

# Situated Mixedness

## Understanding Migration-Related Intimate Diversity in Belgium

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## Chapter 6

### Intimate diversity *outside* and *within*

Points of convergence of Belgian-Asian couples in Belgium

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Aaron Raphael Ponce, and Mari Kawase)*

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## 6 Intimate diversity *outside* and *within*

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#### Introduction

Marriages between Belgians (i.e., those with Belgian citizenship who were born and grew up in Belgium) and citizens of countries in the Asian continent have been observed in Belgium in the last decades. These unions are part of the conjugal mixedness phenomenon that has been dynamically taking place in the country. The phenomenon signifies intermarriages and their underlying processes, including the “Othering” of unions that are socially perceived as “different” from normative couples. Recent statistics show that 15 per cent of the overall marriages in Belgium comprises partners with different nationalities (Statbel, 2020). Belgian-Asian marriages are part of this percentage, which slowly attracts scientific attention (e.g., Fresnoza-Flot, 2017, 2018, 2021; Heyse et al., 2007). Unlike the rich literature on transnational or “ethnic homogamous” marriage phenomenon, in which the partners have different nationalities but with similar ethnic and/or religious backgrounds (e.g., Charsley, 2012; Eeckhaut et al., 2011), only a scant of scholarly works on Belgian-Asian marriages in the Belgian context is available so far. This lacuna leaves many unanswered questions regarding Belgian-Asian marriages: how do these unions unfold through time? How diverse are they? What challenges and prospects do they have?

To shed light on these questions, the present chapter delves into marriages involving Belgians and individuals from economically developing (Laos, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam) and developed (China, Japan, and South Korea) countries in Southeast and East Asia. Except for Laos, in which international marriages are not yet well scholarly explored, the selected Asian countries in this study are known as either the societies of origin or destinations of marriage migrants (e.g., Bélanger et al., 2010; Constable, 2003; Ruenkaew, 2009; Thai, 2012). In economically developed East Asian countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea, many men marry women from developing countries in Southeast Asia (Lee et al., 2006; Suzuki, 2007), whereas their women counterparts most often enter in couple with men from wealthy North American, European, and Oceanian countries (Constable, 2003; Denman, 2009; Lee, 2008). This has led to a

burgeoning literature on international marriages in Asia (e.g., Constable, 2005; Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017; Ishii, 2013; Jones and Shen, 2008; Lapanun, 2019) and in recent years to increasing studies on Southeast/East Asian-European marriages in Europe (e.g., Chen, 2023; Hayakawa, 2021; Lauser, 2008; Suksomboon, 2009).

Adopting a “situated mixedness” framework that locates a conjugal mixedness phenomenon within its relevant social contexts (see Introduction of Fresnoza-Flot, 2025), this chapter underlines the perspectives of social actors who fulfil an active role in each Asian migrant population in Belgium and have regular contacts/interactions with Belgian-Asian couples. Given their role and/or long immersion within an Asian migrant population, these actors can provide meaningful insights about the wider social processes that contribute to the formation of the couples studied. In line with its adopted “situated mixedness” framework, the chapter pays attention to the link between conjugal mixedness and “intimate diversity” – a situation in which a variety of “mixed” couples/families socially viewed as “different” from conventional relationship configurations is rising (*ibid.*). The emic perspectives examined in the chapter and combined with etic points of view provide the window to grasp Southeast and East Asian immigration in Belgium in general and Belgian-Asian conjugality in particular.

The next two sections present the scholarly contexts of the chapter: first, its embeddedness within the larger literature on Southeast/East Asian-Western<sup>1</sup> relationships, and second, the relevant methodological information surrounding the data it examined. The empirical part is organised into three main sections: the first one utilises a situated mixedness framework to grasp the unfolding of Belgian-Asian relationships through time, the second section employs an intimate diversity lens to highlight the points of convergence of Belgian-Southeast/East Asian couples, and the last section highlights the challenges the said couples encounter and the prospects of the Belgian-Asian couple formation. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the future directions of the field of study of Belgian-Asian marriages.

### **Studies on Southeast/East Asian-Western relationships**

Since the last decades, the scholarly literature on marriages and intimate relationships involving Southeast/East Asians and Western people has surged. Most of these works focus on Asian-European relationships either in Asia or Europe. What is salient in these studies is the tendency to concentrate on women, economically developing countries, and numerically dominant cases.

The experiences of Asian women of the “Global South” countries in couple with men of the “Global North” are generally the focus of analysis (e.g., Faier, 2009; Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017; Piper and Roces, 2003). This tendency can be attributed to the widely adopted heteronormative approach to conjugal mixedness, which privileges heterosexual

relationships and overlooks herein the existence of non-heteronormative couples. Nonetheless, the choice of such an approach does not come out of the vacuum as most registered Asian-Western marriages in many countries are between men and women (see Fresnoza-Flot and Ricordeau, 2017). Focussing on women appears effective in socially visibilising them, but the adoption without caution of a victimising framework can strip them of their agency. It is not surprising that studies on the so-called “mail-order” brides (e.g., Del Rosario, 1994; Glodava and Onizuka, 1994) receive criticism for their portrayal of Asian spouses as such (see Constable, 2003, 2006).

