Introduction
In Search of the 'Russian Brides' Village

Driving towards to Sihecun village, I became more and more excited about meeting the Chinese–Russian families that I had read about in the Chinese media. After a five-hour car journey from Changchun, the provincial capital of Jilin, we arrived at the village, which is in Shulan township, on a late August morning in 2016. Several village leaders welcomed our group, which consisted of a male Chinese university professor, a female Chinese research assistant and me, a Belarusian-British researcher working in a British university, and they led us into the main village office. We sat on one side of the long conference table with the receiving side sitting opposite us. The office assistant filled the glasses with water. Those sitting at the table took out pens and note pads in preparation to start an exchange. The village leaders opened the meeting by describing the village. Sihecun was a civilised village that achieved its developmental targets, we were told. The main driving force of development was migration. Out of every 2,500 village residents, 500 migrated abroad to work, mostly to Russia, where they became involved in trade, farming, manufacturing and other business activities. All the way through the introduction I was eagerly waiting for the speaker to move to the main topic and the reason why I was visiting Sihecun – the Russian–Chinese marriages that had led to the Chinese media sphere nicknaming Sihecun the 'Russian brides' village and that had made it famous.[1]

As I waited, I remembered the sequence of events that had led me here. In the mid 2010s, when I was researching cross-border kinship ties on the border between China and Vietnam, a Chinese colleague had prompted me to explore a similar – in his words – 'trend' that was taking place in the opposite part of China on the border with Russia. This encouraged me to open a popular Chinese search engine, Baidu, which

[1] In my characterisation of the village, I employ the language used to describe it in the Chinese media. *Sihecun* became famous as 俄罗斯新娘村 or *Eluosi xinniang cun* (which is translated as the Russian brides village).

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returned numerous results for my search using the key words 'Chinese–Russian marriages' (中俄婚姻 *Zhong E hunyin*) and 'Russian wives' (俄罗斯媳妇 *Eluosi xifu*). There were a considerable number of articles in the Chinese state and popular media about the growing number of happy Chinese–Russian families in north-east China. These productions ranged from short TV reports, printed news articles, entertainment programmes,[2] films and TV dramas[3] to citizen-made products on social media platforms. One article on the Chinese state-run Xinhua News Agency particularly caught my attention. It included a colourful image of a mixed-race couple in traditional Chinese wedding attire, dressed in the way that ethnic minorities are depicted in official documents in China (Fig. I.1). The article about the Russian brides village called Sihecun stated that, ever since 1996, many of the men from this village had been going to Russia to earn money and had returned home with Russian wives. It went on to say that these 'beautiful and happy marriages between China and Russia have become a local legend'.[4] All this made me curious to visit the Russian brides village and meet the women who, according to these journalistic accounts, had settled there. I wanted to interview these women about their life trajectories and their married lives in China. Yet the villagers at the meeting in Sihecun were not in a rush to talk about the Chinese–Russian families. The more I searched for material on Chinese–Russian marriages before my trip to Jilin, the more signs I found that this type of marriage had been constructed as a prototype of international love by the Chinese media. For example, the definition of transnational love on the popular Chinese online encyclopaedia, Baidu Baike, uses the examples and images of Chinese–Russian marriages and families to explain the meaning of transnational love.[5]

[2] Xiang Qin Tuan (相亲团) produced a series of forty short episodes entitled '一见钟情 *Yi jian zhong qing*' (*Love at First Sight*) aired between March and June 2016 on the theme of Chinese–foreign marriages and focusing primarily on romantic relations between Chinese men and women from post-Soviet states, 5 March 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztoTaRH1jc4.

[3] TV drama series and films that were dedicated to romantic Russian–Chinese relations in the 1990s and 2000s are: *Kissing Russia* (1994), *Russian Girls in Harbin* (1997), *North-East Love Story* (2012) and *My Natasha* (2012). In 2019 a joint Russian–Chinese production company released the romantic comedy *How I Became Russian* on the subject of Chinese–Russian romantic relationships. I discuss some of these TV dramas and films in Chapter 2.

[4] Jingwei Yuan, 'In One Jilin Village over 200 Fortune Seekers Who Worked in Russia Marry 22 Russian Brides' [吉林1 村庄赴俄淘金出200余户富翁娶22位俄新娘 *Jilin yi cunzhuang fu e taojin chu 200 yu hu fuweng qu 22 wei e xinniang*], 新文化网 *Xin wenhua wang*, 16 November 2011, http://news.sohu.com/20111116/n325764058.shtml; 'Village of Russian Brides in China', http://greenlea.ru/Articles_Directory/Village_Of_Russian_Brides_In_China.htm.

[5] Baidu Baike, 'Transnational Love' 跨国恋 (*kuaguo lian*), https://baike.baidu.com/item/跨国恋/8592263?fr=aladdin.

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Figure I.1 A Chinese–Russian couple in traditional Chinese wedding garments.
Source: Xinhua News Agency

Years after the first publications about the Russian brides village, the same discursive and representational tropes operate in labelling Sihecun as a mecca for Russian brides migrating to China.[6] The fame of the village has remained alive in the public imagination in China and has also attracted academic interest. In 2013, Sihecun village became the subject of a university research project on cultural adaptation between foreign female spouses and local residents in Chinese–Russian transnational marriages, led by a research team from a university in

[6] Damaotou, 'The Largest 1990s Russian Brides' Village in the Country Was Full of Bachelors', '[直击国内最大的"俄罗斯新娘村", 90年代村子里大多是光棍! *Zhiji guonei zui da de Eluosi xinniang cun 90nian dai cunzi li daduo shi guanggun*], 13 March 2017, www.360doc.com/content/17/0313/13/32087810_636457482.shtml; 'Chinese Bachelor Village Counterattack, Dozens of Young Men Marry Russian Daughters-in-law and Becoming of "Foreign Daughters-in-law Village"' [中国光棍村大逆袭, 几十名小伙娶俄罗斯媳妇, 变 "洋媳妇村" *Zhongguo guanggun cun da ni xi ji shi ming xiaohuo qu Eluosi xifu, bian 'yangxifu' cun*], 7 July 2018, www.sohu.com/a/239796767_100039262; Phoenix Fashion, 'China's Largest Foreign Brides' Village: All Young Men Marry Russian Women', [中国最大洋媳妇村: 小伙都娶了俄罗斯姑娘 *Zhongguo zuida yangxifu cun: Xiaohuo dou qu le Eluosi guniang*], 19 February 2018, https://fashion.ifeng.com/a/20180219/40291670_0.shtml; 'China's "foreign brides village" stuns people', '[中国"洋媳妇村", 让人惊呆了! *Zhongguo "yang xifu cun", rang ren jingdai le*!'], 17 August 2019, www.360doc.com/content/19/0817/14/11405568_855476352.shtml.

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Beijing.[7] This state-funded study aimed to investigate cross-cultural communication in cross-border marriages at 'the deepest and highest level of human relations'.[8] Yet, according to the lead researcher, the team failed to find a single Russian spouse living in the village during their research trip and they had to use third-hand research with local residents as their primary source of data. Like the media accounts, the project report stated that for over thirty years the village had been transformed from a poor village with bachelors into a prosperous Russian brides village. It also found that the fame of the village had started attracting Chinese bachelors from other parts of the country to Sihecun, hoping to meet Russian women.[9] The media coverage of the village's transformation even prompted the establishment of a tourist cooperative to cater for tourists in 2018, a model Russian village, and a special mention of the village in the local government online publicity materials.[10] The eye-catching images and stories circulating in the public domain have constructed a widely held impression that the number of Chinese–Russian marriages is increasing. They feed into the popular belief that Chinese–Russian marriages are commonplace and the Russian brides village is real.

During our meeting the village representatives spoke enthusiastically about local men who had made a fortune in cross-border trade, but they were unable to name any specific Russian women living there at the time. Indeed, during the visit to the village the only 'Russian' (Soviet, to be precise) faces I saw there were those of Lenin and Stalin, alongside the portrait of Mao on a poster memorialising socialist leaders on the wall of the meeting room. This reference to the common ideological lineage was the main trope that joined together Chinese and Russian people in a collective memory of socialist experiments. When I asked, the villagers said that the Chinese–Russian couples had moved away to live in the cities and my hope of interviewing the Russian women was thwarted. At last, one of the officials recalled in passing that the village had served as a film set for the 26-episode TV drama, *A Northeast Love Story* (东北爱情故事*Dongbei aiqing gushi*), which had been filmed in the area. I knew then that to understand what was going on I first

[7] Junfang He, 'A Study of the Cultural Adaptation of Foreign Female Spouses and Local Residents in Chinese–Russian Transnational Marriages – A Case Study of Sihecun Village in Xiaocheng Township of Shulan City in Jilin Province' ([中俄跨国婚姻外籍女性配偶与当地居民相互的文化适应研究——以吉林舒兰市小城四合村为例*Zhong e kuaguo hunyin waiji nyuxing peiou yu dangdi jumin xianghu de wenhua shiying yanjiu yi Jilin Shulanshi Xiaocheng Sihecun weili*], final thesis of National University Student Innovation Training Programme GCCX of Minzu University of China, 3 March 2013.

[8] Ibid., 10.

[9] Ibid., 11.

[10] Shulan People's Government, 'Shulan's Russian Brides Village', 6 April 2021, www.shulan.gov.cn/zjsl/bnsl/201706/t20170621_187582.html?version=slh.

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had to watch this television production. I discuss the themes and storylines constructed by this and other TV drama creators in Chapter 2.

The Russian brides village so vividly depicted in social media and the popular imagination is part of broader processes that feed into a widespread belief in the popularity of Chinese–Russian marriages. Chinese bloggers and the Chinese state media alike regularly remark that 'marrying a man from China' has become fashionable among women from the former Soviet Union.[11] In sharp contrast to the negative public images of 'mail-order brides', which is directed at women from south-east Asia, most of the media coverage of 'Russian brides' and Chinese–Russian marriages has focused on their positive, progressive and civilised character.[12] In 2018, for example, the *Global Times*, the international mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), published an article suggesting that Chinese–Russian intermarriages are becoming integral to the closer cooperation between the two countries as a result of the Belt and Road Initiative.[13] This article was later republished on Russia's main global media platform, Sputnik International. The Chinese national trend to present Chinese–Russian marriages as the party's preferred type of international romance apparently has the approval of Russia's leaders. In the heavily censored publishing environment, such media content could have been published only with the approval of the censors.[14] An important note published in 2013 by the Chinese Central Party Committee to all administrative levels, when China's first Immigration Law came into force, announced that the management of the cultural sphere was being strengthened to 'allow absolutely no opportunity or outlets for incorrect thinking or viewpoints to spread'.[15]

[11] Artem Zhdanov, 'Focus on Sino–Russian Transnational Marriage – Is It Out of True Love or Reality?' [聚焦中俄跨国婚姻-是出于真情还是现实？*Jujiao Zhong E kuaguo hunyin - shi chuyu zhenqing haishi xianshi?*], Sino–Russian Information Network [中俄资讯网*Zhong E zixun wang*], 20 June 2012, www.chinaru.info/huarenhuashang/huarenkantai/14734.shtml.

