

**Intimate Partnering of Chinese International Students in the American South:
The Sexual Fields Approach**

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ABSTRACT

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Thesis under the direction of Professor Mariano Sana

Chinese international students represent the largest group of foreign students within the United States. Although research has investigated the vulnerabilities and career aspirations of this population, literature regarding the intimate lives of Chinese international students remains limited. This paper investigates Chinese international students' intimate partnering—activities and desires related to the pursuit of partners for committed relationships or casual sex—in the host society. A sexual fields theory is used to examine the structured opportunities, barriers, and likely strategies toward intimacy adopted by a sample of Chinese international students ($n = 30$) attending universities in the American South. I propose that the structure of desire and desirability is composed via processes of sexual differentiation, distinction, gendered racialization, and reorientation. I also suggest four types of partnering strategies—withdrawal, within-group exclusivity, between-group exclusivity, and inclusivity—that Chinese international students use based on their lived experiences and their advantages and disadvantages in the sexual fields.

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Introduction

While scholars have examined different migrant groups' intimate lives from undocumented Mexican workers to Filipina hostesses at US army bases (Choo 2016; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994), surprisingly little attention has been paid to intimate lives of international students. International students come to the host country primarily to study in school but also spend time interacting with other students, developing friendships, and exploring intimate relationships. While scholarship has examined the vulnerabilities (e.g., alienation, lack of financial support; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2009) and general challenges of integrating into host countries (e.g., Andrade 2006), a comprehensive perspective aimed at understanding and supporting international students' interactions in host countries requires an investigation of their intimate relationships. As the largest group of international students in the United States (International Institute of Education 2016), Chinese undergraduate students provide a useful case study for young migrants' intimate lives. In addition, the rising economic power of China suggests that the flow of affluent international students to the United States grants a different perspective of young migrants' lives in comparison to those of migrant workers from the underdeveloped countries.

In this paper, I examine international students' *intimate partnering*—activities and desires related to the pursuit of partners for committed relationships or casual sex—in the host society. Intimate partnering is an important aspect of migrants' intimate lives in the host country because it relates to the broader trend of social isolation among international students (e.g., Sawir et al. 2008) and is strongly tied to the dynamics of social order such as race/ethnicity, gender, and class (Ethington 1997). Recalling the famous case study establishing the Bogardus social distance scale, intimate partnering such as marriage represents people's willingness—or reluctance—in interacting with others from different social groups and reveals the demographic and social factors that contribute to partnering

between groups (Babbie 2007). In terms of partnership decision-making, traveling to the host country entails a shift in status of international students and also provides opportunities for students to assess the statuses of locals in the host country. This study aims to investigate the differences in status hierarchy perceived by international students and to delineate the students' strategic partnering decision-making.

I derive Information regarding intimate partnering from a small sample of Chinese international students through a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews and subsequent qualitative analyses. Guiding questions include: (a) To what extent do Chinese international students in the American South engage in intra- or inter-group partnerships; (b) What factors contribute to perceptions of desirability; and (c) What strategies do students adopt in creating host country partnerships?

Ferrar and Sun (2003) suggest that intimate partnering of young migrants is varied not only by individual preferences based on gender, class, race, and ethnicity but also by transnational interconnectedness and the utility of resources within a specific context. Chinese international students in the United States purportedly prefer partnering within their transnational ethnic networks (Ritter 2015). Notwithstanding the accuracy of such generalizations, I argue that insufficient attention has been given to the specific forces that shape partner selection. Intraethnic partnering may be perpetuated through opportunities proffered by homogeneous transnational ethnic networks established within educational institutions and enhanced through communication technology. Conflicting courtship values or norms encountered in the host country have the potential to further influence the perceptions of students. This dynamic may produce a range of individual perceptions regarding one's advantages or disadvantages in inter- or intraethnic partnering, which are further moderated by idiosyncratic demographic characteristics (e.g., economic background).

Opportunities to opt-in or opt-out of intraethnic partnering are potentially a function of individual student resources within the unique contexts with which they engage.

Studies of International Students and Their Intimate Partnering

While scholars have extensively considered the educational and career interests of international students (Findlay et al. 2012; Murphy-Lejeune 2003; Park and Abelman 2004), research regarding the intimate dimensions of international students remains limited. A review of current literature concerning the sexual activities and intimate relationships of international students in host societies reveals two significant features. Specifically, previous scholarship (a) minimizes variability through the aggregation of disparate groups (e.g., nationalities, age groups) and (b) characterizes international students as disadvantaged within the host country.

Research involving the intimate lives of international students frequently samples large groups of individuals and often elides differences in characteristics such as country of origin, time in the host country, and education level. As noted by King and Raghuram (2013) this tendency potentially confounds conclusions regarding the influence of specific characteristics. Aggregating findings across different nationalities (e.g., Suominen et al. 2011; Vivancos, Abubakar, and Hunter 2009) potentially captures the effect of migration rather than the influence of cultural traits. Although few studies exclusively the intimate lives of international students, studies of college students' intimacy frequently conflate international students and second generation immigrants (e.g., Yodanis, Lauer, and Ota 2012) and likewise disregard the influence of time in the host country, which is likely to influence intimate behaviors regardless of nationality. Research that does not sufficiently distinguish international undergraduates from graduate students (Tung, Cook, and Lu 2012; Yodanis et al. 2012) further neglects key differences in the life-trajectories of the respective groups. That

is, graduate students are more likely to have concerns regarding long-term relationships (e.g., marriage), supporting their aging parents back home, and finding employment (Geddie 2013; Kringelbach 2015). Therefore, international graduate students experience different types of preference and desire when it comes to intimate partnering, compared to international undergraduate students without similar concerns. In sum, the results of such studies are predicated on the tacit—yet ostensibly questionable—assumption that Chinese undergraduate international students in their early 20s would share similar experiences of intimacy with Chinese American students, other international students from different countries, or Chinese graduate students in their 30s staying in the United States.

