

European Population Conference 2026

Ethnic Stratification and Status Exchange:

Exploring Immigration and Interethnic Marriage Patterns in Hong Kong

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Acknowledgement: This paper uses the Population Census data from the Census and Statistics Department of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

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Abstract

Interethnic marriage is a key indicator of social integration. While status exchange theory has been extensively examined in majority-minority contexts, limited studies have explored its relevance in post-colonial, multiethnic societies beyond dichotomized ethnic frameworks. This study examines how status exchange operates across diverse ethnic dyads in Hong Kong, a city characterized by colonial legacies, ethnic hierarchies, and rapidly changing migration profiles. Using a 5% sample of the 2021 Hong Kong Population Census, we analyze 7,812 heterosexual married couples aged 21-34. Two series of log-linear models are employed to assess patterns of educational and ethnic homogamy, as well as the presence of status exchange, where educational attainment is traded for majority status and ethnic status in interethnic marriages. We also apply the Exchange Index to quantify asymmetric exchanges across pairings. Preliminary findings showed that Hong Kong-born Chinese and South Asian immigrants were the most endogamous, while White immigrants, multiethnic individuals, and HK-born minorities show higher intermarriage rates. Gendered patterns indicated that women from Southeast Asia and Mainland China without permanent residency were more likely to intermarry. Educational disparities were aligned with ethnic hierarchies. Hong Kong-born Chinese and White immigrants had the highest educational attainments, while South Asians and some Mainland Chinese were concentrated at lower levels. These preliminary findings suggest a layered ethnic stratification system in Hong Kong's marriage market. This study aims to extend status exchange theory into a post-colonial context in East Asia, contributing to broader debates on migration assimilation, social mobility, and ethnic stratification in multiethnic cities.

Keywords: Interethnic marriage, Status exchange, Ethnic stratification, Hong Kong

Topic and Objectives

Interethnic marriage serves as a critical indicator of social integration for immigrants in multiethnic societies. It promotes proximity between ethnic groups and enhances social solidarity. A key question raised by scholars for decades is who, and how, immigrants integrate into the majority population through intermarriage? Two crucial mechanisms, assortative mating and status exchange theory, provide answers (Kalmijn, 2010). The latter mechanism, the exchange of higher racial hierarchy for socioeconomic resources, such as educational attainment, has been widely documented in black-white unions in the U.S. (Qian & Lichter, 2007, 2011; Torche & Rich, 2017). Yet, a critical gap remains that few studies have systematically explored status exchange in post-colonial, multiethnic societies, especially beyond the majority-minority binary.

This study positions Hong Kong as an optimal testbed for grappling with interethnic marriages in a post-colonial, ethnically stratified social setting. As a former British colony, Hong Kong has established itself as an international hub without celebrating its diversity within its social fabric (Law & Lee, 2012). Ethnic boundaries have been entrenched more than cleavages between local residents and immigrants; they also include structural distinctions among different South and Southeast Asian communities, privileged Western expatriates, and the recent influx of highly skilled mainland Chinese immigrants (Gu & Fong, 2024; O'Connor, 2018).

We translate our understanding of the ethnic landscape and theoretical lens into the following research question, *whether and how status exchange is applicable to interethnic marriages across different ethnic dyads in Hong Kong?* Hypotheses are drawn from homogamy and status exchange theories as well as ethnic stratification argumentation in post-colonial societies (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Torche & Rich, 2017). Method-wise, we adopt two series of long-linear models to test assortative mating by exploring education or ethnic preferences for dyadic intermarriage and thereafter, looking into the role of education in challenging ethnic boundaries. Altogether, this study will substantially contribute to the existing literature by investigating interethnic marriage in a multiethnic, post-colonial context, comparing the ethnic majority with different ethnic minorities, and advancing the understanding of intermarriage mechanisms within broader topics of international migration and social mobility.