[12] For research on Chinese–Vietnamese marriages see Yuk Wah Chan, *Vietnamese–Chinese Relationships at the Borderlands: Trade, Tourism and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 2013); Peili Huang, 'Gender, Mobility, and the Space In-between: Vietnamese Brides Negotiating the Boundaries of Tradition and Modernity at the China–Vietnam Border', PhD diss., University of Hong Kong, 2014; Lianling Su, 'Cross-Border Marriage of Vietnamese Women to China', PhD diss., Kansas State University, 2013.

[13] *Global Times*, 'Matchmakers See Chinese–Russian Intermarriages as More Links on Belt and Road', 3 March 2018, https://sputniknews.com/20180303/china-russian-marriage-booming-business-1062200297.html.

[14] Yuwei Hu, 'Matchmaking Agency Owners See China–Russia Intermarriages from a Belt and Road Perspective', 26 February 2018, reprinted on Sputnik International, https://sputniknews.com/20180303/china-russian-marriage-booming-business-1062200297.html.

[15] ChinaFile, 'Document 9: A Chinafile Translation of "Communique on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere: A Notice from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's General Office"', 22 April 2013, www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation, 8 November 2013.

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Trying to make sense of this disjuncture between the lavish celebration of Chinese–Russian marriages by the media and their relative absence in China is the main motivation for this work. During my frustrated search for the Russian brides village, I have come to observe a constant blurring of reality and fiction, or what Umberto Eco calls hyperreality, which comes about when 'imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fakes'.[16] The notion of hyperreality refers to an imitation of reality that is so convincing it can be mistaken for the real thing. Although the number of Chinese–Russian marriages has seemingly been growing, along with other kinds of transnational and cross-border intimacies, Chinese–Russian marriages have become a notable subject of Chinese media constructs and national fantasies. The hyperreal in this context signifies the idealised and romanticised portrayals of these relationships that are often perpetuated through media and popular culture. How to understand this particular foreign-brides phenomenon that peppers Chinese media discourses and cultural practices is the main research concern pursued here. Furthermore, how are the media and popular imaginations of the ideal international family model related to the living experiences of the women who married and moved to live in China? I argue that the hyperreality of these marriages emerges from the interplay between the logics of desire, marriage and race in China's pursuit of national rejuvenation. Chinese imaginations of the shifting global order intersect with the logics of what constitutes national strength and the ideal family form, asserting a particular vision of superior masculinity and desired femininity – both of which are deeply sexualised and racialised.[17]

China's race for global power is intimately related to the way that the ideal family form is imagined and actively constructed.[18] My discussion shows that the marriage and immigration regulations are part of the

[16] Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1977), 8.

[17] For the role of sex and gender in organising social orders, see Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic of Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 27–62; for a discussion of the relationship between pleasure and politics and erotics as an extension of social practices and political institutions, see Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein, 'Introduction: Mediated Transnationalism and Social Erotics,' *Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no 2 (2004): 357–365; for an analysis of the interplay between love, emotion and political economy and the sex industry, global economy and dreams of global power, see Nicole Constable, *Romance on a Global Stage: Penpals, Virtual Ethnography and 'Mail-Order' Marriages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) and Kimberley Kay Hoang, *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 180.

[18] Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Charlie Yi Zhang, *Dreadful Desires: The Uses of Love in Neoliberal China*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

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national security agenda premised on the heterosexual family form as the foundational society unit. The China Dream hinges on the continuity of heterosexual domesticity where white femininity plays a significant role as a symbol of China's growing influence and attractiveness as a global power. White femininity is important in the minds of Chinese propaganda and cultural content makers because it showcases the success of Chinese masculinity. The women who could be conquered and folded into the Chinese patriarchal order take on a central role in the state's narratives supported by popular attitudes and legal structures. This manifests in the family visitor visa that does not grant their holders a right to work until a long-term residence permit is granted. These restrictions put foreign women in a situation where they have to capitalise on their white privilege and at the same time actively negotiate their and their children's citizenship rights and resist the order that limits their role in the Chinese society to the familial sphere.

I.1 The China Dream: Between the Hyperreal Constructions and Lived Realities

The China Dream is the latest in the series of ideological orientations (提法*tifa*) formulated by the Chinese communist leadership since Mao Zedong. In November 2012, in the first address to the nation as the new leader, Xi Jinping pronounced, 'Now, we are all discussing the China Dream. In my view, to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream of the Chinese nation in modern times.'[19] Along with 'scientific development' (2004), 'harmonious society' (2004) and 'harmonious world' (2005) that preceded it, the China Dream provides a discursive umbrella for all Chinese domestic and foreign policies. The quest for the China Dream is fuelled by the national desire to make China the most influential global power. In May 2013, Xi specified that 'the Chinese dream pertains to the past and the present but also the future'. William A. Callahan shows how, in this process, China and the concepts from its past, including 天下*tianxia* (all-under-heaven), 大同*datong* (great harmony) and 和谐*hexie* (harmony), emerged as ideas for the ideal global order with China at its helm. The China Dream works as the meta-narrative that shifts national debates from China's past of national humiliation to its future as a great power at the centre of the world. It conjures a model of the world in place of what Chinese leaders see as an unjust and chaotic international order. Among official national dreams are reunification with Taiwan and achieving the

[19] Xi cited in William A. Callahan, *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

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goal of a moderately developed society by the centenary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2049. This collective China Dream takes shape in the party documents, leaders' speeches and official celebrations, such as the National Day parades and the CCP's anniversaries. Chinese museums, history books and school curriculums all participate in drawing up the collective national China Dream. In this process, national histories are revisited and rewritten, and myths and fictions are produced. As well as being oriented towards building an alternative model for the international order, the China Dream works at the level of individuals, accommodating different visions, hopes, anxieties and desires of a wide range of Chinese people. The China Dream serves as a contemporary national framework for hyperreal constructs, exemplified by a Russian brides village that sustains and refines its existence as a convincing, near-real reality mirage.

The government instructs the Chinese people to have dreams and these dreams take on particular expressions. For example, Xi observed that 'the Chinese dream is the dream of the country and the nation but also of every ordinary Chinese … The great renewal of the Chinese nation will eventually become a reality in the course of the successive effort of youth.'[20] The dreams' affective qualities are tangible in the sphere of popular culture that actively engages with official discourses about the meaning of being Chinese in the twenty-first century.[21] These dreams manifest in how, for example, various social and national issues are coded and represented. Marriages and relations with foreigners are among the topics of China's national discourse where China's collective geopolitical and individual dreams intertwine. Looking at the sphere of family and China–foreign relations through the prism of Chinese–foreign marriages lends itself as an angle to approach an understanding of the China Dream as a space where hyperreality, produced through official statements, propaganda slogans, media constructs and popular representations, meets lived experiences and everyday struggles of those who are subjected to its language, structures of feeling, laws and policies.

The official pronouncements do not often mention explicitly but always imply that the realisation of the individual and collective China Dream rests on the principles of family, marriage and procreation and that it is inseparable from the goal of national growth and development. In 2023, the *Global Times* editorial identified the national goal of

[20] Xi cited in Kerry Brown, 'Knowing and Feeling the "China Dream": Logic and Rhetoric in the Political Language of Xi's China', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 51, no. 3 (2022): 437–455, p. 453.

[21] Callahan, *China Dreams*.

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becoming a globally 'trustworthy, lovable, and respectable' nation as the imperative for the Law on Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China.[22] This longing for global love and respect is an example of what Kerry Brown identifies as 'bolder thoughts and emotions' enabled by China's economic growth and global influence over the last forty-five years of reforms.[23] In this book, I examine how Chinese man–Slavic woman marriage is constructed as ideal for the pursuit of the China Dream and what it is like to live in the China Dream, in between its hyperreal constructions and the experiences of navigating the institutional and legal dimensions, cultural norms and societal habits of its fast-changing transformations. What is striking about the national fame of the Sihecun village is not only its favourable portrayal of Chinese–Russian marriages but the close association drawn between this model of Chinese–foreign marriages and the development model of post-Mao China. The story of the village's transformation from poverty to wealth and the role that marriages with Russian women play in this transformation is related to the official Chinese version of China's modernisation and opening up. It is therefore important to consider the relationship between marriage, sex, race and ideas of development in China's dream of national rejuvenation.

I.2 Marriage Migration, Development and Racial Hierarchies

The questions of love, marriage and family have been central to the way Chinese people collectively imagine the national success of their nation, as in other instances of revolutionary states.[24] The institution of marriage is directly related to the themes of national borders, the present and future of the nation, population governance, citizenship and world order.[25] Up until the early twentieth century, when the power of the

[22] Global Times, 'The Foreign Relations Law Puts China's Attitude on the Table: Global Times Editorial', 30 July 2023, www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1293454.shtml.

[23] Brown, 'Knowing and Feeling', 445.

[24] Gail Hershatter, 'State of the Field: Women in China's Long Twentieth Century', *Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 4 (2004): 991–1065; Lynn Hunt explored the familial order that lay at the heart of the 'political unconscious' of the French Revolution (Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[25] Faye Ginsburg and Rayana Rapp, eds., *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Margaret Jolly and Kalpana Ram, eds., *Borders of Being: Citizenship, Fertility, and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); V. Spike Peterson, 'Towards Queering the Globally Intimate', *Political Geography* 56 (2017): 114–116; Christopher Harker and Lauren L. Martin, 'Familial Relations: Spaces, Subjects, and Politics', *Environment and Planning A* 44, no. 4 (2012): 768–775; Sara L. Friedman and

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Qing, the last ruling dynasty, declined, the imperial rulers of China had relied on peaceful intermarriage (和亲*heqin*) with people outside the Emperor's direct rule as a governing principle.[26] Uradyn Bulag in his research on the historical role of Central Asian frontiers in China's national dynamics noted that 'kinship, gender, sexuality, and love' were at the heart of how civilisation and ethnic identity have been demarcated in China.[27] Scholars working in other contemporary contexts have examined the geopolitical aspects of international marriages to understand the structural injustice of spousal and family visa regimes,[28] and the way that state regulations draw boundaries between being a foreigner and being a citizen, the private and public spheres, legal and illegal practices, and fake and real marital relations.[29] By focusing on marriage and immigration, we can understand the effects of socioeconomic and geopolitical forces on life choices and the emotional dimensions of mobility experiences more clearly.[30] In China, these processes need to be considered in light of the characteristics of China's development model and its engagement with the world.

Pardis Mahdavi, 'Introduction: Migrant Encounters', in *Migrant Encounters: Intimate Labor, the State, and Mobility across Asia*, ed. S. L. Friedman and P. Mahdavi (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 1–24.

[26] Yihong Pan, 'Marriage Alliances and Chinese Princesses in International Politics from Han through Tang', *Asia Major* 10, nos. 1–2 (1997): 95–131; Rubie Watson and Patricia B. Ebrey, eds., *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Uradyn Bulag, *The Mongols at China's Edge: History and the Politics of National Unity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

[27] Bulag, *The Mongols*, 99.