Second, much of the research portrays international students as fundamentally disadvantaged, in terms of sexual knowledge, within the host country. Notwithstanding the common difficulties in relocating into a new society (e.g., Lee and Rice 2007), the assumption of disadvantaged ‘minority’ status for international students implicitly furthers a binary view of host countries as more advanced in comparison to students from ‘less modern’ countries. Epidemiological studies suggest that international students possess inaccurate information related to human sexuality due to either lack of experience or the absence of sex education in the home country; consequently, such students are at a higher risk of involvement in risky sexual behaviors (e.g., Burchard, Laurence, and Stocks 2011; Song et al. 2005; Vader et al. 2011; Vivancos et al. 2009; Zysk and Zysk 2007). Immigration policy undoubtedly limits the life options of students from less developed countries such as Senegal, who can be driven to marry a host country citizen to maintain residence (Kringelbach 2015). Nonetheless, the existing literature exaggerates the marginal status of international undergraduate students, who often have better knowledge of sex and sexualities than their counterparts at home (Tung et al. 2013). In addition, students from affluent countries such as China and Japan can have racial preferences that reflect their hierarchical understanding of

race and ethnicities and exclude other racial groups (e.g., African Americans and Hispanics) from intimate partnership decisions (Ritter 2015). Leaving aside the challenges of relocation, Chinese international students from privileged family backgrounds with access to affluent parents and who have years of receiving global education from China and abroad may not encounter disadvantages in partnering.

Despite the difficulty in evaluating international undergraduate students' experiences based on the existing literature, research does assist in understanding how perceived differences influence international students' intimate partnering. Yodanis and colleagues (Yodanis et al. 2012) interviewed Canadian-born individuals, immigrants, and newly arrived international students from different national backgrounds attending a Canadian university in Vancouver who had experienced interethnic relationships. The results suggest that ethnic difference, such as first-language differences can serve as the basis for attraction because they can present individuals with opportunities to understand multiple cultures, which reflects the reputation of the city in diversity. There is no apparent disparity between international students and Canadian students in terms of the perceived value of interethnic relationship.

Ritter (2015) provides a different picture of the perspectives held by international students from China, Japan, and Korea (graduate and undergraduate) enrolled in the University of California—Los Angeles. Despite the relatively 'liberal' disposition of schools in California, the respondents consider individuals that share their cultural background as ideal partners in order to avoid communication difficulties. In addition, the international students exclude racial minorities from their potential partners, while regarding white Americans as the most preferred next to within-group members. These divergent findings suggest that attitudes regarding inter-group partnering vary based on multiple demographic factors including residential region, experiences with inter-group partnering, and national identities. Moreover, the perceived social distance between international students and their

potential partners, such as racial status, influence international students' partnering decisions. However, these studies largely do not examine the effects of gender, sexual identities, and class on partnering-decisions.

Migration studies involving international students link their intimate partnering to their purpose in migrating. Geddie (2013) interviewed international science and engineering graduate students in Toronto and London who originally hailed from Europe, China, India, and other countries. Questions primarily concerned the relationship between partnering and post-graduation migration plans. Due to their life course transitions—which involve graduation, the potential for marriage, and the possibility of having to support parents back home—respondents struggle to balance their partnerships and their careers. This is particularly true for female students. In contrast, Carlson (2013) found that German students studying abroad throughout Europe for their undergraduate or postgraduate degrees identified romantic reasons, though the need for mobility resources of them and of their partner (e.g., funds available for travel) also contributes to migration motivation. The extent to which respondents engaged in international partnerships is unclear. Nonetheless, students migrating from a European country to another European country appear to have different concerns than those migrating from China to North America.

The unequal global order suggests that students from disadvantaged countries shape the relationship between partnering and migration motivation differently. Kringelbach (2015) demonstrates how students' struggles with relationships can be so detrimental as to result in the termination of educational opportunities in the host country. She met bi-national couples, including individuals from Senegal and France, and examined how the disadvantaged legal and economic statuses of the international students from Senegal relate to their international partnering. Marrying a French citizen guarantees stable continuation of the international students' education; however, their educational advancements in the host country are

contingent on the maintenance of the relationship, symbolizing persisting politics of French colonialism over Francophone West African nations such as Senegal. These studies suggest that concerns surrounding partnering in the host country and migration planning vary due to individual students' abilities and resources in overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers (Mosneaga and Winther 2013). In addition, they also vary in terms of the resources possessed by their families, and partners' resources. The extent to which individuals are exposed to global circuits of higher education (i.e. exchange programs within EU nations, reproduction of the West's hegemony by attracting international students around the globe) representing global hierarchy potentially constitutes an additional context of partnering.

Young Migrants and Their Intimate Partnering

Regardless of the issues with the literature concerning the intimacy of international students, much of the scholarship on young migrants' intimate partnering can influence the development of further investigations of international students' partnering. Below, I will review the study of migrants' intimate partnering embedded within each of the major strands of migrant sexualities studies, including the perspectives of assimilation, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism. Each of the perspectives will be briefly considered on their own merits and in the context of Chinese international students.

