

# Spousal matching in a precarious world: Mobility and resilience in transnational marriage, evidence from China

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# Background

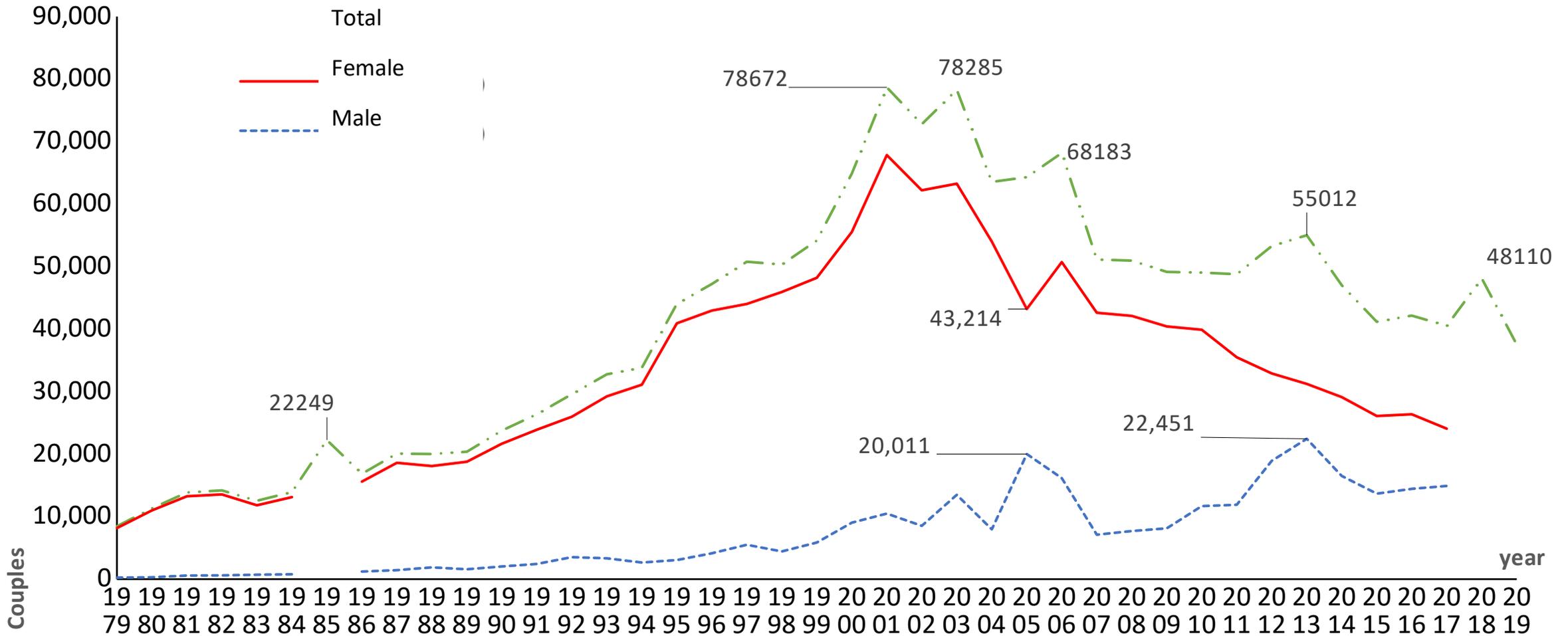
## Transition and self-determination, or lack thereof

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- “generally assumed to be a *female-dominated migration flow*” while “there is evidence that brides frequently outnumber grooms.” (Williams 2010: 61)
  - Early colonists – Jamestown brides, King’s daughters, casket girls
  - 1900s America – mail order bride (West & exclusion act on Asian population)
  - WWII – war bride, mail-order bride, family migration
  - 70s to 90s - refugees, structural imbalance & official intervene
  - 2000s – global “carer” labour market, international marriage broker
  - Limited understanding of the largest population...

