



NHMRC FAQ

Frequently Asked Questions About:
Asian Americans and Marriage

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Research-based answers to important questions related to forming and sustaining healthy marriages.

Introduction: In 2004, 14 million people in the United States reported having an Asian heritage, making up 3.4 percent of the U.S. population. ¹ Given this large and growing population, Asian American marriage is an important topic.

The term Asian American is used to refer to any individual living in America who has an Asian heritage. Yet Asian Americans constitute a diverse group. They represent 25 different Asian ethnicities. Moreover, sometimes Asian American individuals have more than one national heritage. In addition, Asian Americans vary in terms of their financial well-being. The five largest Asian groups in the United States are Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Vietnamese. ²

Asian Americans share a number of traditional cultural beliefs about family relationships. However, it is important to recognize that not all Asian Americans hold these views and that different ethnic groups within the larger Asian American population will hold these views in varying degrees. So while it is not appropriate to assume that all Asian Americans adhere to these views, it is appropriate to be aware that these cultural views may influence many Asian American marriages, especially, perhaps, those who are more recent immigrants.

Below are answers to some common questions about Asian Americans and marriage, using findings from scientifically sound research. Research doesn't have all the answers, and more research on this topic is needed. Nonetheless, the research that has been done can shed a great deal of light on many questions.

Q1. What percentages of Asian Americans are married, divorced, widowed, or have never married? How do these proportions compare with the national averages?

A1.

- *Married.* Asian Americans are more likely to be married than are individuals in the general population. In 2000, 60 percent of Asian American adults reported being currently married, compared with 54 percent of the U.S. population. ³
- *Divorced.* Asian Americans are less likely to be divorced than are individuals in the general population. In 2000, only 6 percent of Asian American adults were currently separated or divorced, compared with 12 percent of the U.S. population. ⁴ A more recent study found slightly lower rates, but Asian Americans were still half as likely to be divorced (5 percent vs. 10 percent). ⁵ Another report found that after 10 years, only 20 percent of Asian marriages had ended in divorce, compared with 32 percent of marriages among whites. ⁶ (Also see Q2 below.)

- *Widowed.* Four percent of Asian American adults were widowed in 2000, compared with 7 percent of the U.S. population. ⁷
- *Never Married.* In 2000, 30 percent of Asian American adults had never married compared, with 27 percent of the total population. ⁸ Typically in Asian countries, female marriage rates are very high due to arranged marriages and the centrality of family in the cultures. Thus, it is significant that despite this cultural norm, Asian American women have the second highest rate of never marrying. ⁹

Q2. What do we know about the divorce rate among Asian Americans?

A2.

- Asian Americans are less likely to divorce than are other groups in the U.S., but their rate of divorce recently has increased. ¹⁰
- Although Chinese and Japanese Americans are the least likely of all ethnic groups in the United States to divorce, the percentage of divorces in this group has more than doubled since the 1970s. ¹¹
- The divorce rate has been growing for Asians in their native countries, and some research suggests that the reasons for this increase also help to explain the increasing rate of divorce among Asian Americans. Below are some of the likely reasons. Note that many of these also are explanations for rising divorce rates among all Americans. ¹²
 - o *Rapid Economic Growth:* An increased focus on wealth and career advancement may increase divorce rates, perhaps because family relationships are given lower priority and work stress spills over into marriage.
 - o *Greater Educational and Employment Opportunities for Women:* Asian American women have become more educated and economically independent, which has given them greater freedom to leave unhealthy relationships. Traditionally, Asian American women were expected to accept their situation if their husbands had affairs or if their husbands or mothers-in-law abused them.
 - o *Loosening of Community Control Over Marriage:* In the past, tight-knit communities within many Asian cultures kept struggling couples together by providing instruction and pressure to make peace when there was conflict in a marriage. Extended families are losing the influence that they previously had over couples in other Asian countries. This change may be due in part to a growing value of individualism.
 - o *Growing Individualism:* Traditionally, Asian marriage was regarded as the union of two families, not just of two individuals. Today, beliefs have moved away somewhat from that view of marriage. Although Asians tend to value obedience, self-control, and family interests rather than the typical American values of independence, self-expression, and individual interests, ¹³ Asian Americans may be less willing to sacrifice personal desires and ambitions for their families than they were in the past. This shift in values could possibly make couples less committed to their spouses and less wary of shaming their families by divorcing.
 - o *The Decline of Arranged Marriages and the Rise of “Romantic Love”:* Traditionally, Asian marriages were arranged by the couples’ parents, relatives, or parents’ friends. These marriages were seen as an extension of the parents’ families and the joining of two families. Accompanying this

