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Marriage Migration, Intercultural Families and Global Intimacies

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to three inspiring scholars of migration

Gillian Bottomley (1939–2016)

Pnina Werbner (1944–2023)

Gavin Jones (1940–2022)

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About the Author

Kathryn Robinson is Professor Emerita in Anthropology in the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University, and a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. Author of *Gender Islam and Democracy in Indonesia* (Routledge 2009), she has written extensively on gender relations and marriage in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Her anthropological research also encompasses the social and economic consequences of large-scale mining (*Stepchildren of Progress: The Political Economy of Development in an Indonesian Mining Town*, SUNY Press 1986); and Islam in eastern Indonesia (*Mosques and Imams: Everyday Islam in Eastern Indonesia* NUS Press 2021). She lives in Canberra and enjoys participating in the academic life on the ANU campus, in particular the activities of the Southeast Asia and Gender Institutes.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Transnational Cross-Cultural Marriage in Australia's Multicultural Society

Abstract Negative evaluations of Asian-Australian correspondence marriages (so-called mail-order bride unions) persist since the genesis of the stereotype in the 1980s. This chapter examines historical and social factors contributing to the genesis of the stereotype: marriage histories and practices; globalisation in travel and new forms of information and communication technologies (ICTs); and Australia's relations with Asia. How are real-world relations haunted by negative stereotypes? The chapter introduces a research project spotlighting the families formed through correspondence courtship, relationships that are hidden from view by sensational media reporting of failures.

Keywords Marriage • Intimacy • Stereotypes • Transnational marriage • Correspondence courtship • Romantic love • Masculinity and femininity • Feminism • Changing gender roles • Australia and Asia • Mail-order brides • Racism • Internet

Introduction

Asian women engaged in mediated correspondence courtship leading to marriage with Western men are subjected to pernicious stereotypes that question their motivations and those of their Australian (Western nation)

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and husbands. Whether conducted by way of 'snail mail', or nowadays through the internet, their relationships are frequently labelled as inauthentic. This book goes beyond the sensational mass media reporting and the cultural analysis of the marriage brokering sites, to engage with the individuals and families embarking on the 'adventure in identity' of a transnational, cross-cultural mediated marriage. This most recent form of transnational brokered marriage, that of Asian women, continues a history of spousal migration in Australia that began with white settlement at the end of the eighteenth century. At that time, migrant brides were predominantly white women. The genesis of the negative stereotypes of Asian migrant brides can be linked to the history of settlement and migration. The colonial heritage also plays a role in the genesis of the stereotypes.

The negative stereotype of 'mail-order bride' emerged in public debate in the 1980s in Australia and other nations of the global North. It arose in media hysteria in reporting correspondence courtship between men from the wealthy countries of the global North and women from the global South, at that time predominantly from the Philippines.

Media reports reproduced stereotypes of 'gold digger' women and 'loser' men. The women were depicted as 'highly sexualised mercenaries' (Roces 2021, 119) and the men as old, ugly, or otherwise unable to attract a wife. In Australia, fiancées/spouses were in an uncapped immigration category (see Chap. 2), and the stereotype contained a suspicion that people were using the uncapped spousal reunion category to 'rort' the migration system in Australia.[1] 'All too often, they have been portrayed as if they were trapped in time, hapless victims without agency to negotiate their marginality and subordination' (Bonafacio 2009, 143).

I became aware of this emerging social issue in 1981, when I was asked to write a commentary on an article published in an Australian Social Science journal, written by a male academic married to a Filipina. The article protested the negative stereotypes of 'loser men' and 'gold digger women' in the media (Watkins 1982). I had been interested in debates about the origins, history, and meaning of marriage as an undergraduate student and ardent 'Women's Liberationist' in the 1970s. As a PhD student in Anthropology researching in Indonesia (1977–79), my assumptions about marriage and women's rights/autonomy were tested by conversations with women in arranged marriages, in a rapidly changing social and economic environment in which courtship and free choice marriage was replacing parental choice of spouse (Robinson 1998). The circumstances of the journal editor's request for me to comment related to

the competing stereotypes noted above. One of the editors apparently felt outrage at the article as she subscribed to the 'Orientalist' view, of passive Asian women undermining feminist gains.