(Landry 1992, Sinke 1999, Tong 2004, Yamanaka& Pipier 2005, UN 2006, Hashimoto 2007, Limanoda 2007, Young 2010)

# General Trends – in Mainland China

**Number of Registered “Chinese-foreign” Marriages in Mainland China, 1979 to 2019**

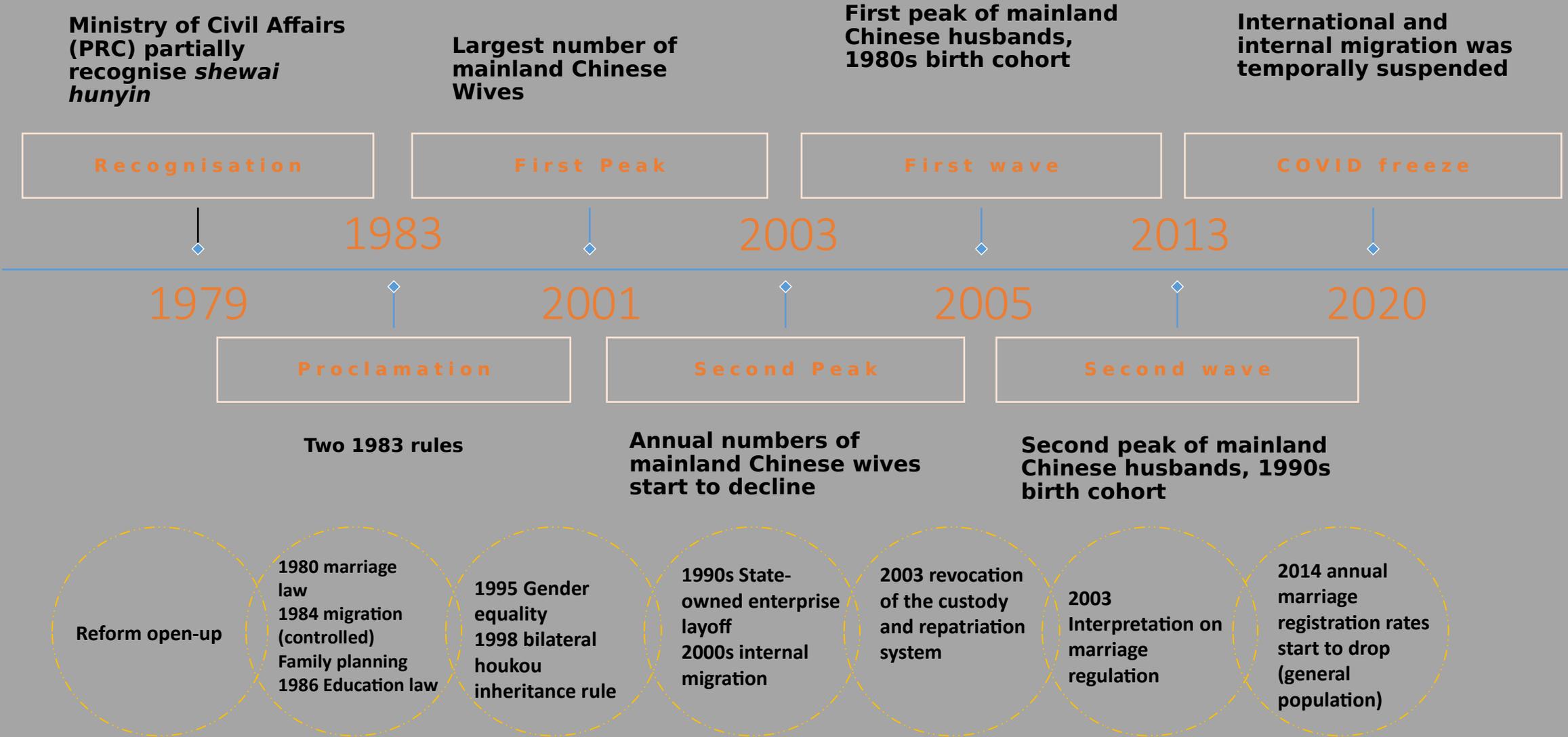


# Existing focal points

- Marriage or migration?
- Linkage or exchange?
- “I can’t understand why those (Chinese) women marry foreigners. All they want is foreign residency. They’ll do everything in exchange for a foreign passport. But is it really worth everything?” (Local official, male, 2017)



# Historical and social ecology





# Social mobility through marriage

How do transnational couples match?