[28] Joe Turner, 'The Family Migration Visa in the History of Marriage Restrictions: Postcolonial Relations and the UK Border', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 17, no. 4 (2014): 623–643; Anne-Marie D'Aoust, 'Love as a Project of (Im) mobility: Love, Sovereignty and Governmentality in Marriage Migration Management Practices', *Global Society* 28, no. 3 (2014): 317–335; Alexandria J. Innes and Brent J. Steele, 'Spousal Visa Law and Structural Violence: Fear, Anxiety, and Terror of the Everyday', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8, no. 3 (2015): 401–415; Saskia Bonjour and Betty de Hart, 'Intimate Citizenship: Introduction to the Special Issue on Citizenship, Membership and Belonging in Mixed-Status Families', *Identities* 28, no. 1 (2021): 1–17; Helen Wray, 'An Ideal Husband? Marriages of Convenience, Moral Gate-keeping and Immigration to the UK', *European Journal of Migration and Law* 8, nos. 3–4 (2006): 202–320.

[29] Georgie Wemyss, Nira Yuval-Davis and Kathryn Cassidy, '"Beauty and the Beast": Everyday Border and "Sham Marriage" Discourse', *Political Geography* 66 (2018): 151–160; Meihua Chen, 'The "Fake Marriage" Test in Taiwan: Gender, Sexuality, and Border Control', *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 4, no. 2 (2015): 496–518; Sara L. Friedman, *Exceptional States: Chinese Immigrants and Taiwanese Sovereignty* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

[30] Nikola Mai and Russell King, 'Love, Sexuality and Migration: Mapping the Issue(s)', *Mobilities* 4, no. 3 (2009): 295–307; Peterson, 'Towards Queering'; Aoileann Ní Mhurchú, 'Intimately Inhabiting Borders: Walking in-between Belonging and Otherness through Constructions of Home', *Geopolitics* 26, no. 2 (2019): 404–424.

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The notion of a heterosexual marriage and a family with one, two and, recently, three children has been at the heart of China's national narratives of what constitutes successful and wholesome personal development and a strong and healthy nation. Concerns over sexuality and reproduction have played a continuous role in the Chinese political elite's governing of its population since the late nineteenth century.[31] Since the foundation of the PRC in 1949, marriage reform and family planning rules have been aimed at maximising the nation's strength by regulating and closely monitoring the reproductive lives of Chinese citizens. The effects of the forty-year-long family planning (1978–2015) policy that prioritised economic development are enduring, with Chinese society facing a worsening sex-ratio imbalance and an ageing population.[32] Moreover, the choice of a life partner in China has been historically a matter for the family, community and the state to regulate, and the heavy influence of the state in family affairs has persisted to the present day. In recent years, an ideological stress on 'beautiful and happy marriages' has become part of broad Chinese discourses on what constitutes beauty, harmony and modernity, valorising the ideal family at the core of social relationships and extending it to the nation as a whole.[33] The party-state aims to encourage Chinese citizens to learn and internalise the correct values which will make them happy. The China Dream plays a prominent role in state interference in the sphere of marriage and interpersonal relations. China's national desire to become a strong and developed nation has been distilled here into promoting a particular kind of international marriage: one between a successful Chinese man and a white woman. The dominant stories of Chinese–foreign marriages all celebrate the combination of a post-Soviet Slavic wife and Chinese husband at the very time when marriages between Chinese men and white women in China are both rare and statistically insignificant.[34]

In the Maoist period, marriages with foreigners were rare as they were officially forbidden by the Communist Party until the restrictions on the contacts with the foreign world were gradually lifted in the reform

[31] Sarah Mellors Rodriguez, *Reproductive Realities in Modern China: Birth Control and Abortion*, 1911–2021 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[32] Feng Wang and Yong Cai, 'China Isn't Having Enough Babies', op. ed., *The New York Times*, 26 February 2019; Björn Alpermann and Shaohua Zhan, 'Population Planning after the One-Child Policy: Shifting Modes of Political Steering in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 117 (2019): 348–366.

[33] Gerda Wielander, 'Introduction: Chinese Happiness, a Shared Discursive Terrain', in *Chinese Discourses on Happiness*, ed. G. Wielander and D. Hird (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018), 7–8.

[34] Pan Wang, *Love and Marriage in Globalizing China* (London: Routledge, 2015).

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era.[35] As a latecomer to the global marriage migration market, China has been primarily known and studied as a source of brides for more affluent destinations in Asia and the West. The dominant dynamic of marriage migration across China's borders has been the migration of Chinese women to the West and to richer East Asian countries.[36] In Canada and Taiwan, for example, immigration authorities identified China as one of the countries of origin of high risk 'fake' marriages.[37]

Over the last two decades, China has joined other countries in Asia where incoming marriage migration had been on the rise for some time.[38] Marriage migration to China has become a focus of scholarly inquiries into growing contacts across China's borders and the emergence of contact zones between foreigners and locals in metropolitan and trading centres.[39] Among the features that shape and relate it to global processes are the global norms of hypergamy, restrictive citizenship laws

[35] Beverley Hooper, *Foreigners under Mao: Western Lives in China, 1949–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 182–183; Elaine Jeffreys and Pang Wang, 'The Rise of Chinese–Foreign Marriage in Mainland China, 1979–2010', *China Information* 27, no. 3 (2013): 347–369.

[36] Monica Liu, *Seeking Western Men: Email-Order Brides under China's Global Rise* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).

[37] Maria Cecilia Hwang and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, 'Intimate Migrations: The Case of Marriage Migrants and Sex Workers in Asia', in *Routledge Handbook of Asian Migrations*, ed. Gracia Liu Farrer and Brenda S. A. Yeoh (New York: Routledge, 2018), 64–74; Yen-Ning (Antonia) Chao, 'Rethinking Nationalism through Intimate Relationships: Conflicts in Cross-Strait Marriages' ('*Qingmi guanxi zuo wei fansi guo zu zhuyi de chang yu: wen lao rong min de liang'an hunyin chongtu*'), *Taiwan Shehuixue* 16 (2008): 97–148; Chen, 'The "Fake Marriage" Test'.

[38] Delia Davin, 'Marriage Migration in China and East Asia', *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 50 (2007): 83–95; Lieba Faier, *Intimate Encounters: Filipina Women and the Remaking of Rural Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Gavin Jones and Hsiu-hua Shen, 'International Marriage in East and Southeast Asia: Trends and Research Emphases', *Citizenship Studies* 12, no. 1 (2008): 9–25; Wei-Jun Jean Yeung and Zheng Mu, 'Migration and Marriage in Asian Contexts', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46, no. 14 (2020): 2863–2879; Mika Toyota, 'Editorial Introduction: International Marriage, Rights and the State in East and Southeast Asia', *Citizenship Studies* 12, no. 1 (2008): 1–7; Nicola Piper and Mina Roces, eds., *Wife or Worker? Asian Women and Migration* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

[39] Heila Sha (Saheira Haliel), 'Transnational Marriage in Yiwu, China: Trade, Settlement and Mobility', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 11 (2019): 2326–2345; Yu Qiu, 'Complicit Intimacy: A Study of Nigerian–Chinese Intimate/Business Partnerships in South China', 2016, PhD diss., University of Cambridge; Yang Zhou, 'Intercultural Marriage, Legal Status and Social Belonging in China: Chinese–African Couples and Families in Guangzhou', 2017, PhD diss., University of Cologne; Shanshan Lan, 'Transnational Business and Family Strategies among Chinese/Nigerian Couples in Guangzhou and Lagos', *Asian Anthropology* 14, no. 2 (2015): 133–149; Daniel Nehring and Xiying Wang, 'Making Transnational Intimacies: Intergenerational Relationships in Chinese–Western Families in Beijing', *Journal of Chinese Sociology* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1–24.

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and changing gender and family norms.[40] Chinese–foreign marriages with immediate neighbours, particularly within Greater China and across the borders of China–South Korea, China–Vietnam and China–Japan were the dominant trends of this process. Marriages between South Korean men and ethnic Korean women in China, as well as Greater China marriages across mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, have been characterised by co-ethnic and linguistic ties that played a significant role in driving and shaping this wave of marriage migration.[41] The proximity, asymmetry and precarious nature of China–Vietnam relations manifested in cross-border interactions marked by anxiety and mistrust – a dynamic that Zhang Juan describes as 'neighbourly unease'.[42] The Chinese sense of distrust towards Vietnam extends to Vietnamese women, who are often stereotyped as unreliable and opportunistic. They are frequently associated with sex work and perceived as marrying Chinese men solely for the convenience of staying in China.[43] These damaging stereotypes affect women from co-ethnic groups over the Chinese borders with Southeast Asia who married through kinship and inter-ethnic ties.

In contrast to the ethnic and cultural connections that underpin marriages between China and South Korea, Vietnam and other southeastern neighbours of China, Yamaura in her study of China–Japan commercial marriages employs the concepts of 'proximity, similiarity and familiarity'.[44] Chinese women in Northeast China participating in the matchmaking events with Japanese men perceived a cultural and territorial

[40] Kathryn Robinson, 'Marriage Migration, Gender Transformations, and Family Values in the "Global Excumene"', *Gender, Place and Culture* 14, no. 4 (2007): 483–497; Friedman and Mahdavi, 'Introduction: Migrant Encounters'; Nicole Constable, ed., *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Constable, *Romance on a Global Stage*; Lucy Williams, *Global Marriage: Cross-Border Marriage Migration in Global Context* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[41] Caren Freeman, *Making and Faking Kinship: Marriage and Labor Migration between China and South Korea* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Lara Momesso, 'Marriage Migration and State Interests: Reflections from the Experiences of Marriage Migrants from the People's Republic of China in Taiwan', *ASIA* 70, no. 3 (2016): 903–920.

[42] Juan Zhang, 'Neighbouring in Anxiety along the China–Vietnam Border', in *The Art of Neighbouring: Making Relations across China's Borders*, ed. Martin Saxer and Juan Zhang (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

[43] Caroline Grillot and Juan Zhang, 'Ambivalent Encounters: Business and the Sex Markets at the China–Vietnam Borderland', in *Chinese Encounters in Southeast Asia: How People, Money, and Ideas from China Are Changing a Region*, ed, Pál Nyíri and Danielle Tan (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2017), 6.

[44] Chigusa Yamaura, *Marriage and Marriageability: The Practices of Matchmaking between Men from Japan and Women from Northeast China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 14.