Assimilation Perspective

Earlier considerations of migrants' sexualities suggested that sexual partnerships were driven to conclude with inter-group marriage as a means of societal, cultural, and biological assimilation (Gordon 1964). As indicated by studies evaluating factors in interethnic partnering, migrants who identify with the host society are more likely to engage in inter-group partnerships (Mosneaga and Winther 2013; Schwartz et al. 2011). While assimilation

itself often takes generations to complete (Alba and Nee 2009), immigrants' participation in interethnic partnering positively correlates with knowledge of US culture. This includes English skills, time in the United States, and exposure to the US popular culture including TV shows, movies, and other media artifacts (e.g., beauty pageants, fashion models) depicting cultural scripts dominant in the United States (Altman 2002; Song 2009). Song (2009) further concludes that interethnic partnering is associated with the level of sexual assimilation, which stems from individual migrants' characteristics and broader contextual features such as neighborhood ethnic composition. The extent of residential integration and segregation, existence of potential intra- or interracial romantic partners, socioeconomic status, and gender are all factors contributing to interethnic partnering, leaving the conception of acculturation as the primary determinant of interethnic partnering as implausible and insufficiently complex (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Song 2009).

The assimilation perspective is particularly problematic when it comes to Chinese international undergraduate students in the United States because their migration is often temporary by design, without serious consideration of staying after graduation (Hazen and Alberts 2006; Kringelbach 2015). Chinese international students with marketable skills may not see the value of developing committed partnerships with locals, even when they are able to adapt well on US campuses and dating scenes. Due to the status of Chinese international undergraduate students as temporary sojourners with the intent of returning home, the assimilation perspective provides only limited insight into their intimate partnering.

Transnational Perspective

A transnational perspective in studies of international migration emphasizes the social ties migrants maintain across their homeland and the receiving country at the same time, instead of entirely trying to incorporate into the receiving country (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Levitt and Schiller 2004). Although the assimilation perspective and the transnational perspective appear contradictory, as Waldinger and Fitzgerald argue, they focus on different “social processes, inextricably intertwined,” (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004) that migrants experience. In doing so, scholars capture not only the simultaneity across home and away but also the transnational processes within social institutions (Levitt and Schiller 2004). This strand of scholarship emphasizes the institutional lives of migrants, such as family, school, and communication technologies, in which migrants tie themselves strongly to their ethnic networks at home and abroad, which provides pools of intraethnic partners and perpetuates the native sexual norms within the migration destination (Espiritu 2012; Gonzalez-Lopez 2005; Hirsch 2003). In studies of international migration, the roles of communication technologies in the lives of migrants have been presented as strengthening their transnational ties with their intimate networks including family and loved ones (e.g. Parreñas 2005; Valentine 2006).

Transnational perspectives suggest that Chinese international students’ intimate lives are influenced by ethnic networks predisposing them to engage in intraethnic partnering. This is due not only to the presumed temporary residence of students in the host country but also to the migration trajectories embedded in the transnational institutions (Bhandari and Blumenthal 2010). However, scholarship couched in this perspective provides limited information regarding the influence of variations in resources and transnational ties on the

intimate pursuits of Chinese international undergraduate students. That is, a Chinese student in the United States who has maintained strong ties to her family and an intimate partner in China after coming to the United States may not be interested in new intimate partners despite difficulties of a long-distance relationship. On the other hand, a student alienated from Chinese social norms might be more open to extending residency in the United States and developing new intimate relationships.

Cosmopolitan Perspective

Global interconnectedness not only enables transnationalism between the home country and host country for migrants but also cosmopolitanism that exceeds the dichotomous (i.e., home and away) nature of transnationalism. Traditionally, cosmopolitanism refers to a perceived communal membership transcending nationality, a concept later challenged by contemporary scholars for its western-centric origin and elitism (Calhoun 2003). Beck and colleagues (Beck and Cronin 2014; Beck and Sznaider 2006) developed cosmopolitanism to explain the influence of a burgeoning global interdependency and interconnectedness on the emergence of values of individual freedom and inclusiveness. Though encompassing ethnocentrism, religious fundamentalism, and other provincial tendencies emphasized in transnationalism, Beck's cosmopolitanism (2006) offers an additional focus on the varied abilities, attitudes, and desires engendered by global forces entangled with the backlashes against cosmopolitanism. For this project, I view cosmopolitan perspective as different from transnational perspective in this sense; it allows us to examine the unequal distribution of abilities, attitudes, and desires among individuals to obtain cosmopolitan ideals.

In order to explain the cosmopolitan aspects of contemporary sexualities Plummer (2011, 2015) developed the term “sexual cosmopolitanism” that refers to a globalized, empathetic outlook toward sexual diversity and the sexual worlds and sexual lives of others. Plummer also coined the term “cosmopolitan sexualities” to describe the conduct of sexual cosmopolitanism and its incumbent appreciation of difference, openness, and tolerance. Even though the term suggests a traditional understanding of cosmopolitanism focusing on idealized ways of life, freedom, and a ‘sense of world-citizenship,’ (Calhoun 2003) Plummer does call for attention to counter responses against the cosmopolitan sexualities—gay bashing in the name of national identity preservation from the pollutive flux of the Western sexual culture, for instance (Plummer 2015).