type of marriage were the beliefs that husbands and wives should remain devoted to each other and should maintain harmony no matter what. Today, most Asian Americans marry someone with whom they fall in love. Many have adopted the Western, media-enhanced idea that love is a feeling that brings two soul mates together in a perfect union. As with other American marriages, this notion can undermine marriages when troubles arise and people believe that they made a bad choice in marriage. ¹⁴

Q3. What percentage of Asian Americans marry outside their ethnic group?

A3.

- While about three in four (75 percent) Asian Americans marry someone of the same ethnic group, about one-quarter marry an Asian American of a different ethnic group than their own or marry a non-Asian. ¹⁵ This rate of intermarriage is three-to-four-times higher than that of the general U.S. population (about 7 percent). ¹⁶
- Asian Americans who intermarry usually marry whites. Of the approximately 25 percent of Asian Americans who intermarry, about 15 percent of Asian American men and 19 percent of Asian American women are married to whites; about 10 percent of Asian American men and 6 percent of Asian American women are married to Asian Americans of a different ethnic group than their own. ¹⁷
- Researchers believe that interracial marriage among Asian Americans will continue to grow as they assimilate further into mainstream American culture. ¹⁸
- Japanese Americans are the most likely of all Asian Americans to marry outside their ethnic group. About one in three Japanese Americans (34 percent) intermarry, compared with 15 percent of Chinese and Asian Indian Americans. ¹⁹ Researchers suggest that this pattern reflects the fact that Chinese and Asian Indians are the two largest Asian groups in the United States, so there are larger pools of same-ethnic-group individuals in which to find marriage partners. In contrast, Japanese Americans are one of the smaller Asian ethnic groups in the United States, ²⁰ and they have not immigrated as often or as continuously as have the Chinese. Also, unlike Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans tend not to live in concentrated communities, so they are more assimilated into mainstream culture than are other Asian American groups. ²¹
- Women are more likely to intermarry than are men in most Asian American ethnic groups. For example, Korean women are 30 percent more likely to intermarry than are Korean men. For a few decades after World War II, a large proportion of Asian women married to whites were “war brides”; these women married white American servicemen who were stationed in their home countries. ²²
- Asian Americans are more likely to marry whites if they were born in America, ²³ speak English well, and have a college education. ²⁴
- Couples who intermarry generally have higher divorce rates. ²⁵ Yet researchers have not specifically examined the divorce rates of Asian Americans who intermarry. Some researchers thought that the divorce rate for Asian Americans who intermarry would be lower because such individuals generally are highly educated. One researcher has also speculated that some interracial marriages may be stronger than are other marriages because intercultural adaptation requires characteristics such as openness, flexibility, and

the ability to regulate one's emotions and these skills facilitate a healthy marriage. ²⁶

Q4. Do Asian Americans tend to marry later than do other racial/ethnic groups? If so, why?

A4.