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proximity to Japan, even though geographically they were closer to Russia.[45] Russia's culture, language, belief systems and predominantly white population were perceived as more different and exotic compared to Japan's. The stress on similarity advocated by Japanese men and brokers reinforces the 'similar but superior' qualities of Japan.[46] Marriages between Chinese men and African women, and African men and Chinese women, have attracted negative media and popular attention, even if African women are sometimes portrayed as offering a solution to the problem of the lack of women in rural China.[47] A new Chinese social media phenomenon of African wives living in rural China, speaking fluent local dialect and expressing their love and devotion to their Chinese families and China in their social media on the one hand attracts praise from the observers, and on the other exposes the anti-Black sentiments aimed at the Black people and children of mixed Chinese–Black heritage.[48] The racial and gendered logics underlying national belonging in China privilege female whiteness and Chinese paternal ancestry in determining who can claim Chineseness.[49]

Since the 2010s, China has been actively engaged in designing its own immigration regime and infrastructures.[50] The establishment of the National Immigration Administration in 2018 symbolised China's emergence as an immigrant destination country. Despite the major disruption caused by strict lockdowns and the closure of borders to foreign entry during the global pandemic between 2020 and 2023, new state activity in the legislative, administrative and regulatory areas of immigration and

[45] Ibid., 13.
[46] Ibid., 16.
[47] Guangzhi Huang, 'Foreigner in China: Economic Transition and the Chinese State's Vision of Immigration and Race', *Made in China* 2 (2021): 66–71.
[48] Kutus Oluwatoyin Adebayo, 'Absentee Fathers, Left-behind Wives and "Ghost Babies": Interracial Romance and Afri-Chinese Families', *International Migration* 59, no. 2 (2021): 263–265; Heidi Haugen, 'The Love Child and the State: Transnational Family Formation in Guangzhou', *Nan Nü* 24 (2022): 134–160; Willy Sier and Elena Barabantseva, 'Descendants of the Dragon: Racialized Mixed Chinese Chineseness in Immigrant China', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2024): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2397548.
[49] Zhiqiu Benson Zhou, 'Patriarchal Racism: The Convergence of Anti-blackness and Gender Tension on Chinese Social Media', *Information, Communication and Society* 27, no. 1 (2024): 223–239.
[50] Friedman, *Exceptional States*; Sara L. Friedman, 'Regulating Cross-Border Intimacy: Authenticity Paradigms and the Specter of Illegality among Chinese Marital Immigrants to Taiwan', in *Migrant Encounters: Intimate Labor, the State, and Mobility across Asia*, ed. Sara L. Friedman and Pardis Mahdavi (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 206–229; Shu-ming Chang and Hong-Zen Wang, 'The Commodification of International Marriages: Cross-Border Marriage Business in Taiwan and Vietnam', *International Migration* 40, no. 6 (2002): 93–116.

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marriage has accompanied these developments. Meanwhile, media and public interest in cross-border romance has flourished.

As the government prioritises attracting highly skilled workers to drive innovation and high-tech development, family migration and reunion have been regulated through the lens of China's national development goals and security concerns rather than from the perspective of an individual's right to family life. In 2020, when Chinese legislators consulted the public on proposed revisions to the 'Regulations on the Management of Foreigners' Permanent Residency', one of the most controversial aspects was a new reunification provision.[51] The Chief Editor of *Global Times*, the Party's main English-language outlet, published an opinion piece arguing that this provision would open the door to chain migration and an influx of cheap imported labour.[52] He contended that China was not an immigration state and had no need to become one. These debates cannot be separated from the gendered and racialised hierarchies that shape China's development trajectory and its often fraught relationship with the West.

China's national narrative of its transformation from poverty and isolation to its global rise attributes its success to the entrepreneurial and personal accomplishments of Chinese people led by the CCP. These accomplishments are constructed along norms of gender and sexuality and are consistent with China's development values. Specifically, these goals value financial success and the ability to provide and engage in the conspicuous consumption of goods and services, including sex, in men, and are an important measure of their entrepreneurial quality[53] and the realisation of their masculinity.[54] As Zhang Li puts it, men demonstrate their masculinity in China by using their power to provide economic

[51] Dorcas Wong and Fuki Fu, 'Foreign Permanent Residency in China: New Draft Regulations Released', *China Briefing*, 5 March 2020, www.china-briefing.com/news/foreign-permanent-residency-china-new-regulations-exposure-draft-released/.

[52] Guangzhi Huang, 'Foreigner in China: Economic Transition and the Chinese State's Vision of Immigration and Race', *Made in China* (May 2021): 66–71, p. 68, https://madeinchinajournal.com/2021/12/01/foreigner-in-china-economic-transition-and-the-chinese-states-vision-of-immigration-and-race/

[53] Quality or *suzhi* (素质) expresses a person's or place's proximity to the idealised vision of development in China. It is broad in its meaning, ranging from education and income to manners.

[54] Jie Yang, 'The Crisis of Masculinity: Class, Gender, and Kindly Power in Post-Mao China', *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 3 (2010): 550–562; John Osburg, *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China's New Rich* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Tiantian Zheng, 'Cool Masculinity: Male Clients' Sex Consumption and Business Alliance in Urban China's Sex Industry', *Journal of Contemporary China* 15, no. 46 (2006): 161–182; Kam Louie, *Chinese Masculinities in a Globalizing World* (London: Routledge, 2015); Geng Song, 'Chinese Masculinities Revisited: Male Images in Contemporary Television Drama Series', *Modern China* 36, no. 4 (2010):

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value and consume goods.[55] This is how favouring a particular kind of Chinese–foreign marriage as an acceptable form of sexual relationship relates to China's national desire for global acceptance, admiration and power. Self-made entrepreneurs with foreign wives (particularly of a white European genotype) could be seen as the symbols of economic and personal achievement in China. The absence of positive narratives of Chinese women marrying Russian (or other foreign) men is important in this regard.[56] Ironically, this preference for a particular kind of Chinese–foreign marriage relies on and reproduces the racial hierarchy that has underpinned the logic and expansion of the world order that Chinese elites regularly critique. In this scenario, the Chinese men do not imagine themselves as demolishing the world order constructed by white Western men, but as replacing white men in their position next to white women. Chinese political elites have been imagining an alternative world order modelled on the pre-modern imperial idea of all-under-heaven (*tianxia*) that some scholars have characterised as a hierarchical order with a Sino-centric view of the world.[57] Gendered and racialised readings of China's worldmaking practices are less common. Yet, gender, sex and race are central to how the China Dream is imagined and realised. As I show in this book, gendered and sexualised popular narratives and visual representations of male and national success during the reform period in part rely on the idea of marriage between Chinese men and desirable and accessible white women as the optimal combination for China's successful global future. A Slavic woman from the former Soviet Union fulfils this image. Understanding how the construction of the China Dream intersects with the politics of gender, race and sexuality enables a deeper grasp of China's engagement with the world order.

This national desire for an ideal Chinese–foreign marriage cannot be understood independently from the actively constructed collective memory of national humiliation that Chinese leaders rely on in their goal

404–434; Geng Song and Derek Hird, *Men and Masculinities in a Global Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Magdalena Wong, *Everyday Masculinities in 21st-Century China: The Making of Able-Responsible Men* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2020); Wei Luo, 'Television's '"Leftover" Bachelors and Hegemonic Masculinity in Postsocialist China', *Women's Studies in Communication* 40, no. 20 (2017): 190–211.

[55] Li Zhang, *In Search of Paradise: Middle-class Living in a Chinese Metropolis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010): 166, 185.

[56] There are notable exceptions to this dominant representational trope as exemplified by TV drama series *Nannies for Foreigners* (2001–2002) discussed by Haiyan Lee, 'Nannies for Foreigners: The Enchantment of Chinese Womanhood in the Age of Millennial Capitalism', *Public Culture* 18, no. 3 (2006): 507–529.

[57] William A. Callahan, 'Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?' *International Studies Review* 10, no. 4 (2008): 749–761.

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of national unity since the establishment of the PRC in 1949.[58] The contours of the affective community are closely intertwined with the production of global racial hierarchies that informed how China's weakness at the hands of imperial powers was first interpreted by the colonial agents and subsequently internalised by Chinese elites, writers and ordinary people. The late-nineteenth to early-twentieth-century tales of the 'sick man of Asia' were depicted through the feeble health and ailments of Chinese bodies projected on to Chinese identity as a whole.[59] The images of pathology that emerged in particular medical contexts fed into broader conceptions of the Chinese self and national identity at the same time as discourses on race became mainstream in Western biomedical knowledge.[60] The persistent afterlife of these histories produced the key messages for the communist revolution and post-Mao reforms. To build a strong, independent, healthy and economically well-off society became a goal to prove to the world the potential of Chinese people to offer an alternative model of development and prosperity. The infallibility and attractiveness of the Chinese model to the foreign world are conveyed through the notion of friendship and affection that stresses the socialisation of foreigners into China's worldview yet relies on a clear delineation between self and other, Chineseness and foreignness.[61] For example, Callahan shows how, in the area of civic education, the PRC's constructions of political community employ the essential ethno-national understanding of Chinese identity, emphasising common origins and kinship ties.[62]

The party narratives of the China Dream offer the promise of a good life that is available to anyone in China or beyond.[63] Along with China's rise to global prominence, the stories of women from the former Soviet republics eagerly marrying Chinese men and settling for a family life in China contribute to the creation of an image of a successful, attractive and confident country suitable for the pursuit of happiness of a particular

[58] William A. Callahan, 'National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism', *Alternatives* 29, no. 2. (2004): 199–218.
[59] Larissa N. Heinrich, *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body between China and the West* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
[60] Ibid., 10.
[61] William A. Callahan, 'Visualizing Affective Democracy: Learning Community in China and Taiwan through Images of Foreigners', *The Asan Forum* (October 2023): 1–27, https://theasanforum.org/visualizing-affective-democracy-learning-community-in-china-and-taiwan-through-images-of-foreigners/.
[62] Ibid.
[63] William A. Callahan, 'Dreaming as a Critical Discourse of National Belonging: China Dream, American Dream and World Dream', *Nations and Nationalism* 23, no. 2 (2017): 248–270.

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kind. In depictions of Chinese–foreign marriages, foreign women are welcomed to the Chinese society and family on condition that they submit to the dominant patriarchal order, embracing and approving it as the optimal model for family, society and the world. This is therefore a suitable moment for exploring how the hierarchies of race, gender and sexuality relate to the construction of nationhood, producing new meanings and relations of power.[64]

Similarly to other immigration-receiving societies, the regulation of marriage, family norms, reproductive lives and citizenship entitlements in China are part of the evolving state infrastructure of immigration policies premised on valuing a skilled population and limiting the access of foreigners to China's labour market. Since the start of the economic reforms in the late 1970s, all social spheres, including family relations, have been regulated by market relationships and the revival of patriarchal Confucian norms. Faced with demographic concerns about China's gender imbalance and ageing population, the embrace of foreign wives addresses national anxiety over the shortage of women in China as a result of militant family-planning policies. Against the backdrop of the market and because of the lack of women posing societal challenges to the family as a symbol of belonging in Chinese culture,[65] foreign wives occupy an ambiguous status in the Chinese official and popular imagination as a necessary resource for national reproduction and strength while being outsiders because of their social and cultural attachment to places outside China and their national identity. For the latter reason they cannot be completely trusted and therefore accepted as full members of Chinese society by being given full labour and social rights. I examine this contradiction between the national desire for more 'foreign wives' and the exclusionary immigration law that makes their inclusion in China only partial and conditional through analysing life-story interviews and through digital ethnography.

I.3 Chinese–Slavic Marriages and the Global Racial Order

The role of Slavic brides[66] in the Chinese national imagination could be approached through an understanding of China's past collective trauma

[64] V. Spike Peterson, 'Interactive and Intersectional Analytics of Globalization', *Frontiers* 30, no. 1 (2009): 31–40, p. 39.

[65] Rofel, *Desiring*, 100.