A cosmopolitan perspective of sexualities would suggest that accumulated experiences such as frequent foreign trips and the accompanying understanding of cultural differences would contribute to more diverse, “cosmopolitan” sexualities of Chinese international students, who would then accept multiple sexual lifestyles and possibly engage intimately with people from different backgrounds (Zarafonitis 2017). The changing global order marked by a diminishing gap in status between China and the United States has further accelerated this process, enabling affluent Chinese youngsters to explore global metropolises such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other cities outside of China (Farrer 1999; Kong 2010). The evolution of US campuses into global educational institutions has facilitated the matriculation of students from around the world, including China. Consequently, the binational dynamic (i.e., China vs. the US) no longer fully explains the plurality of sexual norms Chinese international students potentially interact with in American universities.

While cosmopolitanism can contribute much to the understanding of migrants' intimate lives and how they transform their beliefs about hitherto deviant sexual conduct (e.g., same-sex intimacy, premarital sex; Neilands, Steward, and Choi 2008; Yu and Xie 2015), it might fail to explain people's intimate partnering decisions. For example, it could be that Chinese international students embrace the backlash against cosmopolitanism, and become reluctant to engage with different ideas and people (Ritter 2015). This is because understanding and agreeing with a different sexual lifestyle does not entail active engagement in sexual behavior. Partnering results from multiple factors that include romantic love but also from considerations regarding the social proximity between the individual and the potential partner (McPherson et al. 2001; Yamamura 2015). The partnering decision also involves interests of family and the maintenance of one's social status and identity (Espiritu 2003; Putnam 2015). The concept of cosmopolitan sexualities enhances understanding regarding the pluralities of sexual lives; however, the cosmopolitan perspective can be very limited without additional considerations vis-à-vis the contexts of partnering.

In this paper, I suggest that individual characteristics of international students such as English fluency, understandings about binational differences in sexual scripts (e.g. 'stigmatization of premarital sex in China'), and attitudes toward globalization and cosmopolitanism (e.g. emphasis on preserving national identity by marriage) must be understood in order to analyze the intimacy of international students. As Plummer (2015) also noted, we cannot ignore the regional and communal contexts that constitute sexual norms. For example, even though cities are more cosmopolitan than rural areas, a booming bar scene in Baton Rouge and a nightclub district in Chengdu will exhibit a multitude of critical differences.

Given their weaknesses and strengths, I suggest that many of the current theories regarding young migrants' sexualities may not provide sufficient explanatory power in regards to the partnering decisions of individual students. For international students, partner selection may be due to their assessment of themselves within specific contexts as well as their transnational ties, predisposition toward cosmopolitanism, and assimilative forces. For example, we cannot explain the intimate experiences of a female undergraduate student from Beijing attending a state regional university in the Deep South without considering the specific institutional setting as well as the broader sexual social structures encompassing political, economic, and social configurations that brought her there. For this reason, I suggest that the *sexual fields theory* of Adam Green (2011) is useful in explaining international students' partnering due to its unique ability to incorporate the logics of partnering and strategy-making of individuals.

Sexual Fields Theory and the Structure of Desire and Desirability

Heavily indebted from Bourdieu's field theory, Green uses the "sexual field" as an analytical framework to grasp modern erotic worlds in which individuals seek partners and socialize in the pursuit of spouses, friends, dates, and/or casual sex partners (Green, 2011: 250). The theory of the sexual field provides insight into the structured opportunities and barriers to intimacy that international students might experience along with their migration trajectories. Arguing that the structure of the field creates positions endowed with varying degrees of 'sexual capital' (i.e. factors contributing to sexual appeal), Green expounds on the experience of black gay men in predominantly white gay nightspots as an example of individuals seeking to refine their partner selection criteria and maximize their desirability to potential partners. In the case of Chinese international students, the field can be conceived of as ever-globalizing US campuses populated with diverse student bodies. What Green adds to

this discussion is sensitivity to the opportunity structure and its impact on actors' likely strategies and dispositions in specific sexual fields. Chinese international students may be constrained by the structure of primary group affiliation that leads them to socialize with other Chinese international students and thus have limited opportunity to interact with others in contexts that lead to intimacy. They may also perceive that they are not likely to be attractive to some potential partners, and thus not pursue them.

To specify, Green's sexual fields theory aims to collectively analyze definitions of desirability in specific contexts, that is, the *structures of desire and desirability*. The structures of desire transform individuals' desire into a dominant system of judgment and assessment of desirability (Green 2014: 14). With its "site-specific, transpersonal valuations of attractiveness," (14) the structures of desire represent not only the field of force that collectivizes the desires of field participants but also the field of struggle in which participants' beliefs of desirability are shaped by others (Green 2014). These structures influence the perception of valuable traits within a context (i.e., who is desirable) and determine the sexual capital possessed by individual partner-seekers (i.e., the tools available for attracting a desirable partner).

In this paper, I use sexual fields theory to contextualize three dominant forces—assimilative, transnational, and cosmopolitan imperatives—as contesting logics that shape international students' partnering in specific sexual fields. First, increased geographical mobility has exposed individuals to a wide array of sexual fields, resulting in novel socializations and requiring frequent reassessments of one's sexual capital. For example, international students may try to learn the different partnering rules in the host country to navigate novel sexual fields. By doing so, they learn what is regarded as desirable—about what are desirable bodies, 'sexual scripts' (Simon and Gagnon 1986), and partners.