- Only about 10 percent of Asian American women are married by the age of 20, compared with about 25 percent of women in general in the United States. The percent of Asian American women who are married does not reach the national average until the age of 30, when about three-quarters (76 percent) fall into this category. ²⁷ Despite the traditional importance of family in Asian cultures, Asian American women have the second highest rate among racial/ethnic groups of never marrying. ²⁸
- Research has examined a number of reasons that Asian American women tend to marry later than do women in the general population. The following findings are taken from studies with Japanese and Chinese American women:
 - o *Education.* Researchers have not found a consistent effect of education on the timing of marriage for Asian American women. Some Asian American women experience a delay in marriage because of their pursuit of college education, but others do not. ²⁹ In fact, pursuing advanced education seems to delay marriage more for whites than it does for Asian Americans. Some researchers think that the delay in timing of first marriage for Asian Americans is not due simply to the pursuit of advanced education, but also reflects larger-scale historical changes, such as changes in employment. ³⁰
 - o *Language.* Up to 40 percent of Asian Americans do not speak English well, ³¹ which can delay the timing of marriage. One study found that even small decreases in English-speaking ability might delay marriage by about two years. ³²
 - o *Oldest Daughter.* About one-half of the Asian American women who were still unmarried at the age of 33 or older were the oldest daughters in their families. This fact is meaningful because in traditional Asian homes, the oldest daughter often faces additional responsibilities and social roles, such as helping raise younger siblings, getting an education and a job to help support the family, and taking care of her elderly parents. It is not unusual for these oldest daughters to sacrifice personal goals in order to help with the family business or care for family members. For these women, these roles may result in a loss of independence, little time or energy to socialize, and less social freedom to date. ³³
 - o *Parents' Marriage.* In one study, more than two-thirds of respondents reported that their parents' marriages greatly influenced their desire to marry; more than three-quarters of unmarried women ages 33-80 reported that their parents had unhappy and conflict-filled marriages and that this situation affected their attitudes about marriage. Similarly, 40 percent of the women who chose to delay marriage had parents who had an arranged marriage or a traditional Asian marriage in which the father made all the decisions and the mother was subservient to him. Many of these women stated that they did not want to have a marriage like their mothers'. ³⁴

Q5. What traditional cultural family beliefs affect Asian American marriages?

A5.

- Asian Americans share a number of traditional cultural beliefs about family relationships. However, it is important to recognize that not all Asian Americans hold these views and that different ethnic groups within the larger Asian American population will hold these views in varying degrees. So while it is not appropriate to assume that all Asian Americans adhere to these views, it is appropriate to be aware that these cultural views may influence many Asian American marriages. Below we examine the beliefs of collectivism and filial piety.
- *Collectivism vs. Individualism.* Many Asian American groups, such as the Chinese and Japanese, value commitment to the needs of the group over individual needs and self-development. For example, these cultures tend to value obedience, self-control, and family interests rather than the typical American values of independence, self-expression, and individual interests.³⁵
 - o One study found that Chinese college students were more likely than were white college students to exhibit concern for the feelings of others and to provide support for others.³⁶
 - o Another study found that Chinese culture placed high value on motivations to serve and connect with others, in contrast to American culture, which valued motivations directed at attaining personal goals.³⁷
 - o These findings suggest that Asian Americans may be more likely than are other Americans to make personal sacrifices that foster harmony and promote the well-being of a relationship.³⁸ Such behavior may increase the stability of Asian American marriages. However, these behaviors are not as prevalent as they used to be, which may be contributing to increasing divorce rates.³⁹
 - o Of course, many studies suggest that American society, in general, is becoming increasingly individualistic; people are becoming less constrained by obligations to others. Researchers cite the rise of individualism as a contributor to the current U.S. divorce rate because this idea discourages people from making the commitment and sacrifice needed to sustain healthy marriages.⁴⁰
- *Filial piety*, or respect for parents, is a Confucian value that influences many — but not all — Asian cultures. It embodies the ideas of duty, obligation, the importance of the family name, and service and sacrifice to elders.⁴¹ This commitment to one's family can affect choices about whom to marry, when to marry, and whether to stay married, because the negative effects of personal choices bring shame to the whole family.⁴²
 - o One researcher notes that, traditionally, Chinese people view divorce as so shameful to a family's honor that most Chinese would prefer to endure an unhappy marriage than the shame of getting a divorce.⁴³
 - o Traditionally, the oldest daughter in Asian families was often expected to support and care for siblings and parents.⁴⁴ Researchers speculate that this pattern may be one reason that some Asian American women delay marriage or never marry.⁴⁵
 - o Traditionally, also, Asian marriages were arranged by a couple's parents, relatives, or parents'