[66] I originally used the term 'Russian wife' as a shorthand to refer to the women in my study, emphasising the linguistic framework that shapes how people in China perceive individuals from the former Soviet republics. Furthermore, most non-Indigenous people who crossed the Chinese–Russian border were assumed to be Russian. For example, the

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and desire for national strength and global influence. China's path to the China Dream is accompanied by specific notions of racialised and gendered relations, in which on the one hand marriages between Chinese men and foreign women are a symbolic expression of national strength, and on the other relationships between Chinese women and foreign men are a sign of national weakness. In China's perception of the global order, Russia was historically viewed as an equal to China in terms of cultural heritage and influence, but superior to it in its historico-political role as the birthplace of the first socialist state and its military and technological achievements. Russia's economic decline, combined with its frequent political crises and wars, has shifted the former bilateral power dynamic both in the wider political sphere and at the level of social interaction.[67] This change in power dynamics has been reflected in sympathetic popular representations of the Russian leadership, and favourable images of marriages between Chinese men and Slavic women. The salience of positive depictions of Chinese men–Russian women marriages is particularly apparent when considered in relation to the representations of Chinese man–African woman intimacies and families that are overwhelmingly stigmatised.[68]

migration of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds from the Russian Empire and early Soviet Union to Chinese Manchuria led to the formation of communities that eventually contributed to the establishment of China's own 'Russian ethnic group'. While the use of the Russian ethnic label was passable – albeit problematic – the situation changed dramatically with Russia's use of violence in the name of protecting Russian speakers in Ukraine. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and particularly its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, caused significant divisions within Russian-speaking communities, including among my research interlocutors. Many Ukrainian women distanced themselves from the Russian label, even if they were native Russian speakers. Consequently, I revised the term 'Russian bride' to 'Slavic bride', as it is less politically charged and more inclusive of women who did not identify as Russian, even if their primary language of communication was Russian. I only refer to 'Russian wife' in the instances where this term literally appeared in my research materials and interviews. I am grateful to one of my research participants who encouraged me to revise my use of language in the study.

[67] Although many among the political elite in Beijing see Russia as a loser for failing to prevent the collapse of the Soviet Union, President Putin and his governing style have been popular among the Chinese elite and public. In 2016, the Chinese government awarded Putin its first international peace prize (*The Washington Post*, 11 October 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/11/vladimir-putin-just-won-an-international-peace-prize/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.2ab5ecbe9e1d), and in June 2018 Xi Jinping announced that Putin was his 'best, and most intimate friend' during the 'best friend' medal award ceremony (Reuters, 8 June 2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-china-russia/chinas-xi-awards-best-friend-putin-friendship-medal-promises-support-idUSKCN1J41RO). Xi Jinping expressed his muted support for Putin's war in Ukraine which started on 24 February 2022.

[68] On how Chinese managers on construction sites in Ethiopia create distance between Chinese and Ethiopians to prevent intimacy and romance in the name of 'racial purity',

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This hyperreal construction of Chinese–Russian marriages can be partly explained by the geographical proximity of the two countries and a shared land border that has historically served to facilitate contacts between people for trade, seasonal labour migration, education, entertainment and leisure, as well as for political cooperation and military conflict. The Sino–Russian border region known as Manchuria evolved alongside the development of Russia's Chinese Eastern Railway project (1896–1903) and it gained strategic importance in transporting goods, raw materials, arms and people across the border. The development of this national border is the key geopolitical factor in shaping cross-border movement of people and their popular representations. Mixed Chinese–Russian marriages were first documented in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were a direct result of colonial expansion into Manchuria after Russia enlarged its territory according to the terms of the Aigun (1858) and Beijing (1860) Agreements. The growing scholarship about this area indicates that these marriages were the result of the predominantly Chinese male labour migration to Manchuria, the Russian Far East and Siberia and the high mortality rate of Russian men during the early-twentieth-century revolutions and wars.[69] When the border was closed after the Chinese Eastern Railway conflict in 1929 and the Japanese occupation of China, the best prospect for the Chinese men remaining in the Soviet Union at the time was to marry a local woman and obtain Soviet citizenship.[70] Thus, the long tradition of cross-border mobility in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries led to a sizeable number of mixed-race families in the border regions of both countries.[71]

see Miriam Driessen, *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness: Chinese Road Builders in Ethiopia* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 65–81; see also Robert Castillo, '"Race" and "Racism" in Contemporary Africa–China Relations Research: Approaches, Controversies and Reflections', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 21, no. 3 (2020): 310–336; Mingwei Huang, 'The Globality of Anti-Blackness', *Made in China Journal*, 10 January 2024, https://madeinchinajournal.com/author/mingwei-huang/.

[69] Vladimir Datsyshen and Larisa Kutilova, 'Russian–Chinese Families in the 20th Century: Emergence and Characteristics', *RUDN* 18, no. 4 (2019): 742–757; Ge Tang, 'The Main Historical Stages of the Formation of Ethnic Groups in the Eastern Part of the China–Russia Border' [中俄东段边界跨界民族形成的主要历史阶段 *Zhong-E Dongduan Bianjie Kuajie Minzu Xingcheng De Zhuyao Lishi Jieduan*], *North-East History and Geography* [东北史地 *Dongbei Shidi*] 11 (2004): 20–23.

[70] Datsyshen and Kutilova, 'Russian–Chinese Families', 742.

[71] Tang, 'The Main Historical Stages'; Ge Tang, 'The Origins of China's Russian Ethnic Group' [中国俄罗斯族的由来 *Zhongguo Eluosi Zu De Youlai*], *Siberian Studies* [西伯利亚研究 *Xiboliya Yanjiu*] 36, no. 6 (2009): 60–63; Yu Liu and Honggang Si, 'An Analysis of the Origins of the Russian Population in the Heilongjiang River Coastal Region' [黑龙江沿岸地区俄裔人口来源论析*Heilongjiang Yan'an Diqu Eyi Renkou Laiyuan Fenxi*], *The*

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A racialised understanding of cultural diversity, which was imported from Western biological and social sciences at the end of the nineteenth century, has been central to the way that the Chinese elite and general public view the organisation of the world and China's place in it.[72] The categorisation of people into different ethnic groups, fused with the Chinese imperial view of the concentric cultural circles that revolve around the Han centre and later theories of human evolution have left their imprint on China's method of organising its own ethnic diversity, its relations with its neighbours, foreigners and the Chinese diaspora, as well as its views on its own role in the world. Although the ethnic categorisation is a product of communist ideology, it developed from the fusion of Western colonial practices, Chinese imperial conceptions of the world and later socialist ideals. Russians occupy a qualitatively different place within the Chinese worldview and cultural hierarchy from that of other ethnic minority groups in China. Their historically neighbouring statuses and shifting geographical borders are reflected in China's ethnic demography. The PRC classified the descendants of the first Chinese–Russian families and of Russian migrants as a Russian ethnic group and granted them ethnic minority status during their ethnic identification project in the 1950s.[73] Since then, Russians (俄罗斯族*Eluosizu*) have been a recognised ethnic group with a certain degree of autonomy in China's multiethnic society. This is the root of the widespread perceptions and representations of Russian women in China: 'Asian' versus '(white) Westerners', with all the complexities and differences that these terms embody. Russian women occupy a liminal self–other position as people who can be embraced within the Chinese sphere on the premise that there is a ready-made ethnic category in which to situate them in China's multi-ethnic national project. They are liminal, because they can be assimilated and racialised as the officially recognised China's Russian ethnic minority.

After the period of brotherly socialist relations that was characterised by Sino–Soviet mutual assistance programmes and exchanges between the Communist Parties, the ideological differences over the socialist model following the death of Stalin led to a territorial conflict over Damansky Island which brought to a halt the fragile bilateral relations

Border Economy and Culture [边疆经济与文化 *Bianjiang Jingji Yu Wenhua*] no. 3 (2019): 1–3.

[72] Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1992).

[73] Kui Hao, 'Russian Nationality in China: The Debate on Cross-border Origins' [中国俄罗斯族: 跨境与原生之辩 *Zhongguo Eluosi Zu: Kuajing Yu Yuansheng Zhibian*], *Guizhou Ethnic Studies* [贵州民族研究 *Guizhou Minzu Yanjiu*] 36, no. 9 (2015): 60–63.

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between Russia and China until the early 1990s. For much of the twentieth century, exchanges between China and Russia took place through formal Communist Party channels, with minimal popular cross-border contacts happening on the ground. Some of these official connections along ideological and party lines, however, led to romantic relationships between Chinese and Soviet citizens.[74] During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) these mixed families suffered for their foreign connections at the hands of the executioners of the hard-line policies. The everyday Sino–Russian contacts resumed with the development of border trade in the late 1980s when both countries took the course of liberalising their economies. The figure of the successful border trader became central to the Chinese narrative of the Northeast border national development.[75] The collapse of the Soviet Union and the normalisation of bilateral relations in 1991 further stimulated popular Sino–Russian contacts. The reinvention of bilateral relations and the relaxation of entry policies after the border disputes had been settled paved the way for educational exchanges, border trade and business relations, sometimes leading to romantic relationships and long-term engagements.[76] It also led to the revival of the Chinese belief in the popularity of Chinese–Russian marriages in border areas.

These beliefs have contributed to the imaginative construction of Manchuria as a semi-lost territory where Chinese and Russian people have deep historical ties. Here, the articulations of Chinese national imaginaries, as well as ideas about Asian and European cultures, coalesce and clash, reflecting each other in continual processes of identity-making. Manchurian border areas then became sexualised as a place where romantic encounters between Russian women and Chinese men

[74] Elizabeth McGuire, *Red at Heart: How Chinese Communists Fell in Love with Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Elizaveta Kishkina, the wife of prominent Chinese political leader, labour rights activist, and Mao's friend Li Lisan (before he was imprisoned and tortured to death), wrote a memoir in Chinese and Russian about her life journey from Russia to China. See Elizaveta Kishkina, *From Russia to China – A Century-Long Journey* [Iz Rossii v Kitay – put' v sto let: memuar] (Moscow: Izdatel'skiy Proekt, 2014).

[75] Martin T. Fromm, *Borderland Memories: Searching for Historical Identity in Post-Mao China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 45–74.

[76] Franck Billé, Grégory Delaplace and Caroline Humphrey, eds., *Frontier Encounters. Knowledge and Practice at the Russian, Chinese and Mongolian Border* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2012); Martin Saxer and Juan Zhang, eds., *The Art of Neighbouring. Making Relations across China's Borders* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016); Alexander Horstmann, Martin Saxer and Alessandro Rippa, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Asian Borderlands* (London: Routledge, 2018); Caroline Humphrey, ed., *Trust and Mistrust in the Economies of the China–Russia Borderland* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

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can be and are enacted. For example, in the 2018 English-language programme *Travelogue*, broadcast on the state-funded CGTN channel, the virgin birch-tree forest in the Hulunbuir grasslands on the Russian–Chinese border was represented as a place where Russian women date Chinese men.[77] The Manchurian borderlands have in this way become an important setting for articulating and realising China's sexualised national desires.