Second, sexual fields theory can provide a framework for interpreting how transnational ties influence the intimate partnering of international students. In the face of increasing global interconnectedness, sexual fields are becoming more and more specialized (Green 2013). Individuals now have the means to search for precise configurations of partner characteristics (e.g., Chinese international students) who share a constrained view of partnership functions (e.g., casual sex) (Green 2013). Communication technologies allow people to play simultaneously in multiple sexual fields, raising issues of where to sexually socialize and with whom (Liu 2016). Social media also permits the preservation and rediscovery of old social networks across geographic boundaries (Dekker and Engbersen 2014). Although such possibilities do not automatically predispose migrants toward their transnational ties, they may lead to tensions in partnering for international students (Collins 2009). In the case of international migrants, the availability of multiple sexual fields may generate conflicts between transnational sexual fields and other fields with social media maintaining transnational, intraethnic partnering.

Third, I suggest that cosmopolitan abilities, attitudes, and desires can be investigated as factors of intimate partnering with the sexual fields theory, since the elements of cosmopolitanism can be represented by the unequal distributions of cultural, economic, and social capitals accumulated during the migration trajectories of international students. Specifically, cultural capital, accumulated not only through educational attainment but also by diverse cultural experiences (Brooks and Waters 2010; Murphy-Lejeune 2003), becomes sexual capital in a globalized context, allowing migrants to adapt to new sexual fields with less delay. Since cultural capital positively correlates with economic capital in general (i.e. by having more opportunities to travel abroad), those who can afford to have cultural experiences are more capable of positioning themselves in an advantageous position within new sexual fields. In addition, migrants' social capital, such as durable networks of social

connections, may be strengthened through institutional supports such as migration agencies or Chinese international student organizations, which can produce different patterns of sexual socialization. For example, a migrant might encounter more success in US sexual scenes if they possess years-long language education, financial resources, early exposure to US culture, and institutional support (e.g., attended an elite school).

Finally, despite the specificities of sexual fields and logics within, structures of desire reflect the force of social order constituted through history and imposed on individuals (Green 2014: 38). As migration scholarship regarding gendered transition (i.e., the different roles assumed by migrants based on gender; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994) further suggests, the structure of desire and desirability cannot be separated from class, gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Therefore, international students from divergent social groups may experience varying pathways of sexual socialization with differing levels of conflict and tension. At the same time, international students will create field-specific statuses for others based on their gender, class, race/ethnicities, and sexual orientations.

The Logics of Intimate Partnering of Young Adults in China

In this section, I provide an overview of the sexual norms and practices of young adults in China. This information is key to understanding the intimate relationships of Chinese international students within the United States inasmuch as international students do not migrate to the United States without prior conceptions of intimacy.

Intimate partnering of young adults in China reflects societal tensions between traditional sexual mores and the more permissive sexual values associated with ‘Western’ culture. To borrow the operationalization made by Blair and Madigan (2016) of the binary understanding of intimacy, traditional Chinese sexual beliefs include marriage based on familial interests rather than love, a collectivist culture that enforces such marital norms, the

patriarchal duty of sons, and the stigmatization of premarital sex. Western culture is associated with romantic love as well as the initiation of sexual contact (e.g. kissing, having sex) earlier in relationships. Based on Blair and Madigan's (2016) assessment of sexual attitudes among Chinese young adults, Chinese college students increasingly accept the romantic ideal of love but are still attached to familial interests as well as gender stereotypes and may be less inclined to the 'Western' model of intimacy. Chinese adolescents are highly restricted in their pursuit of romantic relationships and sex by their parents and teachers. However, as non-traditional intimacy becomes more popular in emerging adulthood (Nelson and Chen 2007), adolescents would have become more exposed to such changes from their adjacent cohorts, resulting in greater conflict between the novel and traditional values (Zarafonitis 2017).

The traditional sexual norms lose some of their power in cosmopolitan contexts in urban China, allowing urban youth in China to have different experiences from the macro level tendencies described above. Urban youth in Chinese metropolitan cities start sexual initiation earlier, have more frequent romantic partnerships, and engage in premarital sex more often than their rural counterparts (Nelson and Chen 2007). In addition to that, as Farrer (1999) observed, affluent Chinese urban youths adopt a "super-culture" derived from the scenes of discotheques and absorption of sexual cosmopolitanism. In such fields, consumption localizes 'foreign' sexual values, and in doing so, creates new logics of sexual stratification regarding gender and race/ethnicity. For example, in these sexual fields, racial and gender hierarchy are reshaped in that the value of whiteness declines and Chinese racial identity becomes more valuable for females (Farrer 2011a; Farrer and Dale 2013).

Chinese online sexual scenes also reflect the sense of interconnectedness across local and global sexual fields. Localized Chinese online dating/hook-up apps such as Momo, Tantan, and Blued (exclusively for gay men), are gaining more users domestically and

internationally with the dominance of other Chinese versions of social media services such as WeChat (similar to Snapchat) and Weibo (similar to Twitter). The number of Blued's users, for example, has already far-exceeded that of its American counterpart, Grindr, in 2015 with more than 10% of its users outside of China (Sonmez 2015). Based on location-based discovery systems that find matches, users connect with strangers in their neighborhood as well as with other Chinese across continents, developing a sense of sexual geography consisting of available partners in their cosmopolitan communication (Beck 2000; Plummer 2015).

