Southeast Asian nationals, particularly Thais, Laotians, and Filipinos. These factors include the prevalence of specific types of migration, such as labour in the international care sector (Cheng and Choo, 2015), and highly gendered post-colonial patterns of international (heterosexual) spouse selection (Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017).

A comparison of sex ratios (number of men per woman) among mixed marriages with Belgians highlights the particularly high feminisation of the Asian population in mixed couples in Belgium (see Figure 5.6). These sex ratios are significantly lower than those among other major foreign resident populations in Belgium, such as Congolese, Moroccans, Dutch, and French,

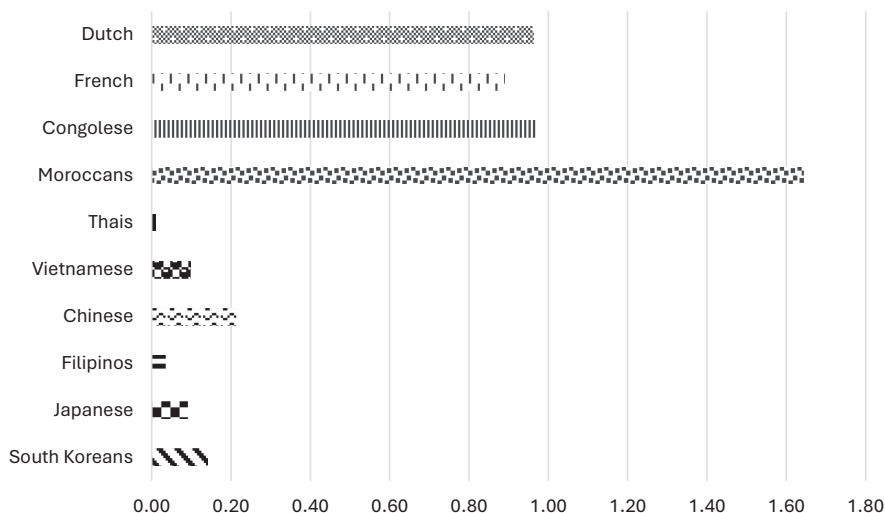


Figure 5.6 Average sex ratio in mixed marriages with Belgian nationals, 2012–2016 (mean values)

Source: Statbel (Direction générale statistique – Statistics Belgium)

even when compared to the overall sex ratios among these populations (see Figure 5.6). A sex ratio of 1.00 would indicate that, in a given population, there is one man for one woman; a sex ratio of 0.00 describes an entirely female population. The sex ratio among the Asian resident populations alone cannot entirely account for this low percentage, indicating strongly gendered spouse selection dynamics. Important factors contributing to these differences can be traced to the patterns and types of migration prevalent for each nationality, such as the types of visas issued or reasons for migration.

Women in Belgian-Asian couples

All populations of the selected Asian national residents in a Belgian-Asian relationship are highly feminised. In 2019, the sex ratio among Belgian-Asian couples in Belgium was strikingly low among Laotian nationals (0.00), as well as Thai nationals (0.03), followed by Japanese (0.11), Vietnamese (0.14), Filipino (0.16), and South Korean (0.17). The sex ratio was highest among Chinese nationals at 0.31, meaning that there is approximately one Chinese man for every three Chinese women in a mixed couple with a Belgian partner (in Belgium). These results also clearly indicate that the most feminised populations in Belgian-Asian relationships are from Southeast Asia, namely Thai and Laotian nationals. In contrast, East Asian nationalities overall present a higher sex ratio, with Chinese being the least feminised among the selected nationalities.

These observations also reveal a partial correlation between sex ratios and rates of mixed conjugality among the selected nationalities. However, some notable differences can also be observed. Specifically, the sex ratios among Japanese and South Korean nationals in Belgian-Asian couples are much closer to those of Vietnamese and Filipino nationals, while sex ratios among these East Asian nationalities are also significantly lower than that of Chinese nationals. This highlights the complexity of the relationship between sex ratios and mixed conjugality rates among different Asian nationalities residing in Belgium.

The observed sex ratios largely reflect the varying types of migration prevalent within each national population residing in Belgium. As revealed in the previous section, these variations are significant. On one side, there is a higher proportion of male employees engaged in temporary intragroup transfers and expatriation (Monteil et al., 2024), who are often married to partners from their country of origin. This partly explains the lower tendency of Japanese and South Korean men to enter into mixed couples with Belgian partners. In addition, the significant number of Chinese students (Shen, 2007, 2008; Li et al., 2021), whose gender distribution is more balanced, and the presence of qualified male workers remaining in Belgium after their studies, contribute to the higher sex ratio among Chinese nationals in mixed relationships.