At the level of the individual body, academic enquiries into the globalisation of the marriage and sex economies have captured the dominant dynamics between women from the poor societies of the Global South and men from the affluent Global North. Nicole Constable's research shows how the globalisation of communication technologies on the one hand, and dominant patriarchal norms on the other, have led to the commodification of intimacy and have produced new global processes of interconnectivity.[78] My focus on Chinese–Russian marriages shifts attention away from the 'West versus the rest' and 'Global North and Global South' dichotomies to examine the way that geopolitics and racial hierarchies play out in the intimate relations of those who normally take up the position of the Other.[79] A relational approach to understanding the gendered, sexualised and racial dimensions of intimate geopolitics lies at the heart of this book. Due to the particular geopolitical meaning of Russia as a neighbour, political ally and successor to the Soviet Union, Russia emerged as what Tlostanova calls a 'subaltern empire of modernity,' positioned as the Other to the West but a friend to China.[80] Consequently, the image of an ideal foreign bride that became constructed as available and desirable for a Chinese man to possess was a Slavic woman from one of the former Soviet republics. This growing stream of official and popular images of Russian, and more recently Ukrainian and Belarusian, women as potential wives for Chinese men serves to dispel the notion that they are unattainable, making them visible

[77] Travelogue 'Inner Mongolia 2: Life in the saddle', CGTN, 28 August 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qP7FqgF-7iA.

[78] Constable, *Romance on a Global Stage*; Nicole Constable, 'The Commodification of Intimacy: Marriage, Sex and Reproductive Labor', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38 (2009): 49–64; Constable, *Cross-Border Marriages*.

[79] For the analysis of Americans as foreign others in China see Yang Liu, *Permanent Outsiders in China: American Migrants' Otherness in the Chinese Gaze* (New York: Peter Lang, 2021); for the discussion of constructions of Russian women as geopolitical fantasy, see Ian Klinke, 'The Russian Cyber-Bride as Geopolitical Fantasy', *Royal Dutch Geographical Society* 107, no. 2 (2016): 189–202; Sarah J. Mahler and Patricia R. Pessar, 'Gendered Geographies of Power: Analysing Gender Across Transnational Spaces', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 7, no. 4 (2010): 441–459.

[80] Madina Tlostanova, *A Janus-Faced Empire: Notes on the Russian Empire in Modernity, Written from the Border* (Moscow: Blok, 2003).

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and familiar figures in Chinese social, cultural and familial spheres.[81] It is this junction of geopolitical, racialised and gendered practices and social narratives that informs my analysis of marriage migrations from the post-Soviet republics to China.

I.4 Intimate and Embodied Geopolitics

To make sense of the relationship between the hyperreal constructions of the Russian brides village and Russian–Chinese marriages and their geopolitical implications requires conceptual tools that can account for the interplay of the intimate and the political, the global and the local, and the fake and the real (hyperreal). The term 'intimate geopolitics' captures the way in which geopolitical considerations and national fantasies shape intimate decisions and processes. These relate to matters ranging from nationalist discourses, visa applications and naturalisation processes to citizenship rights. One might say intimate geopolitics addresses the geopolitics of family relationships.[82] What is potent about this concept is its ability to cut across distinctions between private and public spaces, where the private body of the family and its members and the collective geopolitical body of the nation are bound together.[83] It makes it possible to inquire into the geopolitical and cultural forces that shape Chinese national citizenship and the way that Slavic wives have become the preferred foreign wives and mothers of Chinese nationals, and how they themselves formulate and practise their sense of belonging. Rather than starting with an opposition between global and local, public and private, family and state, native and foreigner, the term intimate geopolitics allows the representations, governance and experiences of marriage and migration at the intersection of these scales to be

[81] William Jankowiak, Peter B. Gray and Kelly Hattman, 'Globalizing Evolution: Female Choice, Nationality, and Perception of Sexual Beauty in China', *Cross-Cultural Research* 42, no. 3 (2008): 248–269.

[82] Gill Valentine, 'The Ties that Bind: Towards Geographies of Intimacy', *Geography Compass* 2 (2008): 2097–2110; Natalie Oswin and Eric Olund, 'Governing Intimacy', *Environment and Planning D* 28, no. 1 (2010): 60–67; Anna Tarrant and Sarah Marie Hall, 'Everyday Geographies of Family: Feminist Approaches and Interdisciplinary Conversations', *Gender, Place & Culture* 27, no. 5 (2020): 613–623; Deborah Cowen and Brett Story, 'Intimacy and the Everyday', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Critical Geopolitics*, ed. Klaus Dodds and Merje Kuus (London: Routledge, 2013), 341–358.

[83] Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner, *The Global and the Intimate: Feminism in Our Time* (Columbia, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012); Peterson, 'Towards Queering'; Lauren Berlant, 'Intimacy: A Special Issue', *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 281–288; Christopher Harker and Lauren L. Martin, 'Familial Relations: Spaces, Subjects, and Politics', *Environment and Planning A* 44, no. 4 (2012): 768–775.

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explored. It draws attention to the intricacies of national border politics, where state borders are not only public expressions of national authorities, but also govern and regulate the intimate relationships of family lives.

The concept of intimate geopolitics allows us to understand how decisions about migration, citizenship and rights are made by those who move to live in a new country. The emotional effort and cost invested in the decision first to move and then to make a successful family life in China are inseparable from citizenship and immigration laws and from changing gender relations and family norms in both the sending and receiving societies. Migration decisions born from existing socioeconomic pressures and gender ideologies and relations are difficult to disentangle[84] from individual pursuits and journeys of self-discovery. In this context, the notion of intimate geopolitics is a useful tool for analysing the emotionally rich and creative sets of practices that the women whom I encountered put in place. I employ it to gain a better understanding of the formulation of the citizenship regime and how migrant women negotiate their unstable role as foreign wives in an immigration environment that is complicated by family values and gender norms in China. The women's decisions to marry and settle down in China escape easy categorisation and labelling and can only be understood through a complex web of intimate geopolitics composed of an array of gendered structures, personal reasons and national projects. Reflecting on their decisions, many of these women expressed surprise that they had decided to marry a Chinese man and settle in China. For some, giving birth to a baby of mixed ethnicity was a previously unacceptable idea while others recognised that marrying a man with a different skin colour from theirs was a source of stigma in their society of birth.

The interplay of global and local racial hierarchies plays an important role in shaping the role of women in nationalist projects and paradigms. Scholars of modern China have analysed the trope of the female body in Chinese nationalism, exploring how gender and nation are negotiated through women's bodies.[85] However, the role of foreign women, particularly as reproducers of the nation, has been relatively under-researched.

[84] Minna Säävälä makes a similar observation in her research on Albanian and Russian migrant women in Finland (Minna Säävälä, 'Forced Migrants, Active Mothers or Desired Wives: Migratory Motivation and Self-Representation in Kosovo Albanian and Russian Women's Biographies', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36, no. 7 (2010): 1139–1155).

[85] Susan Brownell, 'The Body and the Beautiful in Chinese Nationalism', *China Information* 13, nos. 2–3 (1998): 36–58; Tani Barlow, 'Theorizing Woman: Funü, Guojia, Jiating', in *Body, Subject and Power in China*, ed. Zito Angel and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

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The book examines how global racial hierarchies take on localised manifestations in China, with Slavic women embodying a desired form of whiteness perceived as less threatening than their Western counterparts.

Under China's current immigration regime, foreign spouses are positioned as perpetual foreign guests in their families and Chinese society. Their foreign bodies are subject to control, restrictions and approval by their visa sponsors (typically Chinese national husbands). However, these women are not merely passive subjects; they actively redefine their agency by leveraging their skills, creativity and symbolic capital. By contrast, their children occupy a qualitatively different status, as they automatically become members of the Chinese family and nation at birth. Thus, the negotiation of these children's national belonging and citizenship is fraught with contestation, often causing distress for parents and even family conflict. In exploring these familial negotiations, I invoke the concept of embodied border sites to illuminate how the politics of identity and belonging play out in the citizenship negotiations of Chinese–foreign children.

Official historical narratives of Chinese nationalism frequently frame national suffering and humiliation at the hands of Western and Japanese imperial powers through gendered symbols – most notably, the rape of Chinese women and the emasculation of Chinese men. The Communist Party sought to rectify these historical wounds by advocating for a strong, powerful China on the world stage.[86] As Susan Brownell highlights in her research, these narratives centre on the male subject, who is portrayed as unable to protect the women of the nation. Brownell further argues that 'men who feel impotent are likely to feel threatened by sexually aggressive women, but they can accommodate women who are even more victimized than they themselves feel'.[87] In line with these insights, Chinese researcher Zhang Jiehai's study of Chinese men revealed a mental map of foreign women perceived as threatening by Chinese men. Women from the United States, Britain, Canada and Western Europe were deemed the most intimidating, whereas women from Russia and the former Soviet bloc were considered the least threatening.[88] Notably, Zhang's map exclusively focused on white women. Within this framework, Slavic women from post-Soviet states emerge as accessible and ideal candidates for reinvigorating the masculine potency of Chinese men and, by extension, the nation. During the reform, this aspiration to strengthen the

[86] Brownell, 'The Body and the Beautiful'; Barlow, 'Theorizing Woman'.
[87] Brownell, 'The Body and the Beautiful', 43.
[88] Jiehai Zhang, *The Investigation on Chinese Men* [中国男人调查 *Zhongguo Nanren Diaocha*] (Jiangsu Fengquan Wenyi Chubanshe, 2009). I thank Gabriella Angelini for drawing my attention to this source.

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nation has given rise to new gender norms and constructions of Chinese masculinity, which are intertwined with fresh formulations of patriarchal power and male sexual potency.[89] Through marriage and childbirth, Slavic wives have been made to serve the Chinese national body.[90]

This construction of the ideal foreign wife in both popular and official narratives directs a male gaze that extends beyond the boundaries of state and societal imagination into individual desires. The attributes assigned to an optimal transnational marriage contribute to cultural frameworks that shape perceptions of the ideal family fitted with China's aspirations for a prominent global role. Historically, the relationship between marriage and nation has served as a foundational matrix for reproducing the nation by regulating and normalising intimate relationships. These foundational principles have largely reflected the beliefs and values of ruling male elites. The patriarchal perspective and male gaze have been central to how marriage and familial norms are constructed and sustained by the state, reinforcing a dominant and normative social order.[91] These patriarchal constructions also contribute to the creation of hyperreal fakes presented as reality. For example, the increased visibility of women from the former Soviet Union in entertainment, television programmes, dramas, and modelling is often perceived as evidence of their growing presence as 'foreign wives' in China. However, the absence of reliable data makes these claims difficult to verify, leaving them speculative.

Recent studies on state practices have drawn attention to the nonrational foundations of apparently rational state practices and objects, as well as people's affective attitudes towards state institutions and documents.[92] Similarly, the interaction between formal laws and procedures governing citizenship and the lived experiences of belonging in

[89] Everett Yuehong Zhang, *Impotence Epidemic: Men's Medicine and Sexual Desire in Contemporary China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

[90] For more discussion on the roles of women in nationalism, see Andrew Parker et al., eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[91] Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); V. Spike Peterson, 'Family Matters in Racial Logics: Tracing Intimacies, Inequalities, and Ideologies', *Review of International Studies* 46, no. 2 (2020): 177–196.

[92] Yael Navaro-Yashin, 'Make-Believe Papers, Legal Forms and the Counterfeit: Affective Interactions between Documents and People in Britain and Cyprus', *Anthropological Theory* 7, no. 1 (2007): 79–98; Mateusz Laszczkowski and Madeleine Reeves, 'Introduction: Affective States: Entanglements, Suspensions, Suspicions', *Social Analysis* 59, no. 4 (2015): 1–14.