Nonetheless, contemporary sexual life for Chinese young adults has introduced complexities based on gender, class, sexual identity, and broader social change into intimate relationships. Chinese young women are better educated than Chinese men yet still suffer from Chinese patriarchy that values intelligence less than physical appearance and are still expected to marry before 27 (Blair and Madigan 2016). However, women currently enjoy more opportunities to have sex with men than in the past (Blair and Madigan 2016) and simulate the scripts obtained from Western cinema regarding cosmopolitan sexual fields of heterosexuality (Farrer 1999, 2008, 2011a, 2011b; Farrer and Dale 2013; Kehily and Nayak 2008). Urban Chinese young men, though less family oriented than men in rural provinces, are still largely bound to family, marriage, and the maintenance of the family lineage (Hansen and Svarverud 2010; Yang 2017). Following the decriminalization of homosexuality and the declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder, Chinese gay men still struggle to achieve intimacy without defying the family duties (Miège 2009). Chinese lesbian women are also strongly invested in the heteronormative construct of family, while otherwise easily embracing their sexual orientation as lesbians (Chow and Cheng 2010).

While the demographic composition of Chinese urban spaces becomes ever more diverse (Farrer 2011b; Farrer and Dale 2013; Jankowiak 2016; Sander 2014) and social

media enables the exploration of different sexual fields, partnering across social and ethnic lines in China remains taboo. Despite the integration policies championed by the Chinese government, overall interethnic marriage among Chinese citizens represented only 3% of marriages in 2000 and continued to be negatively perceived (Tang and He 2010).

The taboo of inter-group partnering, particularly with ‘Westerners,’ draws gendered patterns of strategies for Chinese men and women to partner. Dating white foreigners can be considered fashionable for upscale urban Chinese women, though it is disapproved of more generally (Farrer and Field 2012; Tang and He 2010). Farrer and Field (2012) describe the more typical nationalist Chinese sentiments expressed by Chinese urban men upon the disposition of Chinese women toward Western men. In nightclubs, groups of urban Chinese men reserve exclusive tables and order expensive liquor in an attempt to attract Chinese women; though considered exotic, Western men are generally found in isolation on the dance floor and are not welcome at the reserved tables. Thus, partnering in cosmopolitan sexual fields in China is based on “zones segmented by ethnicity and nationality, but intersected with more fluid zones of intense ethnic mingling and interracial sexual interaction” (Farrer and Field 2012).

Data and Method

This study investigates the intimate relationships of international undergraduate students in six Southern research universities across three states. These universities receive a smaller number of international students than their West coast and Northeastern counterparts, yet exist in contexts that try to attract international students and promote the transfer of international students enrolled in foreign universities.

I draw on 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with international undergraduate students—foreign-born, non-US citizens holding a student visa—the majority of whom lived

in the Nashville region (n = 16). I excluded first-year students, assuming that their experiences on campus would be more limited. Of the 19 women, 17 self-identified as heterosexual, and 2 as bisexual. Of the 11 men, 8 described themselves as heterosexual, 1 as gay, and 2 as bisexual. Respondents came from diverse backgrounds. Some attended international high school or foreign language schools that taught advanced placement courses and other courses in English and that sent most of their graduates to the United States. Others attended English language institutes for a year or less that are designed specifically for US college preparations. In such institutes, the students, mostly Chinese or of Chinese background, had frequent interactions with English-speaking teachers from English-speaking countries. Four attended Chinese universities for two years and transferred to US colleges. Two matriculated and graduated from high school in the United States, and two transferred to and graduated from high school in the United States after spending only their senior year in US high schools. As measured by their parental occupation and education, none were from working-class backgrounds. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 23. Every interviewee had a history of intimate experiences—including exclusive relationships, sex, crushes, and so on—either in China or in the United States, regardless of whether they were successful in such intimate pursuits.

Given the scarcity of potential respondents, I used convenience sampling and snowball sampling to identify participants. I recruited the interviewees by tapping into networks of Chinese students at universities. I sent messages to them via Facebook, but in many cases, the messages were blocked by Facebook's anti-spam filters. Only those who opened up their spam message boxes or had less strict anti-spam messaging settings read my study invitation messages. Throughout this process, I received assistance from students who invited me to join their WeChat groups for Chinese international students. After receiving a WeChat invite, I could send invitations to other group members, that is, my potential

interviewees, directly without getting filtered. In addition, I asked every interviewee to introduce me to others who might agree to take part in the study (i.e., snowballing). When it comes to the topic of sexual behaviors and beliefs, such sampling methods, particularly snowball sampling, might have reduced the reluctance of potential interviewees due to their relationships with the peers who had introduced them to the study (Carpenter 2001).

A primary disadvantage of such sampling methods is that the nonrandom selection process may result in a sample with nonrepresentative characteristics, which hinders the generalization of findings to the entire population of Chinese international students. In addition, the snowball sampling might have generated a certain level of homogeneity due to similarities of individuals inhabiting the same social networks.

Interview Methods

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews primarily consisting of open-ended questions in English. Participants were asked to discuss their intimate experiences along their migration trajectories, any perceived differences in having such experiences between China and the United States, and any related advantages or/and disadvantages. By doing so, I was able to collect rich and detailed data on their sexual beliefs and behaviors.