On the other side, the increasing proportion of Vietnamese students in Belgium (Nam and Jin, 2021; Nguyen, 2018) similarly accounts for the higher sex ratio among Vietnamese in Belgian-Asian couples, as this student population includes a substantial number of males who may later become part of the workforce. Lastly, the higher sex ratio among Filipino nationals compared to Thais and Laotians may be attributable to the greater prevalence of male migrant workers among Filipinos, as well as the significant number of female migrant workers in the highly feminised sector of domestic labour. These female workers, indeed, often maintain transnational family links with their country of origin (Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017), leading to lower marriage rates within Belgium and fewer marriages with Belgian partners.

Historical trends in gender distribution within Belgian-Asian couples

The sex ratio among Asians in mixed couples appears to be particularly low across the entire period under study (see Figure 5.7), indicating that there are notably fewer Asian men in relationships with Belgians compared to Asian women. In addition, the sex ratio among Asian national residents in Belgian-Asian couples in Belgium is consistently lower than the sex ratio among the corresponding general populations of Asian residents throughout the period under study (see Figures 5.6 and 5.7). This discrepancy highlights that Asian women in Belgium are disproportionately more likely to be in a conjugal relationship with a Belgian partner than their male counterparts.

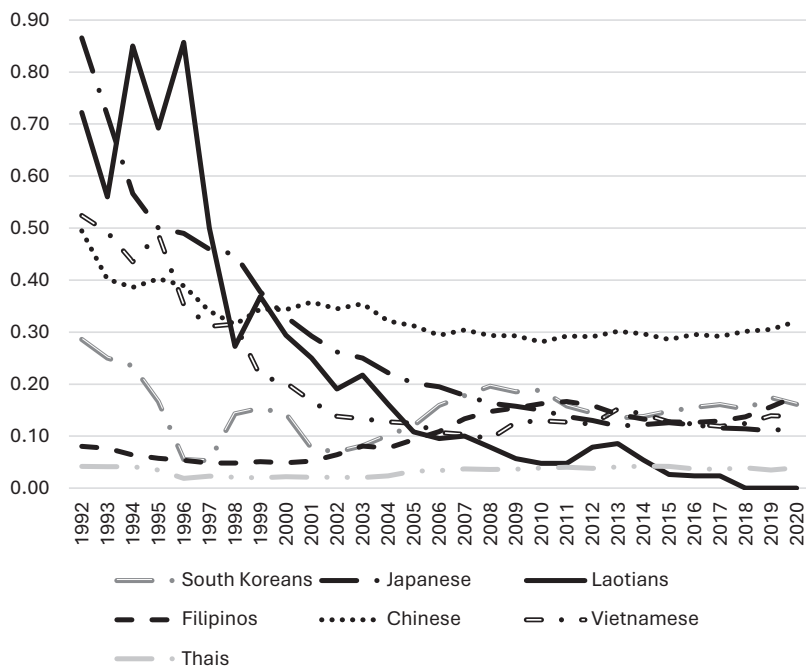


Figure 5.7 Sex ratio of the Asian partners in Belgian-Asian couples from 1992 to 2020, by nationality

Source: Statbel (Direction générale statistique – Statistics Belgium)

This trend was particularly pronounced in the 1990s and continues into the 2000s for the Japanese population. During these decades, the feminisation of Asian populations in Belgian-Asian couples progressed at a faster rate than the overall population of selected Asian nationalities in Belgium. Consequently, the demographic profile of these relationships shows a growing imbalance, with women becoming more predominant in these cross-cultural unions over time.

The most recent observed patterns of differences between selected Asian nationalities in terms of the sex ratio in Belgian-Asian couples can be traced back to at least 2009 (see Figure 5.7). Since then, Laotian and Thai nationals have presented the lowest sex ratios, consistently below 0.1, while the Chinese have exhibited the highest sex ratio, nearing 0.3, a trend observable since 2000. Meanwhile, Japanese, South Korean, Vietnamese, and Filipino populations in Belgian-Asian relationships have all consistently shown an intermediate feminisation trend, with sex ratios of between 0.1 and 0.2 men for every woman in a mixed couple.

Prior to that, the sex ratios among Japanese and Laotian nationals in mixed relationships were close to 1 at the beginning of the period but consistently decreased over time, as did the sex ratios for Vietnamese and even