What is the premium of relative advantages in this marriage market?

# Socio-cultural “logic”

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Universal marriage  
(30/35 rule, 剩女, 光棍)



Assortative matching of  
families  
(门当户对, homogamy)



Hypergamous matching of  
spouses  
(男高女低, education, income,  
age, physical features...)

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## Data

- Provincial Bureaus of Civil Affairs Marriage-Divorce Registration Record Database, 2005 to 2016  
(*individual level, matched*)
- Human Development Index of 2005, 2010 and 2015  
(UN 2018)

- Relative Advantages between husband and wife

*the spousal distance* (individual level)

- Origin (residency at marriage)
- Educational attainment

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- The assumption is that matching pattern of international/cross-border marriage can be explained by *the general pattern of origin exogamy, educational marginal distributions of husband and wife, and educational matching across all couples*. The general model is specified as

where  $E_{ij}$  is the expected frequency of marriages between husband of the  $i$ th educational category and wife of the  $j$ th educational category,  $\mu$  is the overall effect,  $\alpha_i$  denotes the row effect of  $i$ th row, and  $\beta_j$  denotes the column effect of  $j$ th column.  $\rho$  denotes the inter-trait correlation matrix based on the model design. the general pattern of origin and educational homogamy (and  $\rho$ ); the association of individual education and origin is controlled by ( $\alpha_i$  and  $\beta_j$ ); and the  $\gamma_{ij}$  are a set of dummy variables to identify the possible interactions between spouses' traits of relative advantage