Interviews lasted from 1 to 4.5 hours and occurred at a place chosen by the interviewee (respondent's home, public library meeting rooms, or my office). Interviewees were informed that their responses would be confidential. They were also advised that they could stop the interview at any time and refuse to answer any question. They were compensated for participating in the study (\$10 gift card). The Human Subjects Committee of the Institutional Review Board of Vanderbilt University approved the study design, interview guide, and consent form. I conducted all the interviewees in person from October 2016 to March 2017. In this paper, respondents' names have been changed.

Method of Analysis

I coded and analyzed interview data using thematic analysis, which identifies, analyzes, and reports themes by organizing and describing details across the data set (Braun and Clarke 2006). This strategy facilitates the reporting of participant experiences, and by doing so, allows for the examination of the social construction of such experiences and how individuals draw meanings from their experiences (Braun and Clarke 2006). My analysis thus attempts to capture how young migrants from China navigate across home and abroad in their pursuit of intimacy in changing contexts across their migration trajectories.

As respondents were asked to describe their sexual histories, I acknowledge that considerable parts of my respondents' answers contain retrospective meaning-making. Therefore, I approached my data with the lenses of narrative and social positions of self. "Narrative is a way of understanding one's own and others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time." (Chase 2005). Narratives contain emotional expressions, beliefs, and interpretations (Chase 2005). Therefore, I analyzed intimate narratives concerning migration trajectories, which ranged from the initial preparation of participants to their settlement in the host society. In addition, I focused on how interviewees position themselves with the social contexts in their narratives. Situating respondents within their community, organizational settings, and cultural locations allowed me to see how social resources and circumstances enable and constrain individuals (Chase 2005). In this sense, I analyzed how my respondents were engaged within and beyond their education-career institutions.

Structural Processes of Desire and Desirability in the Sexual Fields

In terms of overall partnership tendencies, my interviewees' preference for Chinese individuals is consistent with the findings of Ritter (2015)'s study of East Asian

undergraduate and graduate students. Interviewees identified Korean international students as a similar cultural group worthy of partnership; in contrast, interviewees rarely identified similarities between themselves and Asian Americans, including Chinese Americans. While some are open to dating white Americans, only a few are eager to partner with them. Interviewees are far less receptive toward African Americans, Hispanics, or other racial and ethnic minorities. There are more factors influencing partnering than racial hierarchy learned from the racial depictions in white-dominant US popular media (Ritter 2015), however. I argue that such partnering preferences are not static but context-specific to the sexual fields students encounter on Southern campuses.

Based on the descriptions of their approaches to intimacy, the students' understanding of sexual fields cannot be fully explained by assimilation, transnationalism, or cosmopolitanism. My interviewees choose whom to go out with not entirely based on innate preferences—whom they desire—but also on their learning and unlearning processes from their interactions with other students and their knowledge of sexual scripts and the perceived sexual hierarchy—what and who is desired—within specific fields. Inspired by the socialization processes of Western women in Shanghai described by Farrer and Dale (2013), I categorized structural processes of desire and desirability reflected in the narratives of my interviewees. The processes below are neither exclusive to each other nor in series. Not all of my interviewees share the processes and the level of experiencing the processes vary.

1. Sexual differentiation: Many interviewees highlight the different sexual scripts between the United States and China, despite acknowledging that differences between China and the US are site-specific.
2. Distinction: My interviewees acknowledge that their cultural, economic, and social resources as Chinese international students are a chief consideration in partner selection.

3. Gendered racialization: Interviewees report gendered racialization imposed by US students, but find it to be less of a disadvantage than one might expect.

4. Reorientation: Interviewees perceive moral constraints on out-group partnering.

Sexual Differentiation

Chinese international students perceive cultural differences between themselves and American students, who have more experience with human sexuality and observe different sequences in the process of courtship. Jian (23, male) emphasizes: “I think in high school in the United States, the student is free to have [a] relationship. The teacher could encourage, also parents [could]. I support the, the way in America. ... Because ... you need to deal with the relationship like- from 14, 15, because [at] that age, you start to know the thing.” Yifan (20, male) describes what he learned about American courtship from navigating online forums before coming to the United States:

In the States, people are more open about sex but not about relationships. [The] relationship is equally strict like that in China. It is totally legitimate if you have sex with someone but it’s not a relationship, it’s totally fine because of different cultur[al] backgrounds. In China, sex is more combined with the relationship, it’s a product of the relationship, whereas, in the United States, they are totally separate.

Over the course of their migration trajectories, interviewees learn (a) the perception that Chinese students lack sufficient experiences concerning sex and relationships due to the later sexual initiation than American students and (b) the differences in the linkage between relationships and sex observed in different cultures. In both cases, Chinese students are at an apparent disadvantage, in terms of intimacy, due to their lack of sexual experience and exposure to the dominant sexual scripts within the United States. They may feel marginalized or frustrated by the rules of the majority group—Americans—on campus.

Chinese students do not reflexively attempt to assimilate into US sexual fields or partner with US students as a manner of compensating for these disadvantages, however. Americans' knowledge and experiences represent an "extreme" in opposition to Chinese sexual culture. Lingzhen (19, female) opposes the suppression of premarital sex and the patriarchal stigmatization attached to female sexual activity, attitudes she associates with the dominant sexual norms of Chinese society. However, she does not entirely support American sexual scripts: "Here [in the United States], it's [ano]ther extreme. You can have sexual behavior without a relationship at all. Just casual hook up on parties and stuff. I'm not a big fan of that either." Lingzhen only selectively accepts the dominant American sexual scripts, and disparages the hypersexual aspects of American culture. While many interviewees report feeling liberated from oppressive parents, schools, and other societal forces that condemn sexual activity and appreciate the freedom of having sex with their partners after migrating to the United States (Pessar and Mahler 2003), only a few were interested in sex with a non-committed partner. Not having sex before defining the relationship, though inconsistent with American sexual culture they perceive, corresponds with East Asian (particularly in China, Korea) sexual scripts and is a key sexual distinction between many interviewees and Americans. By avoiding the 'extremes' of American sexual culture, these interviewees believed they achieved a sense of moral superiority over their American peers (Espiritu 2003), which is critical in their negative attitudes toward partnering with Americans.