I chased down the origins of some of the negative stories in the print media. For example, the head of the marriage guidance bureau had written a letter to a major newspaper stating these brokered marriages were likely to fail. When I contacted the organisation requesting the data, they had none—it was his opinion, based on a stereotype about the nature of marriage (see below), given weight by his public role. This was a precursor of the kind of opinion masquerading as fact that we are all too familiar with today in social media posts. Delving into the issue, I was struck by how little was known about the women and men engaged in transnational correspondence courtship. The public debate was tabloid media reporting, including spotlighting stories of domestic violence (discussed below). As an anthropologist interested in forms of marriage, family, and gender relations, I had questions beyond the shallow assertions in the press, about how these relationships were negotiated and sustained, and the personal meanings in the spouses' lives.

In 2004 I was able to undertake an ethnographic study of mediation of transnational marriages by way of the internet, and also explored established transcultural families in six communities across Australia (see Appendix).[2] This book addresses how courting couples establish intimacy and trust on the internet and investigates the communicative practices associated with 'the presentation of self' that have developed in this digital environment. However, to understand the ways in which such intimate relationships develop, an important comparator group was families living in Australia where one partner was Australian, the other Asian (specifically, Filipino or Indonesian for the purposes of this study). We interviewed both women and men in these bicultural relationships: Jones and Shen (2008) note the lack of research on men contracting transnational marriages in Asia. The established couples encountered through fieldwork give more insights into how family relationships develop and become established.

This book brings together a critical anthropological view of the social institution 'marriage' and of how we understand it, reporting on ethnographic research on mediated marriages. It takes up questions about the real-world impacts of pernicious stereotypes in relation to transcultural relationships and changing modes of mediated courtship. Current practices of brokered marriage are contextualised in the history of marriage

migration in Australia, a settler colony whose brief history has been characterised by regular periods of male-dominated migration flows, and corrections of female marriage migration to ensure demographic growth. Asian-Australian marriages have occurred in the context of increased global flows and movements of people, contextualised by the 'Australia in Asia' debate of the last century. This chapter discusses the genesis of the public debate, and sets out the philosophical and historical discussion of marriage as an institution and as a subject of debate in the public square.

The Genesis of the 'Mail-Order Bride' Stereotype

The media coverage of this new social phenomenon in the 1980s was obsessed with the assumption that sex was the dominant 'motif'; 'loser' western men take advantage of their 'cultural capital' as westerners to access beautiful, sexy (young) Asian women; and that 'gold digger' Asian women manipulate men to obtain money and/or to gain Permanent Residence (PR) or citizenship status in a wealthy country. These negative stereotypes, found in both popular discourse and in scholarly literature, circulate in both the Philippines and the Western countries into which Filipina marriage migrants are marrying.

The simplistic and pejorative reporting concealed connections to other public debates of the day: about the future of marriage, divorce, and women's rights, the new stream of migration to Australia from Southeast Asia post-1975, and increasing global connections through new media and transport connections. Media coverage largely failed to engage the human desires, the 'adventures in identity' and questing for new life chances associated with these intercultural unions. Such stereotypical objectifications involve '(mis)understanding cultures as unitary forms in contact, missing the networks of relations that comprise[s] the intercultural dimension' (Adams and Janover 2009, 230).

The historical genesis of the negative stereotype 'mail-order bride' arose at the time of late twentieth century social upheavals associated with Australia's changing relationship with Asia; the effects of 'globalisation' in travel and communication; and the social disruption as the 1970s women's movement succeeded in achieving significant social changes which have impacted on the institutions of marriage and the family. These social transformations occurred at a critical time in the social history of Australia, a white settler colony moving uneasily away from a 'White Nation' to an aspirational multicultural society (discussed in Chap. 2). The negative