## Classification of Marriages by the Relative Advantage between Spouses

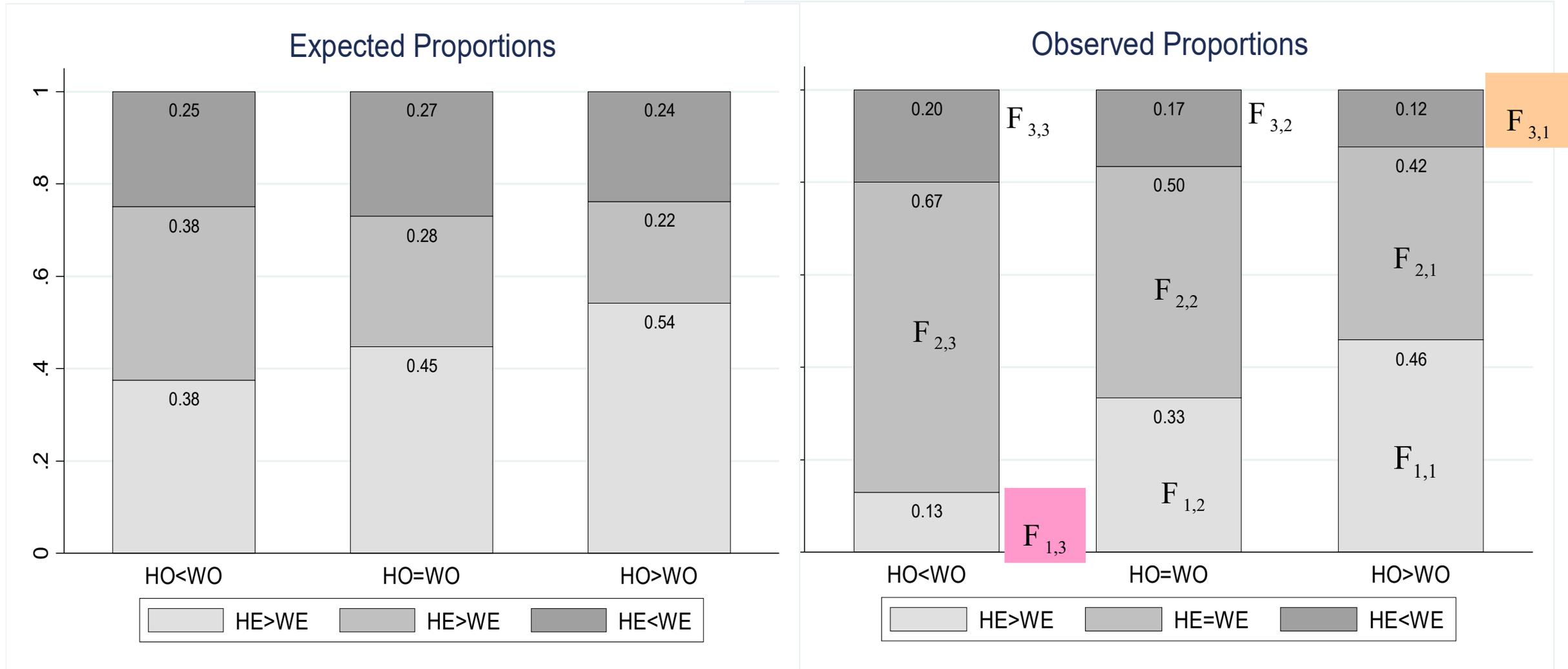
		Spouse's relative origin		
		Husband>Wife	Husband=Wife	Husband<Wife
Spouse's relative educational attainment	Husband>Wife	$F_{1,1}$	$F_{1,2}$	$F_{1,3}$
	Husband=Wife	$F_{2,1}$	$F_{2,2}$	$F_{2,3}$
	Husband<Wife	$F_{3,1}$	$F_{3,2}$	$F_{3,3}$

Husband>Wife, husband has relative advantage in the trait; Husband=Wife, the spouses share the same trait; Husband<Wife, the wife has relative advantage.

The row  $i$  and column  $j$  positions of each cell are shown by  $\Pi_{i,j}$ .

*Rosenfeld 2005; Gullickson 2006 and 2014; Agresti 2013; Schwartz, Zeng and Xie, 2016*

# Spouse's Relative Advantage, Observed Matching and Expected Matching



Calculated based on the Bureau's database, two-group test. Expected proportions calculated under random matching.

# Log-linear Estimation Test for Spousal Status Exchange



	Wife's education for Husband's origin	Wife's origin for Husband's education
Model 1: Diagonal homogamy with off-diagonal heterogamy	0.73*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.02)
Model 2: Model1 + traits vary by levels of education, origin, and age	0.83*** (0.04)	0.12*** (0.01)
Model 3: Model2 + traits vary by within-couple differences	0.91*** (0.05)	0.17*** (0.02)
Model 4: Quasi-symmetry <i>(with lowest BIC)</i>	0.86*** (0.05)	0.15*** (0.02)
Model 5: With saturated interaction of education, origin, and age	0.86*** (0.05)	0.15*** (0.02)

NOTE: Calculated based on the Bureau's database. \*\* denotes significance at 5% level; \*\*\* denotes significance at 1% level. The table reports odds ratios and standard errors (in brackets).  
 SOURCE: BCA provincial *Marriage-Divorce Registration Record Database*, 2005 to 2016.