Theories and Hypotheses

Interethnic marriage is a strong indicator of social integration, as it blurs the strict ethnic group boundaries and facilitates intergroup proximity. The family of assimilation theories provides a valuable conceptual framework for understanding the processes by which minorities integrate into destination societies. In particular, the New Assimilation Theory articulated by Alba and Nee (2015) emphasizes that minorities may not intermarry with the majority to seek

assimilation intentionally, but rather take instrumental considerations to open up opportunities for upward social mobility. In this regard, assortative mating based on preferences for similar levels of education eventually becomes a powerful force that can cross ethnic boundaries (Blossfeld, 2009; Furtado & Theodoropoulos, 2011). In line with educational assortative mating, we hypothesize that: *The likelihood of intermarriage with Hong Kong-born Chinese increases across levels of educational homogamy (H1).*

Status exchange theory, however, provides an alternative perspective to evaluate education in interethnic marriage (Hou & Myles, 2013; Kalmijn, 2010). Seeing marriage product as a result of exchange of resources, minorities offer their exceeding socioeconomic resources to overcome integration barriers from their partners. Unlike the well-documented findings in the U.S., which are based on strict majority-minority boundaries, Hong Kong presents a dynamic negotiation between its colonial legacy of White supremacy, localism, and persistent discrimination and prejudice faced by ethnic minorities. (Li & Liu, 2021; O'Connor, 2018). According to status exchange assumptions with our contemplation of post-colonial ethnic stratification in Hong Kong, we therefore hypothesize that: *Non-White immigrants are more likely to engage in status exchange interethnic marriage with HK-born Chinese for their majority status. The effect would be stronger among non-Chinese immigrants (H2a); Hong Kong locals with higher educational levels tend to marry whites with lower educational levels in exchange for a higher ethnic status (H2b).*

Data and Methods

Data and Sample

We made use of 5% samples of the 5% 2021 Population Census data temporarily from the Census and Statistics Department of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region to answer our research questions. The 2021 Population Census used a disproportionate stratified systematic sample and a multi-modal data collection approach, covering permanent residents and mobile residents (Census and Statistics Department, 2021). The data include a simple survey covering about 90% of households in Hong Kong to collect basic information, and a more detailed questionnaire for the remaining 10% covering a wide range of statistics. Approximately, it covers 136,000 households and 370,000 individuals residing in Hong Kong. This data is of very high quality as it provides up-to-date benchmark statistics on the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the population of Hong Kong and it's suitable to explore interethnic marriages given to its low prevalence (Mu, 2021). Especially for ethnic minorities, the Hong Kong census provides granular data for each ethnic group, which allows us to conduct further comparison and analysis.

Since the current census lacks information on places of marriage, first marriages, and marriage timing, we included currently married couples aged 21 to 34 to minimize potential bias from changes in marital status (Qian & Lichter, 2007). We employed dyadic matching to identify currently heterosexual married couples who live in the same household from the census by identifying unique quarter and household identifiers and spouse serial numbers. We also excluded foreign domestic helpers from the sample based on the question, ‘*Relationship to household head*’, where the cases fell into ‘*live-in domestic helpers*’. From this match-couple dataset, we identified 7,812 currently married pairs, consisting of 68.3% intra-ethnic marriages, 48.8% intermarriages with Chinese individuals (HK-born Chinese, mainland Chinese with or without permanent residency, and Chinese born elsewhere), and 1.54% between immigrants and/or minorities.

Measurements

With regard to ethnicity, we identified ten ethnic groups based on the combinations of nationality, ethnicity, and places of birth: Local Chinese (Hong Kong born), Mainland Chinese (with permanent residence), Mainland Chinese (without permanent residence), Other Chinese immigrants, East Asian immigrants, South Asian immigrants, Southeast Asia immigrants, White immigrants, and Other/Mixed/Unclassified individuals. These categories followed their migration trajectories, ensured sufficient population size, aligned with their distinct educational and intermarriage patterns, and reflected cultural and religious norms.

In terms of educational attainment, we employed the variable ‘*highest education completed*’ from the survey and recoded it into five levels: primary and below, lower secondary, upper secondary, post-secondary, and college. This ensures adequate sample sizes at each educational level across ethnic groups.

Analytical Strategy

Intermarriage research has widely utilized log-linear models to estimate associations between characteristics of spouses, controlling for marginal distributions, such as group sizes and sex ratios (Gullickson, 2006; Qian & Lichter, 2011). We develop two series of log-linear models to test our hypotheses. The baseline model estimates interethnic marriages by modeling the frequencies of observed marriages between husbands and wives of different ethnicities, yielding (10*10 = 100) cells after cross-tabulation:

$$\log F_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_i^{HG} + \beta_j^{WG} \quad (1)$$

where F_{ij} represents the number of marriages between husbands belonging to ethnic group i and wives belonging to ethnic group j . β_0 is a constant, while β_i^{HG} and β_j^{WG} denote the effects associated with the husbands’ and wives’ ethnic groups. To assess hypotheses related to status