In addition, the proliferation of “Global South”-oriented research on Asian-Western couples reinforces stereotypes about such unions as hypergamic. Since the countries of origin of Asian migrant spouses are most often viewed as economically developing and those of their foreign partners as economically wealthy, their relationship has been considered “global hypergamy”; which at the individual level is not often the case (Constable, 2005). A diversity of perspectives on conjugal mixedness appears important in this regard to nuance social understanding of Asian-Western relationships. Including the voices of social actors (i.e., those who play a crucial role within the social spaces of Asian-Western couples) in the analysis, notably those from the countries of origin of Asian migrant spouses, may provide fresh insights on Asian-Western relationships and may counter commonly held stereotypes about them.

Such an approach appears particularly effective if it also tackles the scholarly tendency of prioritising numerically dominant cases or known phenomena in studying Asian-Western relationships. For instance, many studies on these relationships have focused so far on the cases of Filipino, Thai, and Chinese women (Ricordeau, 2012; Sunanta, 2009; Chen, 2023). Less numerically visible configurations remain understudied. In the present chapter, both socially known and paradigmatic cases will be considered by bringing to the fore the perspectives of selected social actors with wide knowledge of the contexts in which Asian-Western relationships unfold.

### **Methods and study respondents**

The present chapter presents the results of expert interviews conducted between May 2020 and September 2022 as part of a larger data collection for a research project examining the situation and experiences of Belgian-Asian couples in Belgium. The interviews took place onsite (mainly in urban spaces) and online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, 38 expert interviews were carried out in collaboration with three researchers of BelMix (a team working on conjugal mixedness in Asia-Europe social spaces and beyond), namely Mimy Keomanichanh, Aaron Raphael Ponce, and Mari Kawase.



The team adopted a snowball approach, that is, relying first on their social networks to meet potential respondents and then requesting referrals of persons who might be interested in taking part in the research. The target respondents were social actors/agents in contact with specific Belgian-Asian couples (e.g., association and religious leaders, government officials, social workers, researchers, and journalists). In other words, the criteria used to identify potential respondents were as follows: they are playing a key role within a specific Asian immigrant population; they maintain regular contacts with their co-ethnics and/or co-nationals; or they are immersed within the said immigrant population due their migration background, link(s) with the first-generation immigrants, and/or couple situation. To obtain the informed consent of these social actors, the team used several data collection tools: an Information Sheet explaining the objectives and scope of the expert interviews as well as data protection, a Consent Form, and an Interview Guide.<sup>2</sup> The latter focuses on ten themes: the characteristics of the couples in question (geographical concentration, the age difference between partners, and so on), existing stereotypes within the immigrant population in Belgium, social spaces frequented, associative activities, social incorporation (access to the labour market, language fluency, nationality acquisition), usual problems encountered in Belgium, sources of assistance/help, links with the country of origin, retirement and old age, and perceived future directions of Belgian-Asian couple/family formation.

Most respondents consented to digitally recording their interviews, and only a few asked the researchers to jot down notes. The interviews were conducted in the common languages that the respondents and researchers can speak and understand: Filipino, French, English, Japanese, Lao, or a combination of two or more of these languages. Ponce interviewed 8 persons (1 Belgian, 2 Japanese, and 5 Filipinos), whereas Keomanichanh had 15 interlocutors (1 Belgian, 7 Vietnamese, and 8 Lao). On my side, I carried out 15 interviews: 1 with Belgian, 1 with Chinese, 2 with South Koreans, 2 with Filipinos (interviewed with Ponce), 5 with Japanese (3 of them were interviewed with Kawase, who acted as language interpreter), and 4 with Thais.

Regarding the profile of the respondents (see Table 6.1), 7 of them are (former) association or temple heads, 7 entrepreneurs in which one is also a journalist, 6 religious leaders, 6 consulate/embassy officials, 3 health professionals, 2 teachers, 2 migrant/descendant group representatives, 2 long-time immigrants actively engaged in Lao immigrant population, 1 researcher, 1 consultant/writer, and 1 journalist. In terms of gender, 16 were women and 22 were men. Among the 22 persons who provided their respective ages to the researchers at the time of interviews, 1 was in her 30s, 4 were in their 40s, 6 were in their 50s, 7 were in their 60s, and 4 were in their 70s. The names of these interviewed social actors are pseudonymised, and their other identifiable personal data are not included in this chapter to protect their privacy and anonymity.

Table 6.1 Profile of the Respondents

<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Social role</i>
4 Belgians (2 of whom are adult children of Asian immigrants)	2 women, 2 men	1 in her 30s, 3 others: no information given	1 health professional, 1 representative of migrants' descendants, 2 entrepreneurs researcher
1 Chinese	woman	in her 40s,	1 religious leader,
7 Filipinos	4 women, 3 men	1 in her 50s 1 in his 70s, 5 others: no information given	3 consulate/embassy officials, 2 entrepreneurs (one is also a journalist), 1 association leader
7 Japanese	4 women, 3 men	2 in their 40s, 1 in her 50s, 1 in her 60s, 3 others: no information given	1 journalist, 2 embassy officials, 1 health professional, 1 consultant/ writer, 1 language teacher, 1 entrepreneur
8 Laotians	3 women, 5 men	1 in her 40s, 2 in their 50s, 3 in their 60s, 2 others: no information given	2 religious leaders, 1 entrepreneur, 2 retired Belgian-Laotian partners active in Lao immigrant population, 1 embassy official, 2 (ex-)temple leaders
2 South Koreans	1 woman, 1 man	2 no information given	1 entrepreneur, 1 religious leader
3 Thais	1 woman, 2 men	1 in her 50s, 1 in his 60s, 1 other: no information given	1 former association leader, 2 religious leaders
6 Vietnamese	6 men	1 in his 50s, 2 in their 60s, 3 in their 70s	1 health professional, 3 (former) association leaders, 1 migrant group representative, 1 martial art teacher