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# Transnational spousal selection unpacked by the couples

“we are not so different”

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- 2016, 2017 (50 interviews)
    - 35 international/cross-border married couples, 5 international/cross-border separated or divorced couples, and 10 domestic married couples
    - observation at registration offices
  - November 2018, 1 international dating trip (organised by a Chinese marriage broker)

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- Purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling
  - In-depth semi-structured interview, life story
  - Non-participant observation, fieldnotes
  - Case study
  - Thematic analysis

# A choice, a solution

## Wives

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- “I was young, and just lost my job... I had no way to make a living; a female worker can never find a decent job. Other people told me that marriage to a foreigner, a Hongkonger, or a Taiwanese would give me a better life. So, I found a marriage broker, paid them, and got married.”
- “In China, we were taught that “women hold up half the world,” but women were nothing in their eyes. I couldn’t find a job. I couldn’t bear this type of life, so I just ran. I came back to China, settled down, built up my own business, and made a life. All these years I didn’t dare to get a divorce; he tried so many times to track me down and take me back.”
- “I thought foreign countries could provide women with more opportunities... If you ask me now whether I feel any remorse, I will tell you no. It’s my fate, and it’s my own choice, and back then it seemed to be the only option.”
- “I like China, I saw a Chinese couple when I was a young girl. The man is gentle and kind, unlike the man in my country, who drinks, gambles, and beats his wife. I was married once, also to a Chinese man. My ex-husband didn’t love me that much. So I divorced him and moved away. My current Chinese husband is a good man. He’s gentle, he knows my past, he likes me and wants to spend his life with me. Now we have a son together, I feel good and happy.”

# A choice, a solution

## *Husbands*

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- “Everybody knows it’s not easy to find a wife in villages... women always expect more: you must have a car and apartment, and your parents should not expect you to look after them, better if they are both dead. The women are realistic and do not have filial piety.”
- “People need to marry, settle down, have a wife and children, everybody needs to do this. It’s the Chinese way. If I can’t get married, I can’t have children, my parents won’t have grandchildren, and there won’t be anybody to take care of the family. People will talk behind our backs.”
- “Some guy in our village went to Vietnam and found a woman. His family saved a lot of money on bridewealth, so several guys from my village and I went on a trip to Vietnam with the help of an agency. I gave her parents some money and we got married in her village.”
- “We got registered, and a year later my wife ran away from my village. I can’t find her. I even went to the police and they couldn’t help me. The last time I heard, she was working somewhere with other women from her country.”

# A “good match”

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- “I’m not some woman who is willing to throw herself at any man, just because he’s a foreigner. I have my own life, income, property, and resources, and as a human being, I don’t think I’m less than these foreign men.”
  - “I don’t want money or residency. I have money to do what I want to and I live in a good place. I just want a decent guy who is a good match for me, who really understands me and loves me. We can understand, feel for and support each other. Otherwise, why bother? I can just find a Chinese guy if I want.”
  - “...because I was divorced and in my 50s, most of the time Chinese men were so realistic that I felt they just wanted a person to take care of them and give them money. I want a foreign man because I think they will be more honest and romantic about life and relationships.”
  - “The facts are simple here; if women can find what they want in China, why spend all the efforts to do this? It makes no sense. It is a way for woman to find what they want—they deserve better.”