friends. These marriages were seen as an extension of the parents' families and the joining of two families.⁴⁶ Accompanying this type of marriage were the beliefs that husbands and wives should remain devoted to each other and should maintain harmony no matter what.⁴⁷ Today, this belief is not nearly as prevalent as it used to be, but it still may influence couples to some degree.⁴⁸

Q6. Are there some general ways in which Asian American marriages differ from non-Asian American marriages?

A6.

- With so many differences among Asian Americans groups, not to mention couples and individuals, it is risky to make broad comparisons and generalizations. But research has explored somewhat the question of differences between Asian American couples and non-Asian American couples. This research notes some possible general differences but much more research is needed to draw strong conclusions.
- *Cultural Adaptation.* Nearly 70 percent of Asian Americans are foreign-born immigrants.⁴⁹ The changes associated with immigration can cause stress that most American couples do not experience. For example, many immigrant families struggle with the balance between valuing their “old” culture and adapting to the “new” American culture, which can put a particular strain on marriages.
- *Role Reversal.* The immigration process also can erode parental authority because children are more likely to learn English than are their parents and then children often fill the role of translator for their parents. This role reversal can put a strain on the parent-child relationship, which, in turn, tends to increase conflict between spouses.⁵⁰
- *Changing Marital Roles.* Many Asian American couples, whether they are immigrants, second generation, or interracial, struggle to balance Asian and American cultural norms. One study found that Chinese and Japanese women still do most of the housework and child rearing even if they work outside of the home. This pattern can be problematic for Asian Americans. Indeed, one study found that an equal partnership in marriage is just as important to Chinese wives as it is to white wives. In this study, satisfaction increased for both Chinese and white wives when husbands participated more in housework, when wives had an equal share in decision-making, when wives and their husbands had more flexible gender roles, and when wives felt that their marriage was progressing toward an equal partnership.⁵¹
- *Communication Styles.* Asian Americans also may have communication styles in marriage that differ from the American cultural norm. For many American couples, the ability to talk over issues and disagreements is considered one of the most important aspects of marital satisfaction. (See Frequently Asked Questions About: Communication and Conflict for more information on communication.) Yet many Asian Americans do not put the same emphasis on verbal communication in their marriages:
 - o *Non-verbal communication* was valued more highly by Taiwanese couples than it was by American couples. In one study, good verbal and non-verbal communication among Taiwanese couples was associated with higher satisfaction in marriage. In contrast, for American couples, only verbal communication was associated with satisfaction in marriage.⁵² Another study suggested that Chinese couples were more likely to express love and support non-verbally through doing tasks for each other.⁵³

- o *Not expressing emotions.* Chinese norms discourage the expression of feelings, especially very strong positive or negative emotions such as anger and joy,⁵⁴ which differs from the value many Americans place on open, emotional self-expression.⁵⁵
- o *Avoiding the issue.* One study found that many Chinese couples deal with conflicts simply by not bringing the issue up again.⁵⁶

Q7. What is the risk of domestic violence in Asian American marriages?

A7.

