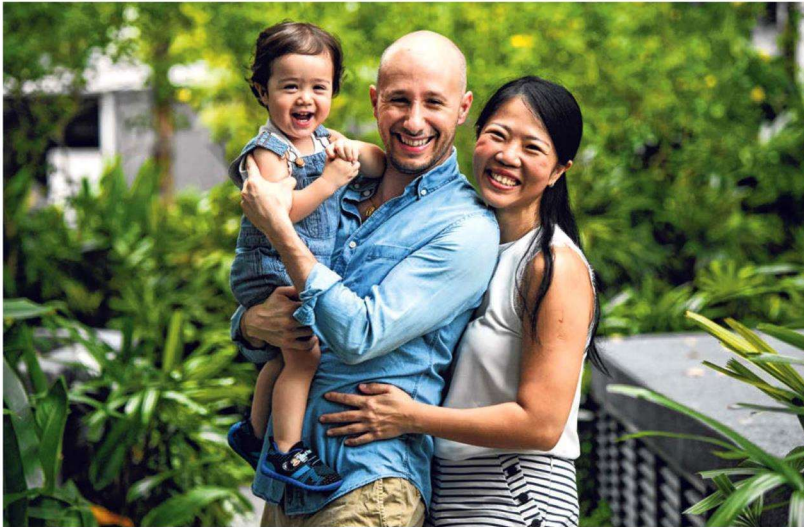


Singaporean Rena Foong, 36, with her Brazilian husband, Mr Expedito Fabiano, 36, and their one-year-old son Emmanuel. Mr Fabiano came to Singapore to work in 2015 and got to know Ms Foong at the workplace. After dating for about two years, the couple got married in 2019. ST PHOTO: KIA CHEE SIONG



More Singaporean women marrying foreign sweethearts

1,727 Singaporean women tied the knot with a non-resident groom in 2019 – up 52% from 2009

Theresa Tan
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When it comes to Mr Right, more Singaporean women are marrying their foreign sweethearts.

In 2019, 1,727 Singaporean women tied the knot with a non-resident groom – a 52 per cent jump from the 1,134 such couples in 2009. Whereas, in 1999, there were 1,043 such pairings.

In 2019, the number of Singaporean women marrying non-resident grooms made up 8 per cent of all marriages involving at least one citizen – up from 5 per cent in 2009. About two in three of the non-resident grooms in 2019 were nationals of Asian countries, while the rest held nationalities from countries in North America, Europe, Oceania and other regions.

The data is contained in the Population In Brief reports, the 2010 and 2020 editions, published by the Government.

It is a trend fuelled by greater social mobility, with couples, counsellors and sociologists saying more Singaporeans are finding their life partners when they study or work overseas and vice versa, while some transnational couples meet online or while on holiday.

There are other reasons women may be more open to the idea of romance wherever they occur. Ms Winny Lu, senior counsellor at Reach Community Services, said: "Although the practice of marrying between families of equal social class and status is not widely practised in our modern society, men typically would not 'marry up' (marry someone with a higher socio-economic status) and women generally would not 'marry down'."

This remains an unspoken expectation. She said many Singaporean women are well educated, more selective in choosing their Mr Right and they could have met their intellectual equal and soulmate at the workplace.

Take, for example, Singaporean Rena Foong, 36, who met her



Ms Jolyn Ng, 29, and her Italian husband Simone Meregaglia, 25, met during a six-month Christian mission programme in South Africa in 2015. They dated for four years and wed in 2019. PHOTO: FRENCH TOAST PRODUCTIONS

It's a different picture for men

While more Singaporean women married foreigners in the past decade, the same cannot be said for Singaporean men.

In 2019, 4,426 Singaporean men wed non-resident brides – 18 per cent fewer than the 5,410 such pairings in 2009. These marriages made up 20 per cent of all marriages involving at least one citizen in 2019, down from 25 per cent in 2009.

In 1999, 4,129 Singaporeans wed non-resident women. Some 97 per cent of these non-resident brides in 2019 were nationals of Asian countries.

The data is from the 2010 and 2020 editions of the Population In Brief report published by the Government. Counsellors say many of the men who wed foreign wives are less educated, lower-wage workers.