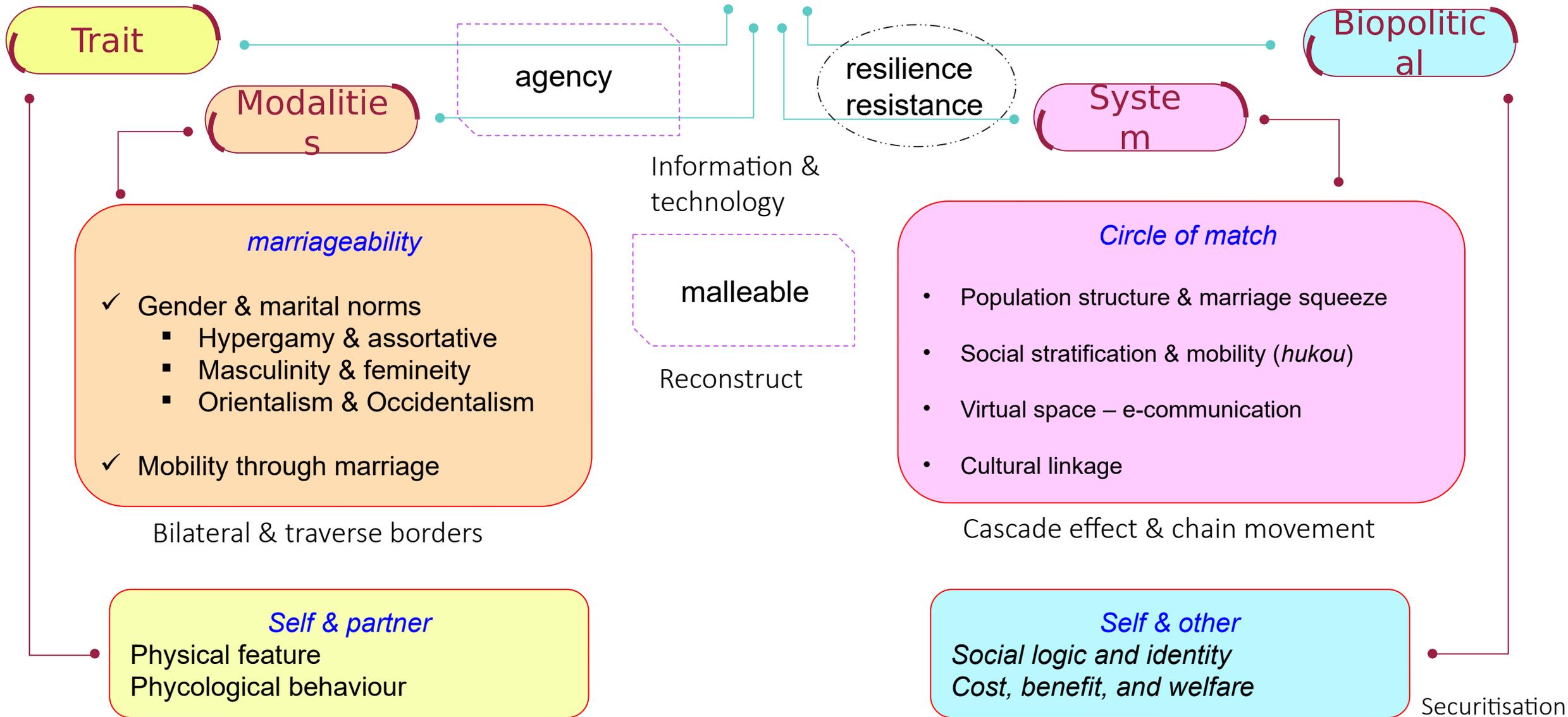
# Mars & Venus

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- “Woman who want to show her charm, beauty, and talent will have more chances. You can’t be too self-conscious and strong-willed, it will intimidate men and scare them away. You need to let them think you are gentle and full of mystery, let them feel your gentle and womanly features.”
  - “I know my husband is kind, warm, and gentle, he’s a good person, but I’m also angry with that. Because I feel he’s like a girl! Every time we have a discussion about certain things, if I insist on my opinion, he just starts to feel hurt and moody, sometimes even crying! I mean, I know this is how his parents raised him, he is emotional, but this is too much! I don’t want my husband to be a sissy! I want him to be a manly man!”
  - “My wife is Chinese, but she is kind and gentle, almost like a woman from my country. She speaks my language.”

# Fight the power

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- “We couldn’t register our marriage because of some procedure issue, we spent two years and a lot of money, and divorced last year and remarried, just to get the documents right so we can register in both countries. To me and my wife, we love each other, that’s what matters. If either of us does not love each other, deceiving each other, that will lead us to the end of our marriage, right at the beginning.”
  - “I think marriage is just a paper, legal document. I love my wife, and that should be enough. But because I love her, I wish to legalise everything. She can be part of my life, she can enjoy benefits and make decisions when it is needed.”
  - “...when you worked as a registrar long enough, you can pick them out. Those who married for everything but love. But as long as they have all the documents required by law, their marriage is legal.”
  - “They have no idea what it’ll be like to be a foreign spouse without permanent residency. How to find a job, how to access welfare and insurance. There will be challenges and considerable costs in the future.”