- Although Asian American marriages are less likely to end in divorce than are marriages in the general U.S. population, researchers caution about perpetuating the “model minority myth” in connection with Asian American marriages. That myth holds that Asian American marriages are “model marriages” that are happy and problem free.⁵⁷
- Several studies have estimated that domestic violence among Asian Americans occurs at least as often, if not more often, than it does in the general U.S. population. However, the many different languages and cultures among Asian Americans make it difficult for researchers to measure accurately the amount of domestic abuse in the Asian American population as a whole.⁵⁸ Also note that although some research has reported about wives who commit violence against their husbands, researchers have concluded that women more often experience severe spousal abuse than do husbands. Thus, the majority of the research in this area focuses on violence against women.⁵⁹
- *Higher Rates of Domestic Violence.* A number of studies have found the rate of domestic violence in the United States to be higher for Asian Americans than for whites. For example, one study found that 61 percent of Japanese American women in Los Angeles experienced some form of spousal abuse during their lifetime, compared with 22-to-31 percent of the U.S. population.⁶⁰ Studies of Korean and Japanese communities report similar proportions, around 60 percent.⁶¹ However, studies of Chinese and Chinese Americans reported a much lower rate (10-to-30 percent) of domestic violence.⁶²
- *Top Reason for Divorce.* One study that focused specifically on divorce among Korean immigrant women found that the most common reason for divorce was the ex-husband’s abuse of the spouse or children.⁶³
- *Obstacles to Leaving Abusive Relationships.* Asian Americans may face more obstacles to leaving abusive relationships than do other Americans:
 - o *Language barriers or fear of involvement* with immigration officials or other legal agencies discourage many from seeking help.⁶⁴ Many Asian American women may not make use of domestic abuse hotlines. To help overcome this barrier, community outreach workers should speak the relevant language and provide culturally hospitable shelters with Asian foods and furnishings.⁶⁵
 - o *Traditional cultural beliefs* may discourage women from reporting violence or may encourage them to tolerate it.⁶⁶ For example, the Confucian principle of “Three Obedience’s” states that a women must be obedient first to her father, then to her husband, and then to her son.⁶⁷ This belief may also make husbands more likely to abuse their wives. In fact, studies have reported that husbands who believed that men should dominate women were more likely to abuse their wives.⁶⁸ Such beliefs may put pressure on women to maintain harmony and remain devoted to family at

all costs.⁶⁹ These beliefs also may encourage both men and women to believe that abuse is a normal and acceptable part of relationships.⁷⁰

Q8. What should marriage educators know to make their services more inviting and effective for Asian Americans?

A8.

- *Consider Child-Focused Marriage Education.* Because Asian Americans traditionally focus more on the parent-child relationship than on the spousal relationship, they tend to be more interested in parenting education than in marriage education. Family life educators should consider making the importance of a healthy marital relationship part of a parenting program and should discuss the importance of a healthy marriage to raising happy children.⁷¹
- *Attend to Extended Family Issues.* Most marriage education programs tend to focus on issues related to participants' family-of-origin and how these issues may affect the marital relationship. Dealing with issues from the family in which participants grew up can be valuable, but ongoing relationships with parents and in-laws may be particularly important for Asian American couples.⁷²
- *Emphasize Learning Instead of Counseling.* Many Asian Americans place a high value on learning and education. Designers of marriage education programs should frame these programs as a learning opportunity rather than as something that is akin to counseling. For instance, marriage educators might emphasize that their courses teach emotional intelligence and people-management skills. Concepts such as emotional intelligence may be especially helpful for teaching the importance of understanding one's own feelings and those of one's spouse because emotional intelligence sounds more appealing and less foreign than talking about personal feelings.⁷³
- *Don't Hide the Research.* Perhaps because of a strong value placed on learning and education, many Asian Americans appreciate it when research and theory are evident in what is taught in the program.⁷⁴
- *Be Sensitive to Cultural Differences.* Marriage educators should be aware of cultural differences in healthy relationships and family boundaries. For instance, what may appear as an intrusive family relationship to some Americans, such as in-laws' involvement in couple decision-making, may be acceptable to Asian Americans. Marriage educators should be aware of the level of traditional beliefs of the participants and the degree to which they have accepted or rejected Western culture.⁷⁵ One implication of this point is that the most effective educators are likely those who are fluent in both the language and the culture of their students.
- *Read More.* Marriage educators interested in learning more about adapting their services to Asian Americans may want to read in detail an article by Wei-Jen Huang cited here.⁷⁶

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