### Contextualising “mixed” couple formation in Southeast/East Asian immigration

Some social actors interviewed referred to the history of their respective migrant populations when they narrated the formation of what is known as Asian-Belgian couples, which is the case of Vietnamese interlocutors and, to a certain extent, Laotian, Thai, and Japanese respondents. Other experts interviewed mainly focused on the main characteristics of the said couples. The narratives of all these respondents unveil diverse cases of Southeast/East Asian immigration and conjugality.

*Parallel trajectories of Vietnamese and Laotians*

Many of the (Vietnamese) students left to study abroad. Those who speak French chose French-speaking countries: France, Switzerland, and Canada. In my class, we were about thirty. The majority went to Canada. I came to Belgium because I had my uncle and my brother who were already here. At the beginning of the 70's, there was an association of students in Leuven, Liège, Mons, and Brussels.

(Vietnamese association leader)

This vignette represents the narratives of all Vietnamese respondents who made a parallel between migratory movements from Vietnam to Belgium and the formation of Vietnamese-Belgian couples. The arc narrative of the respondents identifies several generations of these couples. The first generation (i.e., couples comprising Vietnamese men who entered Belgium for university studies and Belgian women) came into existence between the latter part of the 1960s and 1975 – the first period of Vietnamese immigration to Belgium. The second generation was formed after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 with the arrival of asylum-seeking Vietnamese (also called “boat people”). It consists of two groups of couples: Vietnamese women and Belgian men, and Vietnamese women and men of Vietnamese origin with Belgian nationality who arrived prior to 1975. The third generation has risen since the 1990s, following Vietnam’s opening to the world through its economic renovation (*Doi Moi*) that started in 1986 and the resumption of its diplomatic relations with the United States of America in 1995 (Le Hong, 2012). Specifically, this generation has come out due to three micro-level phenomena: divorced Vietnamese in Belgium going to Vietnam where they find Vietnamese wives; Belgians proceeding to Vietnam for business or tourism, meeting their Vietnamese partners there, and then returning to Belgium with them; and the descendants of Vietnamese migrants or Vietnamese-Belgian couples forming a couple with Belgians born of parents with Belgian citizenship and ethnicity.

In the case of Laotian-Belgian couples, three social actors interviewed traced the formation of the first group of such unions between the latter part of the 1970s and early 1980s. Like the second migratory movement of Vietnamese to Belgium, the migration of Laotians to Belgium occurred after 1975 – the year when Laos became under a communist regime. An association leader explained that mostly Lao men immigrated to Belgium then and later married Belgian women who were often much older than them. The opening of Laos to the world in the 1990s contributed to the emergence of the second group of Laotian-Belgian couples. According to a Laotian respondent, these couples comprised mainly Laotian women who migrated to Belgium to be with their Belgian husbands met in Laos. In her research on Laotian-Belgian couples, Keomanichanh (2021) identifies another group composed of

descendants of Laotian migrants in couple with Belgians born of parents with Belgian citizenship and ethnicity.

The parallelism between Vietnamese and Laotian immigration histories and mixed couple formation is evident here. It can be attributed to the simultaneity of key events (the end of the Vietnam War, the start of the communist regime in Laos, and the opening of their countries to the world) that occurred in Vietnam and Laos, which subsequently triggered the emigration of many of their citizens and the visits or later installation of foreigners in their countries. This is the larger context in which the formation of Vietnamese-Belgian and Laotian-Belgian couples takes place.

#### *Contrasting cases of Thais, Filipinos, and Chinese*

The Thai lad(ies) who came to Belgium, they are educated. Before, about 20 years, 30 years (ago), (the situation was) different. [...] I saw a lot of the Thai lad(ies) who came to Belgium not just [...] to get married first, but they came (for) education, education. They are working, and then later get married.

(Thai religious leader)

The narrative above contrasts the past situation of Thai immigration to Belgium with what has occurred since “after 2010,” as another respondent remarked. Although Thai immigration took place on a small scale in the 1970s and slowly took force in the 1980s, its important inflow only started 30 years ago, that is, in the 1990s (Fresnoza-Flot, 2017). During this period, Thai women arrived massively in Belgium through the marriage or family reunification channel. At the macro level, this phenomenon appears to stem from Thailand’s booming tourism industry, affordable communication, transportation technologies, and effective social networks between Thais in Thailand and those abroad. As Heyse and colleagues observed (2007), these women met their Belgian partners on the Internet, in Thailand, or through the intermediary of their family member(s) residing in Belgium. These women immigrated as marriage migrants, whereas their more recent co-nationals arrived not necessarily through the same channel; some came to study in Belgium, as a Thai religious leader interviewed observed.