# Transnational spousal matching





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# Conclusion

Marring up vs. marring down

To resilient is to resist

# Marring up by marring down?

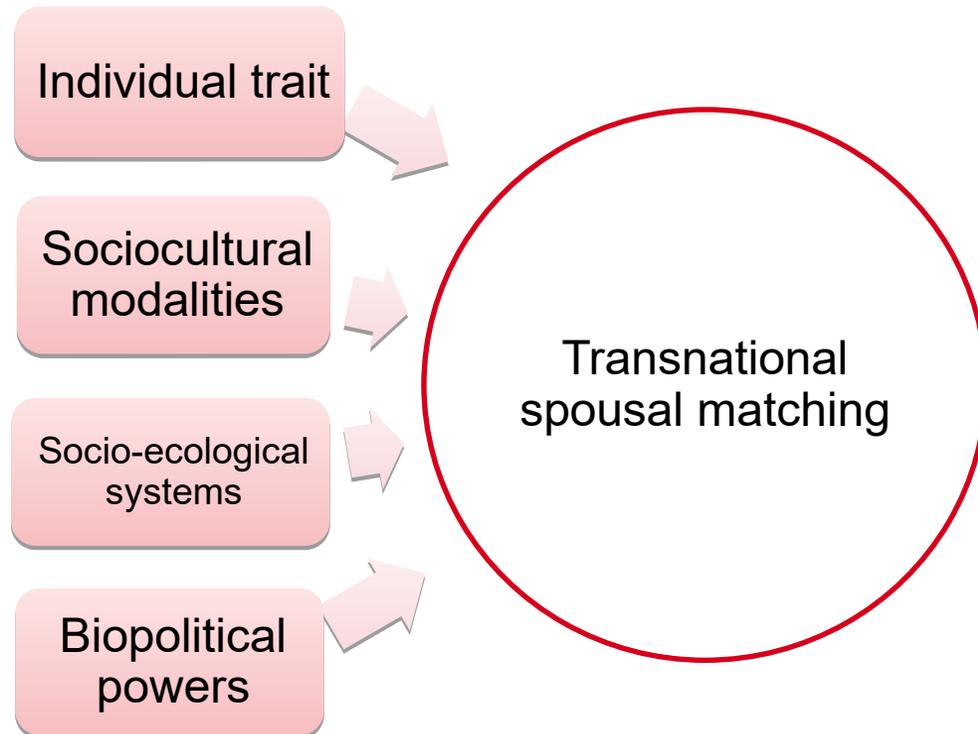
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- In practice, the nature of cross-border/international marriage is either following *highly homogamous pattern*, or determined by *one party's advanced individual traits*
    - couples in cross-border/international marriage follow the same *hypergamous pairing and assortative matching* patterns as couples in domestic marriage do, or even go further in their spousal selection standards
    - compared to the husband-advantaged and wife-advantaged marriage pattern, *status exchange marriage is much less likely to happen* for both genders.

# Marring up by marring down?

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- Individuals who have a premium in their social economic status and origin will be in a better position in cross-border/international marriages, but for the individual who has a modest status, the marriage might **further solidify their disadvantage**.
- In the contemporary Chinese marriage market, cross-border/international marriage has **reinforced marriage barriers**.

# Resilience and resistance traverse borders



- Socially constructed modalities and socio-ecology *shape* individual marital choices, *traverse borders* and *reconstruct* transnational couples' experiences and behaviours
  - Masculinity and femineity – *malleable, fluid, reconstructed*
- Microscopic marriage responses and reconstructs modalities and systems from a collective level
  - The persistence and coexistence of pushing back and bouncing back