

Chinese immigrants look to digital Chinatowns to find love online

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Where do people go for good Chinese food? One obvious answer is Chinatown. Many large cities have established Chinatowns and other neighborhoods that serve as a cultural base for different communities. But increasingly, more than existing in physical space, these ethnic communities are forming in cyberspace.

In particular, digital Chinatowns are becoming very important in the dating lives of Chinese immigrants. According to [our new research](#), many Chinese immigrants in Canada are turning to [online communities](#) hoping to find love.

As the internet and smartphones have become ubiquitous in our day-to-day life, millions of singles are [going online](#) to look for romantic partners. And online dating platforms have burgeoned.

Digital Chinatowns

Even if you've never tried online dating, you've probably heard of Tinder, Plenty of Fish, OkCupid or one of the many [dating apps](#) available today. There are also online dating platforms that [cater to specific groups](#).

A popular choice among Chinese immigrants is [2RedBeans](#), one of the main dating sites for Chinese people living abroad. Another frequently mentioned app, [Tantan](#), is known as the Tinder of China.

People of Chinese descent are [one of the largest visible minority groups](#) in Canada. Nearly 60 percent of them are foreign-born immigrants to Canada.

In 2018–2019, our research team interviewed 31 heterosexual Chinese immigrants in Metro Vancouver, including 17 women and 14 men. All of our research participants had used online dating services while they were living in Canada. We talked with each of them about their dating and relationship experiences.

About half of the people we interviewed preferred to date someone of the same ethnic background. Many of them preferred Chinese immigrants who had come to Canada at a similar age to themselves.

They believed that immigrating from China to Canada around similar ages would indicate shared cultural upbringings. This cultural matching was perceived to facilitate mutual understanding, good conversations, and feelings of "clicking" in intimate relationships.

Interviewees told us it was difficult to make friends in their daily life in Vancouver, let alone find their preferred dates. For example, one interviewee participated in an [English conversation circle](#) for newcomers to improve her English. However, she found it hard to socialize with people there because everyone "was cold to each other" and "had little interest in chatting further." So, she went online in search of dates and romantic partners, just like [many other immigrants](#).

But meeting people on western dating apps was also challenging for our Chinese [immigrant](#) interviewees. While Tinder is often seen as a default option in the western dating scene, one interviewee felt there were "very few Chinese" on Tinder. Another said, "If any, those are the Chinese people who can't speak Chinese; those speaking Chinese don't use Tinder to look for partners."

As a result, many Chinese immigrants we interviewed primarily, or even exclusively, used dating platforms that specifically catered to Chinese people.

Dating apps like 2RedBeans and Tantan have created Chinatowns in cyberspace. Chinese-oriented dating apps not only provide a virtual space for co-ethnic daters to gather, but they also preserve the use of Chinese language.

Speaking Chinese matters when connecting with potential partners. Users who lack Chinese language skills can feel blocked out of cyber-Chinatowns. One of our interviewees, who came to Canada as a child and didn't speak fluent Chinese, said his experience on Chinese dating

apps had not been fruitful. In his experience on Tantan, most women stopped talking to him after he asked if they could speak English.

Racial stereotypes

Our research also found that Chinese immigrant men were more likely than women to rely on ethnic online communities to look for romance. Men's choices of [online dating](#) platforms were not just down to personal preference, but rooted in their lived experiences of discrimination in dating.

One man shared with us that he once received the following comment from a white woman: "You are the first Asian man that caught my eye!" While it was meant to be complimentary, it felt more like scorn than praise, echoing stereotypes of Asian men being "unmasculine" and "unattractive."

Some of our male interviewees tried mainstream western dating apps like Tinder and Plenty of Fish but kept getting no matches. Disappointed with their experiences, they soon deleted the apps.

Even if some Chinese men were open to dating women of other ethnicities, non-Chinese women seldom responded to their messages. After experiencing constant non-responses and rejections on western dating apps, Chinese men tended to "retreat" into cyber-Chinatowns as a comfort zone shielding them from potentially disappointing encounters.

Without enough intercultural contact that promotes [deeper understanding](#), individuals are often reduced to [stereotypical characterizations](#). As such, [racial stereotypes](#) remain unchallenged and racial discrimination continues to prevail.

Ethnic, cultural or religious online communities help people find a

match. However, such communities can also risk further segregating people into ethnic clusters and reduce interactions across different cultural groups.

Our interviews with Chinese immigrants were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, [anti-Asian racism has surged](#). That could mean more Chinese immigrants will turn to digital Chinatowns to look for love and companionship.

What can be done to help immigrants attain a sense of belonging without living in the margins of the host society? Ideally, in Canada, a country that [supports multiculturalism](#), visible minority immigrants can preserve their ethnic cultures while having plentiful intercultural communications without experiencing racism. But in reality, that is not always the case.

Limited opportunities to make meaningful connections won't be magically solved by using technology. We must all cultivate more space, on and offline, where we can meet people of different backgrounds and get to know each other as real people and social equals. Culture may define us, but it should not divide us.

More information: Manlin Cai et al, Digital Ethnic Enclaves: Mate Preferences and Platform Choices Among Chinese Immigrant Online Daters in Vancouver, *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/cars.12414](https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12414)

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