Unlike Thai immigration, mainly oriented to couple or family formation, Filipino immigration to Belgium appears to be principally oriented to the labour market, specifically to the domestic work sector (see Pauwels, 2015). As previous works unveil, this immigration can be traced back to the arrival of Filipino nurses and midwives in the latter part of the 1960s and 1970s (Fresnoza-Flot, 2023). Many of these women married Belgian men and settled in the country. There were also some Filipino men seafarers during this period who “jumped out” of their ships to stay in Belgium and who got married with Belgian women. Between the 1980s and early 1990s, trafficked Filipino women in the sex industry (De Stoop, 1993), as well as Filipino *au*

*pair* arrived. Since the latter part of the 1990s, Filipino spouses of Belgian men and Filipino domestic workers have increasingly entered Belgium. The social actors interviewed did not provide such historical information regarding Filipino immigration, but they did remark on several developments in this phenomenon. For instance, there are more and more Filipino migrants entering Belgium from other EU countries: as a journalist-entrepreneur remarked, “I most often encounter Filipinos, saying ‘I am now resident in Italy [...] or Spain’ [...] ‘could I work now in Belgium?’”. The same interlocutor observed that “most Filipinos in Belgium are undocumented”.

Concerning Chinese immigration to Belgium, the social actor interviewed did not talk about its historical background but was aware of the phenomenon’s increasing dynamism. The study of Martiniello and Bousetta (2008) can provide the missing information in this regard: according to the authors, Chinese presence in Belgium can be traced back to the 19th century with the arrival of seafarers and merchants. Chinese from Hong Kong and Southeast Asia entered the country between 1950 and the 1980s, whereas Chinese from mainland China started to immigrate to Belgium starting in the 1980s (*ibid.*, p. 48). Contrary to the former who concentrate in the restaurant sector, the latter with low socio-economic profile include students and undocumented migrants (*ibid.*, p. 49). As China becomes a wealthy country, more Chinese migrate abroad. The formation of Chinese-Belgian couples can be situated within this larger context. As the Chinese researcher interviewed pointed out, the partners usually met in Belgium. These meetings usually took place when Chinese nationals came to the country “as students or tourists”. Alternatively, they met somewhere else in the world or when Belgian nationals travelled to China. When asked about the profile of the Belgian partners, the respondent identified two groups of Belgian men: those who are “very marginal in their society and have a bigger longing for warmth, warmth from Asia”, and those who are “quite successful in their own society”. Chinese spouses of the former group are usually non-university diploma holders and much younger than their partners, unlike the spouses of the latter group, who generally come to Belgium as students and are almost the same age as their partners.

Thai, Filipino, and Chinese in Belgium have different immigration histories, which can be explained by the distinct social, economic, and political conditions of these migrants’ countries of origin. The couples these individuals formed with Belgians are part and parcel of their overall histories and the temporal continuation of their social existence in their receiving country.

### *Beyond expatriation stories of Japanese and South Koreans*

Interviews with social actors suggest that the immigration of Japanese and South Koreans and their couple formation with Belgians is beyond the common view of expatriation. The economic development of Japan and South Korea accompanies the amelioration of their citizens’ spatial mobility in the world, which facilitates their meeting with prospective partners.

An embassy official explained that Japanese immigration started “even before World War II” and that Japanese investment in the country can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s. Niehaus and Walravens (2016) identified two categories of Japanese residing in Belgium: temporary and permanent residents. The former includes expatriates working in Japanese companies and their Japanese family members, whereas the latter refers to Japanese women in couple with Belgian men. In the last decades, there have been more and more Japanese women who have formed a couple with Belgians and other Europeans, as a Japanese language teacher explained below:

I started working in 1999. At that time, there was one or two [...] mixed children. [...] Now, it is maybe the contrary: only 10 per cent of the class are Japanese children, and 90 per cent are (ethnically) mixed children. Therefore, it means that more and more mixed Japanese-European married couples have arrived (in Belgium).

Regarding South Korean immigration, it has been taking force in recent years. As a South Korean entrepreneur said, “It (Belgium) is not a country with many (South) Koreans, unlike France and Germany where there are many. In Belgium, there are just a few, but now there are more and more”. Like the case of Japanese immigration, many South Koreans arrived in Belgium with their family to work as expatriates. Another social actor interviewed remarked that South Korean students also come to study (for instance, in the field of arts). This immigration can be linked to South Korea’s economic progress and the rise of its “soft power” by exporting cultural products. South Korean-Belgian couples are seen as formed between South Korean women and Belgian men with a “not so big age gap”, as one respondent mentioned. There are also couples formed via the Internet, notably between young South Korean women and Belgian men. Unlike other Asian immigrant populations in the present study, one interviewee describes the South Korean population in Belgium as having an average age between 40 and 50.

In both immigration cases, the formation of mixed couples arises alongside the arrival of expatriates and does not involve expatriates themselves, as they usually arrive in Belgium with their nuclear family members.

### **Converging points in Southeast/East Asian-Belgian conjugality**

Based on the narratives of the social actors interviewed, the seven Asian immigrant populations studied share two common characteristics when it comes to conjugal mixedness. These characteristics are intimate diversity *outside* and *within* their respective populations, which are both nuanced.