Reach Community Services senior counsellor Winny Lu said some men may have been deterred from finding a foreign wife in the past decade after realising the challenges such couples face.

These include financial struggle, the difficulty of securing permanent residence for the spouse, cultural barriers and different expectations. Singapore Management University sociologist Paulin Straughan believes there could be another reason for the fall in the number of foreign wives. "I suspect women from these traditional sources of foreign brides may have alternative means of seeking their life partners, so perhaps fewer are willing to come as foreign brides," she said.

Theresa Tan

Love at first sight in Edinburgh library

It was love at first sight for Mr James Pelham, 36, when the Briton first laid eyes on Singaporean Erni Salleh, 33, in a library in the Scottish capital of Edinburgh in 2018.

Mr Pelham, an accounts manager at an IT firm, said: "As soon as I saw Erni, I felt she's very special and I have to get to know her. She's gorgeous."

"I thought of marrying her the first time I saw her. This feeling took me by surprise."

Ms Erni, a former librarian, was on the last day of a solo holiday when Mr Pelham struck up a conversation with her. After she returned to Singapore, and Mr Pelham to Bournemouth, England, where he lives, they kept in contact.

Three months after their first meeting, Ms Erni flew to England to visit him and they started dating. It was a long-distance relationship for most of their two-year-long courtship.

Mr Pelham said: "A long-distance relationship is difficult even in the best of times. It's hard to be apart from the person you love."

But both were committed to each other. Mr Pelham converted to Islam on his own accord as he wanted to show Ms Erni's family he was serious about becoming part of their family. He did not practice a religious faith before his conversion.

He said: "My family asked if I'm sure, they would support me."

Ms Erni said her family "really fell in love" with Mr Pelham after their first meeting. She said: "My family is open to (me marrying a foreigner) as many of my cousins married foreigners. The only thing is he has to convert to Islam."

The couple registered their marriage in Singapore in January last year, although they decided to postpone their wedding reception because of the pandemic. And after a year apart given Covid-19 travel restrictions, Ms Erni moved to Bournemouth to live with her husband last month. She said of her husband: "I felt very reassured that this is the person I want to spend my life and raise children with."



Mr James Pelham and Ms Erni Salleh at the Registry of Muslim Marriages in Singapore. PHOTO: RADZIAH RAZALI

Theresa Tan

From strangers to spouses in a few months

Going from strangers to spouses in less than five months, Mr Sumit Grover and Ms Annabelle Lee will spend their first Valentine's Day together as newly weds.

They have Ms Lee's aunt to thank – she put them in touch with each other after she met Mr Grover at a party in the first half of last year and thought he would be a good match for her niece.

The couple met for coffee on National Day, and the blind date led to a genuine connection between them. After a whirlwind romance in the midst of a pandemic, the two took the leap and said "I do" in December.

Ms Lee, 30, a Singaporean, grew up with an elder sister and her two triplet brothers here, while Mr Grover, an Indian national, came to Singapore in 2007 for his studies.

Mr Grover, 33, who is a money broker, said it was love at first sight. "She swept me off my feet on that first date. Over time, I recognised her caring nature and appreciated her effort to understand me, whether it was my faith or my cuisine," he said.

Ms Lee, a former banking and finance executive currently on sabbatical leave, said: "My family is quite conservative so when they encouraged me to go for the initial date, I was surprised."

"When we met, I realised we had similar career paths and we just clicked. What struck me the most was how he paid attention to the little things and was respectful towards my parents."

Following a surprise proposal at Marina Bay Sands in October, the couple held a small function on Dec 12 after signing their marriage certificate. They still hope to hold a multicultural wedding – complete with a visit to a Sikh gurdwara and a traditional Chinese bridal procession and tea ceremony – later this year. Two months into their marriage, the duo are waiting patiently for borders to reopen so they can visit



Mr Sumit Grover and Ms Annabelle Lee celebrating Deepavali at their home last year. PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE COUPLE

Malavika Menon

family members in Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Although they plan to travel far and wide, the couple say Singapore will still be their home. Ms Lee said: "Growing up in a multicultural society, we are used to understanding and appreciating different cultures. We look forward to the next few decades and raising our family here."