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contemporary Chinese society is critical to this analysis.[93] Drawing on Raymond Williams' work on 'collective meanings and values that are actively lived and felt', this study explores how structures of belonging surrounding marriage migration in China are co-constituted by distinct social and material forms of feeling and thinking.[94]

The book points to how these processes reflect China's shifting relations with the global order and the role that racialised women's bodies play in shaping the nation's self-image. By analysing the interplay between formal regulations, cultural norms and affective experiences, the book highlights how marriage migration becomes a site where national identity, belonging and power relations intersect, shedding light on China's evolving national narrative in the context of its rise to global prominence.

I.5 Methodological Reflections

The combination of existing scholarship and a profusion of visual and media representations of Chinese–Russian marriages motivated me to start my fieldwork and search for research participants in the border zone where, as the media sources suggested, many Chinese–Russian couples resided. Because I was interested in the dynamics of these relationships post-1990s, my choice fell on one of the cross-border trading hubs: the town of Suifenhe on the Chinese–Russian border, which was built in the early twentieth century and is a historically important border-crossing point along the route of the Chinese Eastern Railway.[95] Since the early 1990s, it has become a popular shopping destination for Russians from the Vladivostok and Khabarovsk regions. It is frequently portrayed as a meeting place for Russians and Chinese, where intercultural romance is held to occur spontaneously.[96] It is a place for transient cross-border contacts and a stopover point for journeys further into both national heartlands. All white people in Suifenhe are automatically presumed to be Russian. The Russian and Chinese ways of life seemingly co-exist

[93] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.
[94] Ibid., 131.
[95] One Russian programme entitled 'We were Russian one day', dedicated to Chinese–Russian marriages, was released on the channel Oriental Express in November 2007. It presented the story of a Chinese–Russian couple who had met in Ukraine and married there in 1999. In the early 2000s, the couple moved to Suifenhe where they ran a private Russian school. www.youtube.com/watch?v=onXfWnlV11Q.
[96] An example of this common belief is captured by a short motion film 'Love in Suifenhe' (绥芬河之恋 *Suifenhe zhi lian*) submitted as a final graduation project by the students of Shanghai Academy of Theatre in 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=COAUDm_eObs.

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happily there – shop signs, menus and price tags are displayed in both Russian and Chinese, restaurants serve Russified versions of Chinese dishes and nightclubs play Russian and Chinese hits. I arrived in Suifenhe in November 2015 during a period of deep economic crisis in Russia, which had a direct impact on the border trade and traders on the Chinese side. As I walked down the street Chinese traders called out to me in Russian 'kak pomoch, podruga?' ('how can we help, friend?'). The place generated a strange atmosphere of Chinese–Russian co-dependency and mutual reliance. The local Chinese complained that their business had suffered from the lack of Russian visitors after the introduction of Western sanctions on Russia following the annexation of Crimea. The budget hotel, where I stayed for 120 RMB (15 GBP) per night, was mostly hosting Russian *pomogais*[97] and traders. It served a buffet meal throughout the day for 20 RMB (2.5 GBP), including vodka, which was on offer from early morning onward. It felt like a Foucauldian heterotopia, in which I was both present in a real place and displaced from Russia and China at the same time.

After a week-long search for mixed families in the town I heard of one, but could not locate any of its members. According to Suifenhe's Civil Affairs Office (*mingzheng ju* 民政局) in 2006 between eight and ten Chinese–Russian couples had registered their marriage there.[98] Yet the idealised images of these desirable conjugal couples had created the impression that they were common in the border area. The town's heritage, memorialised in the museum, celebrates the life of a young mixed-race woman named Galina Dubeeva, the daughter of a local Chinese man and his Ukrainian wife. Between the late 1890s and 1917, a large number of people relocated to these parts of the Russian Empire as colonists, settlers or refugees. Intermarriage in rural and urban Manchuria was defined by the scarcity of women in these remote areas due to the concentration of male labour in the north of China and the difficult economic position of many migrant Russian women.[99] By the early 1930s, travellers to the north-east of China were talking about the emergence of a distinct 'Eurasian type' (Sino-Russian) of Manchurian

[97] Pomogais (helpers) are people who assist border traders for a fee to transport sacks of goods for retail across the border checkpoints.

[98] Xiaorong Tian, 'Sino–Russian Transnational Marriage: Weaving Happiness with Tolerance' [中俄跨国婚姻: 用宽容织出幸福 *Zhong E kuaguo hunyin: yong kuanrong zhi chu xingfu*], Overseas China Network [中国侨网 *Zhongguo Qiaowang*], 21 June 2006, www.chinaqw.com/news/2006/0621/68/33351.shtml.

[99] Mark Gamsa, 'Mixed Marriages in Russian-Chinese Manchuria', in *Entangled Histories: The Transcultural Past of North-East China*, ed. Dan Ben-Canaan, Frank Grüner and Ines Prodöhl (London: Springer, 2014), 47–58, p. 48.

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colonist.[100] As one of my co-travellers and a Suifenhe native observed during the sleeper-train journey from Harbin to Suifenhe, his hometown 'is different from other places in China. It is proud of "mixing". Galina is our hero; there are streets, buildings and a museum named after her.'[101]

Galina Dubeeva was celebrated as a national hero in 2003, when a Chinese journalist discovered the story of her disappearance towards the end of the Second World War when she had been on a translation assignment with representatives from the Japanese army. The news of this forgotten story spread quickly and was picked up by local and central government officials. In 2005, a monument commemorating her heroism was erected in Suifenhe. In March 2013, the city authorities opened the museum in Galina's memory, linking her personal life to Suifenhe's growth and development and the improvement of Chinese–Russian relations (Fig. I.2). In 2015, a two-part documentary film about Galina's life was broadcast on Chinese television as part of a series commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Galina Dubeeva became the symbol of Sino–Russian friendship – an 'angel of peace' (和平天使*heping tianshi*) – that expressed Chinese–Russian common interests and values in memory of their victory against the common enemy. Since then, Galina has been celebrated as a hero for her personal sacrifice in China's national struggle.

One aspect of Galina's history that is always mentioned and emphasised in this memorialisation campaign is her mixed-race background. Several panels in the museum are dedicated to the unique features of the family that nurtured Galina's heroic character. She is presented as beautiful, clever, strong-willed and independent, with a romantic soul. The museum emphasises that she spoke several languages fluently and was a talented musician and poet.

The creation of this museum and the popularisation of Galina's story tap into the unfolding narrative of close Chinese–Russian state relations, which have been steadily improving since the resolution of border issues in 2004. In 2007, Hu Jintao and Vladimir Putin issued a joint statement on economic cooperation between north-east China and the Russian Far East, marking the beginning of Putin's 'turn to Asia' policy agenda. Journalists started citing as evidence of these close bilateral relations the growing popularity of Chinese–Russian marriages.[102] The Suifenhe

[100] Ibid.
[101] Fieldwork diary, 11 November 2015.
[102] Peter Hessler, 'Invisible Bridges: Life along the Chinese–Russian Border', *The New Yorker*, 9 February 2016, www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/invisible-bridges-life-along-the-chinese-russian-border.

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Figure I.2 Memorial museum dedicated to the life of Galina Dubeeva in Suifenhe.
Source: Author's archive



Figure I.3 The portrait of Galina Dubeeva.
Source: Author's archive

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museum includes a panel with Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin's celebrations of Russian–Chinese relations, emphasising Galina's symbolic role in tying together the histories and destinies of Russia and China. Such forgotten histories of Chinese–Russian intimacy are thus being revived, mythologised and glorified in an attempt to establish continuities with the past and to stimulate future close relations between the two nations.

My conversations with Russian weekend shoppers and pomogais from the town of Pogranichny, the equivalent of Suifenhe on the Russian side of the border, confirmed my first observations – there were indeed very few Chinese–Russian families in this part of China. It had by now become clear that there was no such thing as a Russian brides village or even a place where Russian wives clustered to migrate to China. However, this research trip helped me to establish contacts with Russian women married to Chinese citizens in other parts of China. My research took me to several towns in the border area, including Suifenhe, Qiqihar and Mudanjiang, before I discovered through one of my research participants a lively and vibrant community of Russian-speaking women in relationships of one sort and another with Chinese men, using the popular Chinese social network WeChat,[103] and decided to adapt my research strategy to this newfound digital reality. Social media appeared to be central to my research participants' worlds and, in order to approach an understanding of their journeys and lives in China, I embraced the digital domain as 'interdependent with their infrastructures of everyday life'.[104]

I had not planned to join women's digital groups in China until one day I found myself a member of one. In August 2016, one of the women I interviewed invited me to join a closed WeChat group dedicated to the discussion of Chinese–Russian family matters and their children. By the time I joined the group, it had 135 members. Thus, rather than trying to meet all these women in person, I used this group to send out a call written in the Russian language for research participants in several other WeChat groups, introducing myself and my research topic. The women whom I met throughout my three-year search lived in scattered, mostly

[103] Eric Harwit, 'WeChat: Social and Political Development of China's Dominant Messaging App', *Chinese Journal of Communication* 10, no. 3 (2017): 312–327, https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2016.1213757; Natalia Ryzhova and Iuliia Koreshkova, 'WeChat as Migration Infrastructure: The Case of Chinese–Russian Precarious Labour Markets', in *WeChat and the Chinese Diaspora: Digital Transnationalism in the Era of China's Rise*, ed. Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu (London: Routledge, 2022), 38–56.

[104] Sarah Pink et al., *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015), 9.

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urban, locations of China. By the time I left the group in 2018, its membership had grown to 500, reaching the limit of members in one group permitted by the company. The group administrator asked people who wanted to stay in the group to tag their profile name with a panda icon. Those who did not do so were deleted from the group. I could not keep up with the volume of messages in the group and missed the deadline by which I had to mark my username with the panda icon. As a result, I was purged from the group. WeChat ethnography and interviews became an important dimension of my fieldwork experience and how I engaged with the 'digital-material-sensory environment' of my research participants and research field.[105]

This resulted in my collection of fifty-three oral stories[106] by women from different parts of China, rather than in the north-east border area that I had originally planned to focus on. The women whom I interviewed and on whom my analysis is based came to China from post-Soviet Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus between the mid 1990s and mid 2010s.[107] They were at different stages of their dating, married and post-married lives at the time of our meetings, which took place between November 2015 and August 2018.

Subsequent interviews with several members of staff at the Russian consulates in Beijing and Shenyang complement my interpretations of women's personal narratives from the sending state's perspective. In this book I weave my discussion of their life stories and digital practices of belonging with an analysis of visual images, immigration regimes and population management techniques in an attempt to paint a complex picture of the politics of Chinese national desire and the hyperreality that the Russian brides village reflects. In doing this, I build on the tradition of the feminist research concerned with studying simultaneously the 'up and down' of political power.[108]

It became apparent to me early on in my fieldwork that my research positionality had taken on several unexpected and contradictory dimensions. In most cases, I was talking to women of my own generation who had left their country of birth and married a foreigner. We shared both a

[105] Ibid., 13.