*Intimate diversity outside*

From afar, the conjugal mixedness phenomenon involving the migrants studied presents an intimate diversity easily observable by the naked eye. This diversity *outside* indicates that Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness is a heterosexual, urban-oriented, and network-shape phenomenon.

Often, Belgian-Laotian couples meet in Laos. They are Belgians, especially men, who go there for vacations or on a work mission. Sometimes, they meet via (the) Internet.

(Laotian diplomatic staff)

I think it is rather a (South) Korean woman married to a Belgian. There is often a (form of) couple in which the man is (South Korean), but this is not so many. I know two (cases).

(South Korean entrepreneur)

These vignettes are representatives of the perspectives of social actors interviewed regarding heterosexual conjugal mixedness involving Belgian-Asian partners. Filipinos, Thais, Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese share the same characteristics. Nonetheless, there are two migrant populations in the group studied that show a temporal specificity as regards the said characteristic: Laotians and Vietnamese. According to social actors interviewed from these populations, Vietnamese and Laotian men were marrying Belgian women during the 1960s–1970s and 1970s–1980s, respectively. As explained in the previous section, this conjugal mixedness phenomenon took place against the backdrop of the Vietnam War and the advent of a communist regime in the countries concerned. The trend changed for Laotians starting the latter part of the 1970s and for Vietnamese after the late 1980s; this time, it is Laotian and Vietnamese women who started to form a couple with Belgian men, a phenomenon linked to the opening of the two countries to the world and the dynamic emigration of their populations. On the contrary, other social actors interviewed indicate that the rest of the Asian populations studied (Filipinos, Thais, Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese) show consistency through time as regards heterosexual Belgian-Asian marriages: it is mostly women who formed couples with Belgian men. Previous studies also observed it, notably among Southeast Asian migrants (see Heyse et al., 2007). Another characteristic of intimate diversity *outside* observed among the Asian populations studied points to these populations' geographical concentration.

In Antwerp before, there were many more Japanese. Now it continues because (of the) diamond, diamond companies in Antwerp (city). There were many Japanese who came, so there was enough population, and

also some restaurants in Antwerp. But most of the (Japanese) companies are located in Brussels(-Capital Region); they chose to live in Auderghem (municipality), or not very far from Auderghem: for example, Etterbeek (municipality), those areas. There are people who live (in Brussels), but not completely in the centre.

(Japanese language teacher)

The narrative above unveils that the Japanese tend to work and reside in urban areas in Belgium. Aside from Antwerp city and Brussels-Capital region (notably in the municipalities of Auderghem, Etterbeek, and Woluwe-Saint-Lambert), they can also be found in Zaventem (a municipality in Flemish Brabant province) where branches of some Japanese companies are located. This is also the case for other Asian populations: Filipinos can be mainly found in Brussels-Capital region and cities such as Antwerp and Leuven; Laotians and Vietnamese in Brussels-Capital region and Liège city; South Koreans in the municipalities of Overijse, Tervuren, and Waterloo; and Chinese and Thais in Brussels-Capital region and Antwerp. Figure 6.1 illustrates these populations' urban-oriented concentration.

The tendency to reside and work in urban areas, notably in large cities, can be generally explained by the fact that the economic, social, and familial lives of the Asian populations studied are embedded in those places. For instance, Filipino, Thai, Laotians, and Vietnamese migrants also find employment and/or run their businesses (restaurants, shops, etc.) in cities.

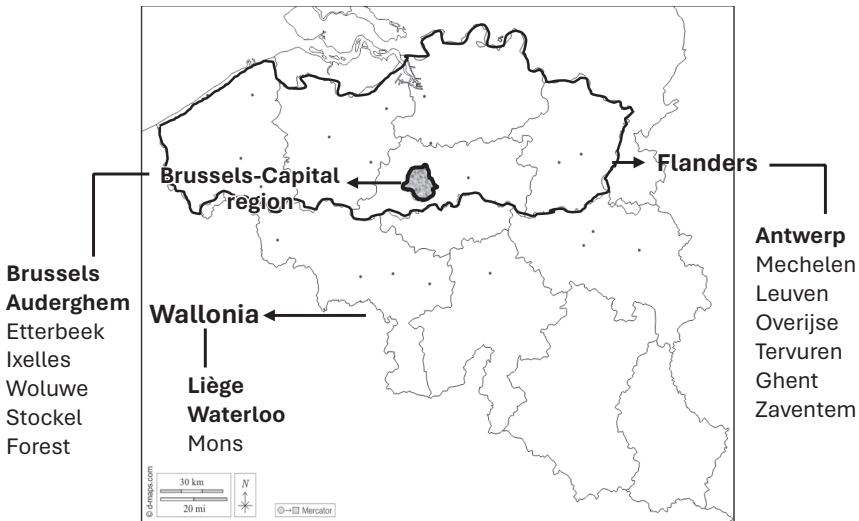


Figure 6.1 Spatial distribution of Asian migrant populations in Belgium

Note: Drawing by A. Fresnoza-Flot on a basemap from <http://d-maps.com/>



Many Japanese expatriates and those in couple with Belgians or other foreigners send their children to the Japanese school in Auderghem. In contrast, their South Korean counterparts send their offspring to an international school in Waterloo. Many urban areas welcoming the populations studied are mostly part of Flanders and Brussels-Capital regions. Interestingly, only a few urban areas in the region of Wallonia were mentioned during interviews with social actors: South Koreans in Waterloo and Laotians and Vietnamese in Liège. It is important to note that the urban area orientation of Asian populations and their conjugal mixedness studied is nuanced. It means that the term “urban” encompasses large and small cities, as well as towns here. Alongside the urban-oriented concentration of Asian migrants and their families, a small segment of their population sporadically lives in villages that are most often difficult to reach without resorting to the said migrants’ social networks. The importance of social networks is highlighted in the narratives of many respondents. The Chinese researcher interviewed remarked the absence of “support structures” for Chinese women, who rely on their own social networks in times of need. A Thai respondent below shared an interesting observation:

I think when (Thai) people [...] come, they come because of condition, because of the friends, yeah, they have friends who married here, so when they introduced someone in that area [...] it broadens now [...] even in a small village.

(Thai association leader)

Whether it concerns immigration to Belgium, meeting a Belgian partner, or confronting difficulties in their new country, personal networks of kin, friends, and co-ethnics appear to play a key role in the lives of Asian migrants. These various links represent the forms of proximate relations that can be observed among the populations studied, notably in their frequented social spaces such as ethnic shops, their countries’ embassies/consulates, and places of worship. Their interpersonal linkages facilitate their social existence through time by providing opportunities for conjugal mixedness to flourish and offering help in times of need. In other words, Belgian-Asian conjugal mixedness is embedded in a wide set of social relationships alimenting one another.

### *Intimate diversity within*

Intimate diversity involving Belgians and Asians has inner heterogamous characteristics not only in socio-demographic terms but also in terms of relationship configurations. Age, gender, social class, nationality, ethnicity, and sexuality are categories of difference that can explain intimate diversity within Asian migrant populations and their conjugal mixedness.

(There is) ten-year difference, probably because some Filipino women came here as *au pair*. So, you know the age of *au pair*, 26 and below, and single. So perhaps, they would meet (Belgian men) aged 30 plus, 40 plus, sometimes 50. Sometimes, the age gap is 20 years or more.

(Filipino journalist-entrepreneur)

Many social actors interviewed, like the Filipino respondents above, pointed out the age gap between Belgians and their Asian partners, with the former being much older than the latter. This gap has mainly a gendered dimension as it is usually the Asian women who are younger than their Belgian partners. This age heterogamy has been widely documented among Filipino and Thai women in couple with foreigners (Meszaros, 2017; Statham, 2021). The case of Vietnamese and Laotian men seems to be an exception, as these migrants were mostly younger than their Belgian spouses, specifically in the early period of Vietnamese and Laotian immigration to Belgium. The vignette below presents the observation of a Laotian respondent:

Of the couples of my generation (1970s), there were quite a few Lao men who were with the Belgians. I know two cases very close to me. The men tended to be younger than their *falang*<sup>3</sup> (Western) partners, about ten years apart.

(Laotian long-time immigrant)

The age gap between Belgians and their Asian partners has also social class dimension and temporality. For instance, unlike in the past, an increasing number of Thai migrant spouses meet potential partners outside of the tourism and intimate industry in Thailand, as one social actor interviewed remarked below:

After 2010, maybe, yeah, because when they come to (the) temple, I observe (that) there are Belgian men, and the lady's age is not so different like in Thailand. That is why, and when I sometimes ask them how (did) you know each other, (they got to) know through (the) Internet, and also some go to study, yeah go to study in some courses in Thailand, ah oh that's when they met.

(Thai religious leader)

The changing characteristics of Belgian-Asian couples, as remarked by some interviewed social actors, can be attributed to the opening of other sites of possible intimate encounters, such as matchmaking websites, the higher education sector, and the labour market. These sites can explain the different, most often overlapping categories of Southeast/East Asians in Belgium: marriage migrants, students, and workers (self-employed or salaried ones in mostly the care sector).

In addition, intimate diversity within the populations studied can be noticed in three rising configurations of conjugal mixedness, which goes beyond heterosexual relationships involving either Belgian men and Asian women or Belgian women and Asian men. The first configuration that certain social actors interviewed pointed out concerns LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) couples. For example, a Filipino association leader mentioned the formation of LGBT Filipino-Belgian couples and remarked that gay Filipino partners in these couples find livelihood “in Flanders selling cosmetics” or work as “make-up artists”. The entry of LGBT Filipinos to Belgium has been taking place alongside the immigration of other LGBT Asians, such as gay Chinese (Ponce and Chen, 2023) and Thai male-to-female transgender called *kathoey* (see Pravattiyagul, 2021).

The second relationship configuration brought up during interviews with social actors is a mixed-blended family. Two respondents remarked on this emerging phenomenon: a Japanese language teacher said that “there are many mixed couples who are [...], for example, the Japanese woman (is) the second wife of Mister”, while a Japanese health professional mentioned that “it is completely normal, second, third marriage with children also”. As a previous study shows, this phenomenon also occurs among Filipino-Belgian and Thai-Belgian couples in Belgium (Fresnoza-Flot, 2017).