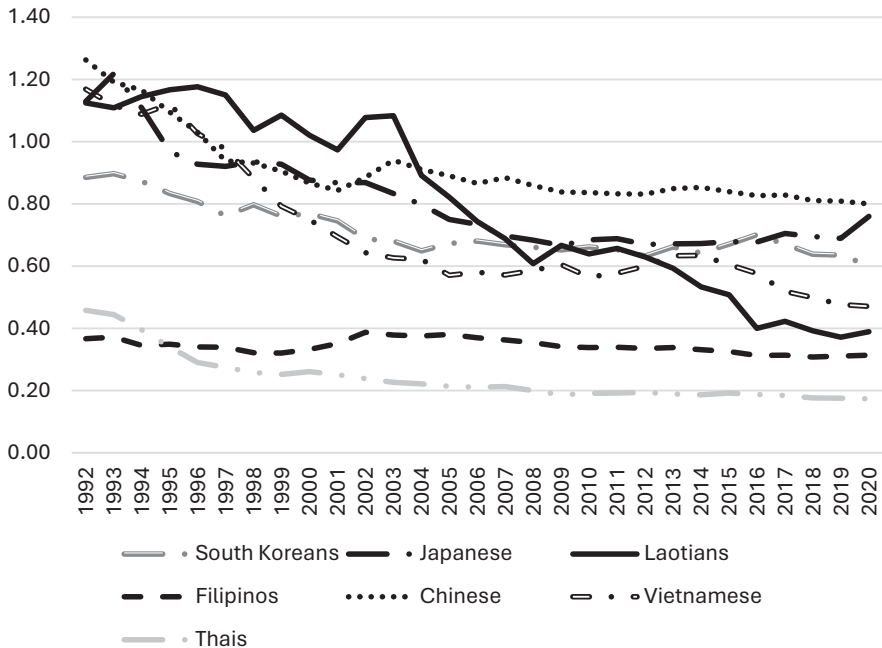


Figure 5.8 Sex ratio among Asian residents in Belgium

Source: Statbel (Direction générale statistique – Statistics Belgium)

Chinese nationals. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the sex ratios for Laotian, Vietnamese, Japanese, and South Korean nationals in Belgian-Asian couples drastically dropped. Although a decrease was also seen in Chinese nationals, it was significantly less pronounced. In contrast, the sex ratios among Filipino and Thai partners remained almost unchanged. This stability persisted until the early 2000s for Filipinos, and throughout the entire period for Thai partners, making them an exception among the selected nationalities. Since then, the sex ratio among Thai nationals in Belgian-Asian couples has doubled, rising from 0.02 in 2004 to 0.04 in 2018. For Filipinos, the sex ratio has more than tripled, increasing from 0.05 in 2004 to 0.17 in 2019.

These trends are also linked to changes over time in the types of migration and their respective impacts on each selected nationality. Notably, the significant shift that occurred after Belgium adopted restrictions on labour immigration seems to have played an important role in reshaping the gender distribution among Asians in Belgium (Figure 5.7), as well as among those in mixed couples (see Figure 5.8). In the early 1990s, Laotian, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Japanese residents in Belgium were predominantly male. The exception was South Koreans. When male labour migration ceased, the number of men from these nationalities, as well as the number of men in mixed

couples, also drastically decreased. At the same time, other types of predominantly female migrants, such as those migrating for family reunification or marriage, became increasingly significant within their respective populations.

For Japanese and, to a lesser extent, South Korean nationals, this shift also corresponded to the decreasing migration of single male workers and the increasing (temporary) expatriation of employees in intragroup transfers and government agencies (Monteil et al., 2024), often followed by their wives and families. The decreasing number of working males of Laotian and Vietnamese descent led to significantly more women of these nationalities in mixed couples, a trend most pronounced and even complete at the end of the period among the very small population of Laotians in Belgium.

The rising population of international students (Nam and Jin, 2021; Nguyen, 2018) appears to have had a stabilising or even slightly increasing effect on the sex ratio of Vietnamese nationals in mixed couples since the mid-2000s. Similarly, high levels of international student migration and the subsequent “brain drain” phenomenon among Chinese nationals (Shen, 2007, 2008; Li et al., 2021) seem to have had similar effects, making Chinese nationals the group with the highest sex ratio among the selected nationalities in mixed couples in Belgium since 2000.

Finally, the notable increase in the sex ratio among Filipino nationals in mixed couples in the 2000s and its stability at this level since then may be explained by several hypothetical factors. These include the influx of workers in male-dominated labour sectors, such as international seafarers (Galam, 2022), and the migration of women working in the international care sector. These women are often married and migrate to support their families who remain in their home country (Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017).

These tendencies also converged towards a gradual stabilisation of sex ratios among selected Asians in mixed couples during the 2000s and even more so in the 2010s. There has even been a slight reversal of these trends since 2017, particularly for Chinese, Filipino, Thai, and Vietnamese nationals. This indicates a relative “defeminisation” of this population. While the feminisation trend continues slowly among Asian residents overall (see Figure 5.8), it stops or slightly reverses among Asians in mixed relationships with a Belgian partner.

An additional factor contributing to this evolution since the 2000s may reside in the increasing implementation of legal restrictions on Asian women, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, in the context of political reforms adopted in Belgium to limit international marriages and the number of visas issued for family and spouse reunification. The observed tendencies, especially among Filipino, Thai, and Chinese people in mixed relationships, the recent defeminisation of which contrasts with the overall sex ratio evolution among the corresponding nationalities in Belgium (see Figures 5.6 and 5.7), suggest that increased scrutiny and stricter conditions for binational marriages have started to weigh more heavily on them. This

has partly hindered Thai and Filipino women from aspiring to marry or join their spouses in Belgium.