[106] The breakdown of the fifty-three face-to-face and online interviews with the women from the former Soviet Union was as follows: thirty-five from Russia, twelve from Ukraine, five from Belarus, and one from Kazakhstan. (See Appendix for the list of interviews.)

[107] Robert Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview* (London: Sage, 1998).

[108] Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True, 'Feminist Methodologies for International Relations', in *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, ed. B. Ackerly, M. Stern and J. True (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4.

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common language and memories of our Soviet upbringing in the 1980s and 1990s, together with the cultural referents of life during the last years of the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet transformations. We also shared the experience of migration from our home countries and the sense that we had escaped its socioeconomic and cultural dead end. Furthermore, my intercultural marriage and children were in my mind additional areas of common experiences. To find a way to forge links with my prospective research participants, I played up my maternal subjectivity and chose a photo of myself with my children for my WeChat profile. WeChat became an important resource for conducting individual interviews, as it provided the flexibility, distance and anonymity that some participants asked for. The option to turn off a camera also meant that some of them could speak without me seeing them. Most of the women preferred to talk with our cameras switched off. All these fieldwork aspects and my background played a role in shaping my encounters with the people and knowledge emerging in the field.[109]

After distributing a call for research participants into this WeChat group, I asked those who had responded to my call why they had agreed to talk to me. They told me that they welcomed the opportunity to work out their future orientation. Some women explicitly said that it helped them psychologically to push themselves outside their comfort zone to talk about the problems they encountered. Others noted that it was a chance to talk to someone else outside their home.[110] Many found our conversations interesting and useful as a reference point to compare their stories with those of other women and noted that they wanted to help other women even though they normally did not like sharing the details of their private life.[111] Others said that they had acted on their initial intuitive reaction that they wanted to be part of the research.[112] And some participants expressed their hope that the more people knew about mixed marriages, the more they would accept them and understand they were normal and ordinary. 'Maybe this could bring some benefit to society and challenge stereotypes?' my interlocutors said hopefully on more than one occasion.[113] Their hope for such change stemmed from their negative experiences of prejudice and discrimination. One woman recounted episodes from her life in Russia with her Chinese husband and said they had encountered a group of youths who had made offensive comments to them and a taxi driver who asked, 'Aren't there enough

[109] Pink, *Digital Ethnography*, 12.
[110] Fieldwork notes, 4 June 2017.
[111] Ibid., 11 August 2016.
[112] Ibid., 19 August 2018.
[113] Ibid., 20 and 21 August 2018.

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Russian men for you?' She told me she was very angry when this happened and expressed her hope that with time more people would have appropriate reactions.[114] Several of the women involved in artistic industries in China became interested in my project because they found the idea unusual, which was particularly pleasing to me. Yet my research also generated some suspicion and hostility. My presence was not always welcome and some found it strange and suspicious that a publicly funded British research agency would fund a research project on marriage migration to China.

In March 2018, I was added to a new WeChat group by one of its participants. I introduced myself as a researcher who was born and raised in Minsk, educated in Belarus and the UK, and working at the University of Manchester. Several women welcomed me to the group. However, two months later, an anonymous article from a WeChat channel was posted on this group that was rude and offensive about Chinese–Russian marriages. The article called the women stupid for entering into relationships with Chinese men without having paused to think about their security and future in China. This generated a suspicion that someone within the group had written the article and I became the main suspect. The group moderator got in touch with me to say that some members felt uncomfortable with me being a group member and that it was inappropriate for me to be included in the chat because I was not in a relationship with a Chinese man. I was asked to leave the group. I became a subject of what Homi Bhabha calls 'familiar strangeness' that becomes unbearable, both politically and conceptually.[115]

My presence had become intolerable to the group, although I felt I had many things in common with the women in it. After all, I also married a foreigner (though he was not Chinese) and live outside my country of birth. My children are of a mixed cultural background, but none of this was enough. For the other women the Chinese context was too different from mine and no one who did not have direct experience of it could be fully trusted. Although many women replied to my call to participate in a life-story interview, I didn't have the credentials to be a member of their WeChat group.

The administrator of another group on a popular Russian social platform completely refused to let me join the group. The decision to expel me from the WeChat group chat also indicated that, collectively, the women felt vulnerable and exposed to even more public critique in their home countries which, as I had learnt in the interviews, was a common

[114] Ibid., 20 August 2018.
[115] Homi Bhabha, 'Location, Intervention, Incommensurability: A Conversation with Homi Bhabha', *Emergences* 1, no. 1 (1989): 63–88, p. 71.

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experience for many of them. The widespread Sino-phobic attitudes in post-Soviet societies informed the reactions of some of these women's families and fellow country people to their decision to form a family with a Chinese man. As one woman on the Vostochnoye Polushariye platform observed: 'How do you deal with my feeling of shame for having fallen in love with a Chinese man?' I viewed my expulsion from the WeChat group as an expression of their survival strategy. Excluding an outsider from the women's collective safe space was a visceral act of self-defence.

I.6 Chapter Outline

In Chapter 1 I examine the development of China's principles regulating marriages with foreigners from the perspective of the country's sovereign concerns on border stability, population management and national security. These concerns are considered through the lens of the Chinese state's material and affective economies that inform and shape the regulations for women migrating to China'. I show how the Chinese state has revised its administrative terms and laws about international marriage and I highlight the historical, racial and gendered forces that shape the content of these laws. I show that marriage migration laws are shaped by feelings about what it is to belong to Chinese society. These clusters of collective attitudes and emotions define the architecture of Chinese immigration policy. They signal the new relationships between power and inequality that are being constructed to capture China's relations with its neighbours and with the rest of the world.

In Chapter 2 I show that the realisation of the Chinese national dream to become a powerful international actor through the government's project of national rejuvenation fetishises intercultural marriages and families of a particular kind – marriages between a Chinese man and a white woman from the former Soviet Union who is transformed into an obedient daughter-in-law and then absorbed into Chinese patriarchal structures. I develop this argument through an analysis of three Chinese TV dramas and a feature film that signalled prominent changes in Chinese–Russian relations spanning nearly thirty years of reform (1990–2019). I argue that these cultural products construct a consistent image of a strong, clever, beautiful and independent white woman who ultimately submits to the Confucian patriarchal order with the assistance and through the benevolence of her Chinese husband. Weaving the discussion of TV representations of Chinese–Russian romantic encounters and marriages into wider political and public discourses on China's foreign relations, I refer to cinematic geopolitics, which I envisage as the construction of hyperreality 'where the boundaries between game and

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illusion are blurred'.[116] The dramatisation and popularisation by the state of intimate Chinese–Russian relations on the screen have helped to produce the image of a post-Soviet white woman who is an object of national desire and the preferred choice of foreign bride. This takes place against growing concerns over the lack of women in China and the national economic revival that gave rise to new gendered images of cultural and sexual conquest.

Chapter 3 discusses women's narratives of migration and marriage journeys. The stories told to me by the women who travelled to China from the mid 1990s to the late 2010s paint a complex picture that contrasts with existing stereotypes of marriage-migration trajectories. I argue that numerous narratives conflict with the dominant popular perceptions in China and Russia, which claim that most women choose to escape the harsh living conditions in the Russian Far East to live in the north-east of China, where these Russian brides tend to put down their roots. Instead, I show that there are several different and multilayered migrations that these Russian 'Chinese brides' make, including as language exchange students, through online encounters and in the entertainment industry. I trace these stories of cross-border romance and desire and what they mean for the women adapting to a new life in China. In Chapter 4 I explore how my research participants navigated the patriarchal norms and cultures that commodify them as sources of Chinese national desire and reproduction, valorising the white woman's body in the Chinese marriage market and immigration regime as social capital for the Chinese husband and his family and a free womb for nurturing future Chinese citizens.

In Chapter 5 I document how these women encountered and negotiated the citizenship status of their children in China. I employ the theoretical lens of embodied border sites where racialised geopolitics and competing individual values and family norms meet and clash. I show how the politics of citizenship, identity and race have played out in these women's disputes about where their children belong in national terms, and argue that these women – driven by the precarious position that results from their own unstable legal and socioeconomic status and from the fear of being forced to separate from their children – resort to their home-nation citizenship or informal dual-citizenship arrangements as leverage to defend their parental rights in the context of China's strict single-citizenship rules.

[116] Eco, *Faith in Fakes*, 8.

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The women develop strategies to secure their parental rights through the citizenship structures available to them and then seek to deal with their uncertainties amid the various limitations and tenuous immigrant and family statuses available to them in China. I conclude by explaining how China's single-citizenship law and current immigration laws restrict foreign spouses who live there on 'family visitor' visas to engage in the reproductive sphere of marriage, as well as how these inequalities emerge in their subsequent family life in the form of parental negotiations about their children's citizenship. Confucian values promoted by the state are used to strengthen patriarchal structures and gender inequality in Chinese society.[117]

As most of their everyday lives is devoted to their caring and family responsibilities, the digital sphere is the place where these women turn to vent their emotions, try out entrepreneurial skills and search for belonging, community and support. From the mid 2010s, WeChat has become the main digital social media platform in China and the main place for migrant communities to socialise. In Chapter 6 I discuss the main themes and unfolding conversations in several WeChat groups I participated in. I argue that, although these digital groups are central to the way these women search for forms of belonging in Chinese society, they are ambivalent spaces where their discussions of their legal status, labour rights and citizenship rub against the participants' personal life choices and ambitions.

Chapter 7 presents an audiovisual exploration of a group wedding festival held on the Chinese–Russian border during the late summer festival of 七夕节 *qixi jie*. The official goal of this event is to strengthen Chinese–Russian relations, transforming a traditional celebration into an occasion for the articulation and celebration of international love and desire. The symbolic significance of the location, timing and aesthetics of the event, alongside the national, racial and gender identities of the participants, reveals key insights into China's national aspirations. I argue that this state-sponsored group wedding is not simply a reflection of China's foreign relations, nor is it an incidental event – it serves as a crucial site for observing and interrogating China's geopolitical imaginaries and national desires. Furthermore, it provides a space for both

[117] Stevan Harrell and Santos Gonçalo, 'Introduction', in *Transforming Patriarchy: Chinese Families in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. S, Harrell and G. Santos (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2017), 3–36; Harriet Zurndorfer, 'Escape from the Country: The Gender Politics of Chinese Women in Pursuit of Transnational Romance', *Gender, Place & Culture* 25, no. 4 (2018): 489–506.

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reinforcing and contesting these aspirations through the performance of international love, gender roles and an ideal form of marriage.

The conclusion synthesises the book's arguments, highlighting how marriage and migration serve as pivotal sites for examining the intersection of geopolitical and intimate projects. It reveals the complex relationship between national desire, family, marriage and race within China's quest to realise the China Dream. The war in Ukraine further amplified these narratives, reinforcing the image of China as a rising force capable of stepping in where other nations falter. A relational approach to China's interactions with the world, particularly through the lenses of gender and race, necessitates an exploration of the historical, geographical and normative dynamics that shape China's self–other relations. Russia, in this context, serves as a critical node, connecting China to the racialised global order through its proximity, historical ties and shared geopolitical outlook. The gendered and racialised dimensions of these processes highlight that national security and international relations are deeply intertwined with intimate relations.

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