Finally, another configuration mentioned during interviews with some social actors is what Eeckhaut and colleagues (2011) call “ethnic homogamous marriages”, in which the partners share the same ethnic origin(s). This phenomenon is widely observed among Vietnamese and Laotians, whose early formation of couple with Belgians can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s. According to the interviews with social actors in the Vietnamese immigrant population, in recent years, many Vietnamese men with Belgian nationality tend to marry Vietnamese women – a phenomenon also taking place in the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States of America (Thai, 2008). On the contrary, Belgians of Vietnamese origin (e.g., children born in Belgium to Vietnamese parents) form a couple with Belgian (wo)men. This is also the case of Laotian migrants’ descendants in Belgium, as Keomanichanh observed in her study (2021).

### **Challenges in and prospects of intimate diversity**

The social actors interviewed revealed the challenges that Belgian-Asian couples in Belgium experience or may encounter. These challenges can be summarised into three themes: immigration-related difficulties, tensions in the couple, and conjugal rupture. Against the backdrop of these challenges, most of the social actors interviewed shared their views about the future of intimate diversity involving Belgians and Southeast/East Asians.

One of the main immigration-related challenges that some social actors interviewed cited is the difficulty of the Asian partners “to find a good job” in the Belgian labour market. This difficulty is specifically brought up in the

case of Chinese, South Koreans, and Japanese. It appears to stem from their fluency in one of Belgium's official languages (Dutch, French, and German). It has a gender dimension: many Southeast/East Asian women, despite their university education often ended up working in the service sector as home and office cleaners, language teachers, self-employed entrepreneurs, and so on. Certain nationalities, namely Filipinos, Thais, and Laotians, seem to concentrate in this sector massively. One respondent below remarked:

Among the foreign workers here, Filipinos are more appreciated, (and) more sought, more sought. They are preferred. It is easy for them to find a job, especially for women working in [...] households.

(Filipino religious leader)

Asian men also encounter difficulty finding employment. For instance, a South Korean respondent remarked that it is “not easy to find a job” in Belgium for (South) Korean men in couple with Belgian women. Interestingly, except in two cases, anti-Asian racism and discrimination are not mentioned in the narratives of social actors interviewed. The exceptional cases concern Japanese and South Koreans. A language teacher interviewed noticed that discrimination “in public” of Japanese people is contingent on their place of residence: “It depends (on) where you live. If you live in immigrants’ area, then yeah, then you tend to get more harsh attitudes (from other immigrants)”.

The most salient aspect in the narratives of the social actors interviewed points to conjugal tensions. Issues around money are one of the sources of tension, notably for Chinese, Laotians, and Thais. A Chinese respondent raised the issue of “input in the relationship, the financial input” by explaining that when Belgians go to China with their Chinese partners, they benefit from the latter's social networks (e.g., invited for free meals), which is not the case for the Chinese partners in Belgium: “Usually, bit by bit, the (Chinese women) feel imbalance. They feel the (Belgian partner) doesn't put enough”. In the case of Lao-Belgian couples, a Lao religious leader cited differences between partners regarding money-related issues: the Laotian partner would like to buy real estate, but the Belgian partner only wants to rent. A Laotian entrepreneur mentioned about “money problem”: the Laotian partners would like to help their parents in Laos financially, but their Belgian partners are not wealthy. As the spouse of a Laotian association leader expressed, “We cannot be rich by just marrying a *falang*. It is just a cliché”. This respondent revealed that certain Belgian partners do not like their Laotian wives to send remittances to Laos. This is also a common issue among Thai-Belgian couples, as the respondent below explains:

Their problem is the level of understanding between the partners. For example, we, Thais, when we arrived here, with work [...] and our desire, we earn more than in Thailand; and as a result, [...] many persons

(Thai women) keep money to send to their family (in Thailand), and their husband does not understand it much. [...] This can be a tension, or she does it in secret [...] but when the husband discovers it after, there are disputes, things like that.

(Thai health professional)

Misunderstanding between partners as regards the filial obligation of their Asian spouses to their natal family back home is often coupled with miscommunication due to the low level of fluency in one of the languages in Belgium and the differing levels of educational attainment of the partners. A Japanese respondent shared below her observation:

They cannot communicate well, (due to) language problem [...], and sometimes, they cannot tolerate. They are not patient enough to understand each other. So, I mean, to (be) married to somebody who (has) not (the) same nationality, there are a lot of differences in terms of values and things like that. Unfortunately, they are not patient, so they get angry, something like that. After many years, they get many problems.

(Japanese journalist)

A respondent who has regular contact with her co-nationals and/or their Belgian partners evokes below the possible link between partners' differing educational attainment and conjugal abuses:

(The situation) came from the education level of the person. For sure, she (Filipino woman) doesn't know where Belgium is, (or) what is the culture of Belgium. She comes (to) a country where she doesn't speak the language. She comes (to engage) in a relationship where probably the intentions are not based on love but based on other reasons like financial, and [...] she comes in a situation where the Belgian automatically takes the authoritative role: 'you don't know anything from here. I know how it works here. You (are) just coming from a third world country'. I think that, psychologically, that is played from the start. That's where the abuses come from, so these are all the several factors, and [...] the fact that she is practically alone, and she doesn't know any better.

(Filipino association leader)

Another respondent emphasises below the unequal power dynamics in Vietnamese-Belgian couples:

Belgians, whether men or women, also have [...] power, because they [...] control all the household affairs (and) paperwork. I know quite a few people who tell me their stories.