exchange, we then incorporate interaction terms for selected interethnic couples based on a strategic trade-off between ethnic status and educational attainment, producing (9*9*5*5=2025) cells:

$$\log F_{ijmn} = \beta_0 + \beta_i^{HG} + \beta_j^{WG} + \beta_m^{HE} + \beta_n^{WE} + \beta_{im}^{HGE} + \beta_{jn}^{WGE} \quad (2)$$

where F_{ijmn} is the number of marriages between husbands in ethnic group i and education group m and wives in ethnic group j and education group n . In addition, β_m^{HE} and β_n^{WE} denote husbands' and wives' education, and β_{im}^{HGE} and β_{jn}^{WGE} capture all two-way interactions between ethnic group and education for husbands and wives, respectively.

Expected Findings and Implications

Descriptive findings showed that ethnic intermarriage patterns among young adults (aged 21–34) in Hong Kong revealed distinct differences shaped by immigration status, ethnicity, and education (Figures 1-3). Intermarriage was most prevalent among local minorities and multiethnic individuals, groups that also indicated relatively high educational attainment, while South Asian immigrants and local Chinese remain the most endogamous. Gender differences were clear, with women generally more likely to intermarry, especially among Southeast Asian and Mainland Chinese immigrants without permanent residency. Local Chinese overwhelmingly married within their group, mainly partnering with Mainland Chinese permanent residents, which reinforced strong ethnic boundaries. Educational disparities further underscored stratification, where white immigrants and local Chinese tended to have the highest levels of education, while South Asian and some Mainland Chinese groups clustered at the lower end of the spectrum. Altogether, these patterns suggested that while certain groups, such as local minorities, white immigrants, and multiethnic individuals, were more integrated through intermarriage, others remained socially and structurally distinct. This reflected a layered system of ethnic stratification and selective status exchange within Hong Kong's marriage market.

Further analysis will be completed by using multiple waves of census data from the Hong Kong census to supplement the three-way interactions in our estimation models, to address the trend variations across time and ethnic groups in Hong Kong. Using the Exchange Index as a new methodological framework to address confounding issues (Xie & Dong, 2021), we expect to find that mainland Chinese migrants and ethnic minorities are more likely to intermarry with HK-born Chinese for majority status, while HK-born Chinese are more likely to intermarry whites to achieve higher ethnic status. Ultimately, this research speaks to broader debates in migration, race, and family sociology by showing how social mobility and ethnic boundary-making are negotiated through union formation in a rapidly globalizing yet historically stratified society.

Figures

Figure 1. Intermarriage rates by ethnicity and gender

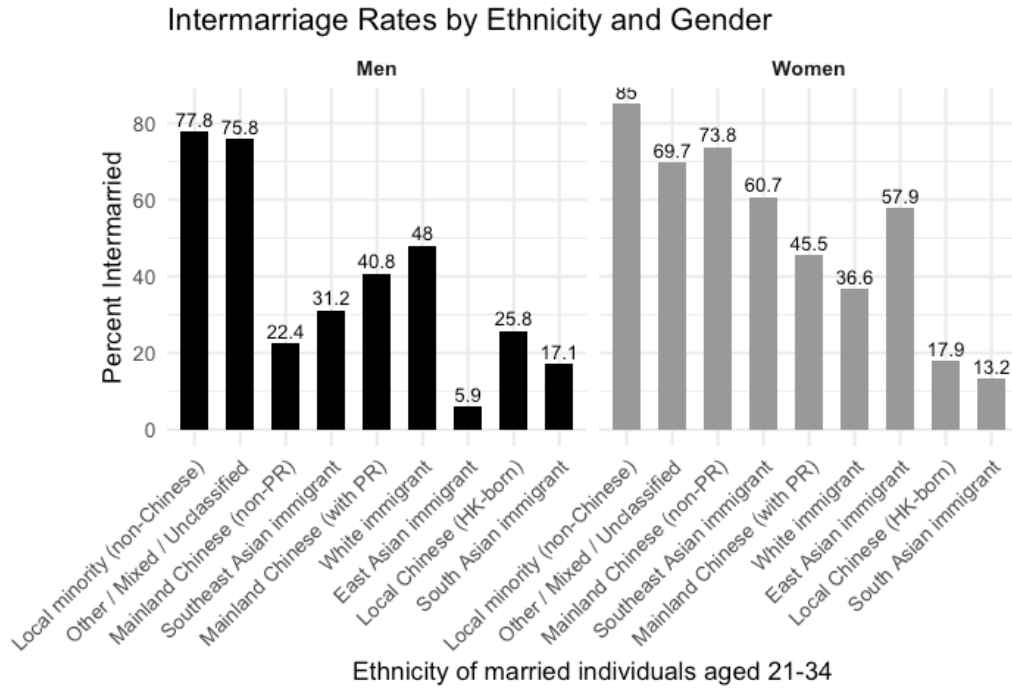


Figure 2. Distribution of Spouse Ethnicities in Intermarriages for Hong Kong Locals by Gender