Overall, the population of Asians in mixed couples in Belgium is very predominantly composed of women. This high level of feminisation is even greater than that of the overall population of Asian residents in Belgium and remained consistent over the considered period. The most feminised nationalities of residents in Belgian-Asian couples are Southeast Asian, namely Thai and Laotian, while the least feminised nationality is Chinese. Other nationalities present an intermediate level of feminisation, which does not reflect the same subregional divide between Southeast and East Asians that prevails in terms of rates of mixed conjugality and sex ratios of the overall resident populations.

These divergences also reflect the prevalence of different migration types and their evolution over time. These migration types include international marriage, family and spouse reunification, education, and various forms of employment migration or mobility. Underlying macro factors include the evolution of Belgium's labour migration policy, its international marriage and family reunification policy, the international division of labour, socio-economic development trends, and public policies related to emigration from countries of origin.

Conclusion

This quantitative analysis has highlighted the particular prevalence of mixed conjugality among Southeast Asians over the entire studied period, while selected East Asian nationals present levels closer to those of other foreign nationals overall. A similar East/Southeast divide appears in terms of the gender composition of the Asian populations in Belgium, but this divide only partly prevails in terms of the gender distribution of partners in Belgian-Asian couples.

A noticeable decrease in mixed conjugality rates among selected Asians in Belgium has been observed since 2017, along with a perceptible increase in sex ratios. These trends reflect the composition and evolution of each migrant population in terms of type of migration, and the factors underlying them. We identified various macro-level factors, including the levels and history of development of countries of origin, post-colonial legacies, patterns of international division of labour, and public policies related to migration in countries of origin as well as in Belgium.

Southeast Asian nationals in Belgium exhibit high rates of international nuptiality and overall mixed conjugality with Belgians over the studied period, surpassing those of East Asians and even other foreigners as a whole. However, an unprecedented decrease in mixed conjugality rates among all Asians in Belgium has occurred since 2017, although this decline is more pronounced for Southeast Asians.

Regarding gender, the clearest feminisation trend among residents in Belgian-Asian couples also involves Southeast Asians, particularly Thai and Laotian nationals, while the least feminised population is Chinese. Other

nationalities from both regions present divergent gender patterns, with similar, intermediary levels of feminisation. It is noteworthy that, following a drastic decrease since the beginning of the period, particularly in the 1990s and/or early 2000s, sex ratios among Asian nationals in Belgian-Asian couples began to increase again after 2017.

These trends and tendencies are best understood by considering the composition of each national population of migrants in terms of migration types or reasons. The prevalence and respective proportion of migration visas obtained for international marriage and family reunification, and for other reasons such as employment and study, vary considerably according to nationality and underlying factors. Strong patterns of international marriage involving Southeast Asian women are rooted in post-colonial legacies. The uneven prevalence of student migration or labour migration, which is overall higher among East Asians, and the varying types of employment such as skilled labour and expatriation, which can be predominantly male or female, depend mainly on macro socio-economic and political factors.

Higher proportions of students and workers among Asians in Belgium may decrease the relative importance of migration related to international marriage or conjugality, but they can have opposite or uneven effects in terms of gender, depending on the types of labour migration or mobility at play. A high prevalence of international students, related to the level of development of countries of origin as well as to their public policies, seems to have an increasing effect on sex ratios. In contrast, the end of massive, organised labour migration to Belgium has significantly increased the relative quantitative significance of mixed couples, initiating a shift from predominantly male Asian populations of residents, with higher sex ratios among Asians in Belgian-Asian couples, to increasingly feminised sex ratios.

However, these levels of feminisation also appear to be strongly dependent on the types of labour migration patterns which remain at play, their gender composition, and the varying positions and attitudes of the workers in question towards domestic or international marriage and family. Finally, the decrease in mixed conjugality rates among selected Asians in Belgium since 2017, as well as the increase in sex ratios among them, may well be due to the tightening of Belgium's policies on international marriage and family reunification. These efforts to limit such migration have had a delayed but growing impact, particularly on poorer Asian women. These findings underscore the importance of considering the macro-economic and political contexts of both the countries of origin and destination to understand migration dynamics and their impact on the demographic composition of mixed couples.

Acknowledgements

The research presented in this chapter draws from a larger research project led by Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot supported by the *Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique* – F.R.S.-FNRS under grant number PDR T.0094.20. Earlier

versions of this chapter have benefitted from the careful reviews of Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot, Marion Maudet, and Cai Chen, to whom I extend my sincere thanks.

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