(Vietnamese association leader)

Such power inequality often translates into domestic violence, a topic that some social actors interviewed evoked. For example, Filipino embassy officials interviewed mentioned getting distress calls regarding domestic abuses but declined to give figures or details. A Japanese respondent and a few Thai social actors interviewed mentioned some cases of domestic abuse among Thais and Japanese in couple with Belgians. A Thai respondent cited the dependency of Thai spouses on their Belgian partners: for instance, having no driving license, they asked the latter to bring them to a Thai temple where they “spend a lot of their time” as they often “have no families here, who have no child here”. Such dependency on Belgian partners is also the situation of some Chinese migrant spouses who rely on their social networks composed of their friends mostly co-nationals.

Unresolved conjugal tensions and misunderstandings in Belgian-Asian couples most often lead to conjugal rupture in the form of separation and divorce. This rupture is particularly cited in the case of Japanese, Thais, and Vietnamese. It triggers difficulties in the lives of Asian migrant spouses, as a respondent explains below:

Here (in Belgium), you have to share the children’s time, right? The problem is (that) sometimes the mothers [...] want to go back to Japan, but then they cannot see (their) children. So, they end up staying here, but sometimes (it is) difficult for them to find a job to live. So, getting (a) divorce in a foreign country is very, very stressful for, yeah, Japanese ladies.

(Japanese language teacher)

Another situation that arises after divorce is when Japanese mothers bring their children to Japan without returning to Belgium. According to one Japanese respondent, there are “many, many” cases of child abduction involving Japanese women formerly in couple with Belgians, a phenomenon widely documented involving Japanese and their ex-partners of other nationalities (e.g., Nagata, 2020).

I observe [...] (that) they are not looking for Belgian ladies anymore. I am thinking, they are looking for Asian ladies because right now, they have many platforms for contact and (through which) to see and to talk to each other.

(Thai religious leader)

Despite separation and divorce cases, except one respondent, all the social actors interviewed like the Thai religious leader cited above were optimistic about the continuity of the phenomenon of Belgian-Asian couple formation. This is due to several factors, such as sexism pushing women to leave their natal country (in the case of Japanese) and more opening of society to foreigners like the case of Thailand. Only the Chinese respondent expressed a rather different viewpoint; aware of the tension between China and certain European countries, she foresaw “much fewer” formations than in the past

of Chinese-Belgian couples, saying that “it is so complex when two countries fight. [...] (it) makes couple life very hard”. This remark affirms that “state and society” constitute one of the powerful factors shaping the life of “mixed” families (de Hart, 2010, p. 114).

## Conclusion

The present chapter examines the perspectives of social actors in selected Southeast and East Asian migrant populations regarding the formation of Asian-Belgian couples. The chapter unveils the diverging and converging points of Asian-Belgian conjugality by situating this mixedness phenomenon within its relevant socio-historical contexts and by paying attention to intimate diversity.

In terms of diverging characteristics, the interviewed social actors viewed the formation of Asian-Belgian couples as arising from socio-historical changes and phenomena that occurred mostly in the countries of origin of the Asian partners, such as the advent of a political regime, the opening of formerly closed economy to the world, the rise of the tourism industry, and the internationalisation of businesses. These changes vary from one country to another, but present some common features with one or more countries, which is the case of Laos and Vietnam as well as that of Japan and South Korea. Asian-Belgian couple formation undergoes reconfiguration through time. In gender terms, some cases start with the arrival of men (Vietnamese and Laotians) and their marriage with Belgian women, whereas in other cases, it is mostly women (Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Thais, and to a lesser extent South Koreans) who started to get married to Belgians. Likewise, the social class background of partners changes through time with students and asylum seekers (Laotians and Vietnamese) as well as skilled workers (Filipinos) entering Belgium in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s; this is followed by the arrival of married spouses or family migrants (Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Thais) from the 1980s onwards.

As regards their converging points, Asian-Belgian couples display intimate diversities both *outside* and *within*. Their common intimate diversity *outside* points to their heterosexual, urban-oriented, and social network-shape characteristics, whereas their shared intimate diversity *within* concerns the differing socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, social class, nationality, ethnicity, and sexuality) of the partners and various relationship configurations (LGBT couples, mixed-blended families, and ethnic homogamous marriages). Another converging point of Asian-Belgian couples refers to the fact that all the Asian partners in these unions encounter challenges in labour market incorporation, mainly due to their low level of fluency in one of the Belgian official languages. The partners in the couples also undergo interpersonal difficulties, which can be due to money-related matters (e.g., remittance sending), power inequality, and/or misunderstanding. Whereas some social actors pointed out the existence of conjugal violence, many others mentioned numerous cases of conjugal separation and divorce.

The above-mentioned points of convergence are fluid and mutable, which suggests the potential continuity of Asian-Belgian couple formation. The future direction of this phenomenon points in general to its diversification both *outside* and *within*, which requires follow-up studies to identify its stakes and impact on the meaning of mixedness and the family.

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### Notes

- 1 The adjective “Western” in this context refers mainly to countries in the European and North American continents, as well as to two countries in Oceania – Australia and New Zealand.
- 2 All the data collection tools used within the frame of the present study received the approval of the Central Ethics Committee of the Université libre de Bruxelles that hosted the research project.
- 3 The Laotian term *falang* (*farang* in Thai) means Western people.

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