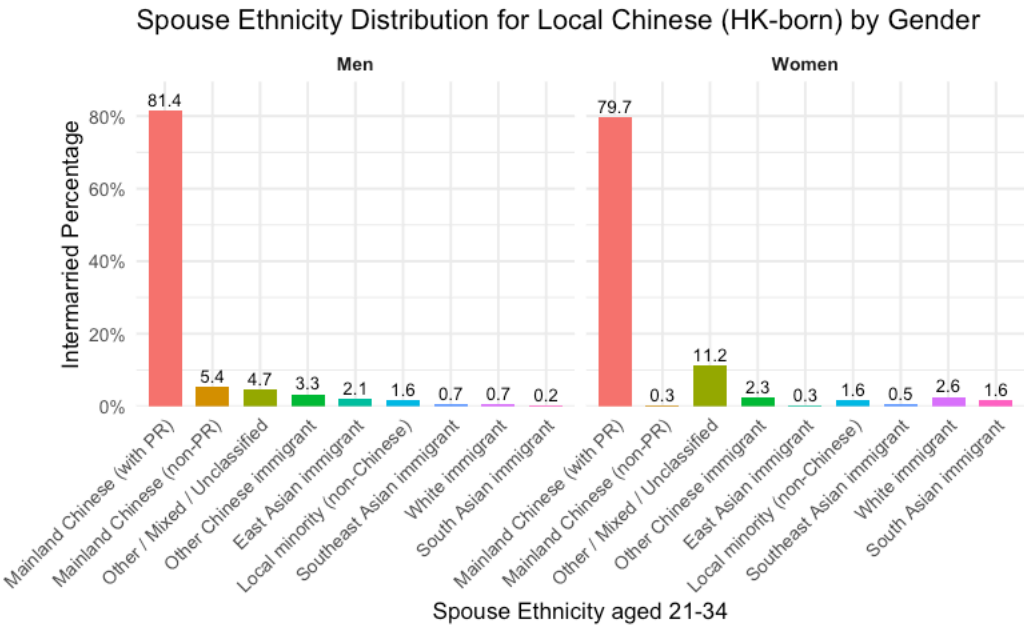
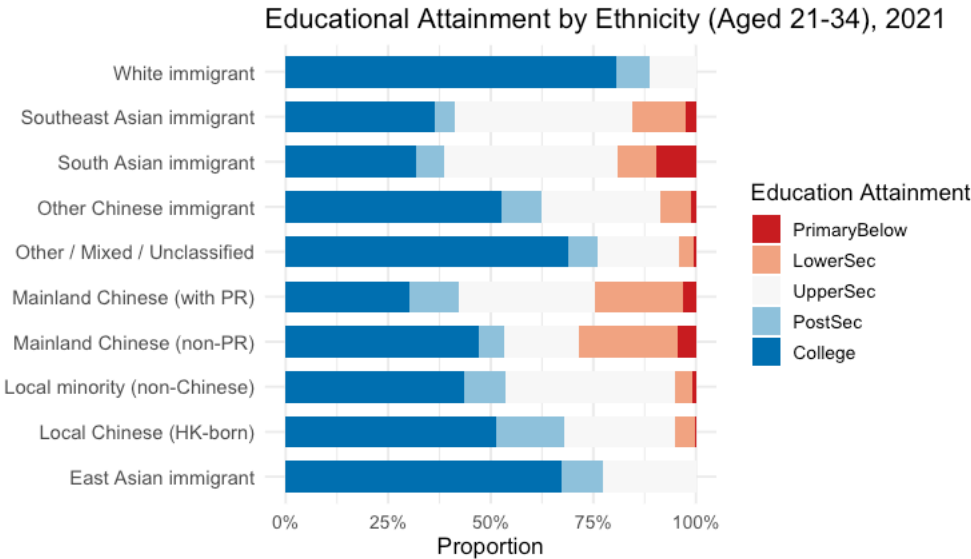


Figure 3. Educational attainment by ethnic groups (aged 21-34)



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