Interviewees profess an understanding about the supposed sexual conservatism of sexual fields in the American South, thereby embracing ambiguity of US sexual culture. In many cases, respondents suggest that the more conservative attitudes toward sex in the American South eased pressures associated with emulating American sexual tendencies: "[the] majority of my friends are still virgins, I'm not under the influence [of becoming sexually open]." (Xianmin, 21, female). While acknowledging the dominant sexual scripts in

the United States, Xianmin understands that American sexual culture is not homogeneously 'liberal' and chooses rather to observe 'Southern conservative' sexual practices—if not the familiar East Asian fields of intimacy on campus—by dating and having sex with other East Asian students. However, the supposed conservative sexual values of the American South are not considered to be overly distinct from the dominant, liberal US sexual culture that my interviewees perceive. For example, Minzhen (21, female) is perplexed by the efforts of her Christian, conservative, white boyfriend at persuading her to have sex. In this sense, sexual differentiation is a process of recognizing distinctions in the attitudes toward sex held by Chinese traditionalism and newly observed patterns of sexual conservatism and liberalism in the United States by the students themselves.

Distinction

Interviewees frequently acknowledge their abundant economic, social, and cultural resources and want to pursue a partnership with people like themselves: Chinese international students. Studying in the United States is costly: international students are ineligible for in-state tuition or other academic awards exclusively available to US citizens; the costs for preparation and application processes for US colleges (e.g., attending international high school, having English tutors, taking a mandatory English test, etc.) add up. Disregarding the fortunate minority, 81.2% of international undergraduate students pay for the costs of studying in the United States with their parents' financial support (International Institute of Education 2016). Among those from families willing to spend their fortunes on international education, there remains a further distinction in terms of those that can afford state universities or private, elite universities. My interviewees from more privileged backgrounds include those whose parents' education and occupational status are higher than upper-middle class, which enables them to attend an elite university, take frequent trips to foreign countries

and embrace cultural differences, participate in short- or long-term educational programs abroad, and develop better taste in cultural goods such as luxury brands. Notably, none of my interviewees attending regional state universities—as opposed to elite universities—possessed all of these traits. Interviewees having a greater ability to pursue affluent lifestyles describe the process of distinction as (a) being instrumental to the conception of desire as well as desirability and as (b) complementing the differentiation process. Hai (20, male) states the difference between Chinese international students and American students:

For us, probably the things we're worried most about is, 'Can I get an internship that actually accepts foreigners? Can I successfully get a working visa?' This kind of thing. 'Does this company even accept foreigners?' The things we wouldn't consider are probably the things that local students are considering a lot and we cannot feel for them. Things like, well, maybe finding a job, it's challenging, but it's not something that's maybe you'll going to have it or maybe not. For them, especially if you're [a student of his university], if you're successful, you can end up with a job. For them, the things are like, 'How can I pay back my student loan?'

While students from less privileged backgrounds attending regional state universities are not seriously planning to stay in the United States after graduation, students like Hai, attending an elite university and having higher socioeconomic backgrounds, want to start their careers in the United States first, regardless of whether they want to stay in the United States permanently. The distinction Hai makes represents the difficulty of Chinese international students in planning out their future after graduation but also demonstrates his ability to maintain a higher standard of living during college than that of his American peers. Hai continues the story with an anecdote about his American friends choosing to forego pizza toppings due to concerns regarding student loan debt. Those with the greater financial resources of Hai and similar Chinese international students, as evidenced by their ability to

consume expensive global educational services, have an entirely different set of concerns and interests. Consequently, Hai strongly prefers partnering with Chinese international students for both committed and casual relationships. He believes that the similar financial backgrounds international students possess shape life trajectories consisting of attending private international boarding schools, tedious application processes for the US colleges, and relocating to US campuses. It is not just Chinese, but Chinese international undergraduate students that are more desirable compared to American students who rarely seem attractive, or possess adequate sexual capital in terms of accumulated resources and experiences.

The comments of Luanfeng (20, female) further demonstrate the distinction of Chinese students from Americans on the basis of cultural capital (e.g., education, wealth) as well as the mere capacity for consumption that can be valuable for attracting potential partners. She confesses her surprise in learning that her American boyfriend, whom she met at a summer exchange program at a European university, is 'rich enough' to meet her standards:

I [didn't] see myself dating [a] white guy ... [In] China, people who are rich are really rich, who are poor are really poor. But in America ... they are kind of average, ... they're not ... super rich. ... [But] he (her current American boyfriend) told me of his father, is British and he did business before. ... and then he told me they're kind of like much above average in my college. ... I was thinking ... 'There should be [a] possibility for us.' I started to date him and ... [One day] I wanted to go eat in this restaurant, a really nice fancy restaurant. [People would say] "How much does this cost? I don't think I can afford this." And then they want something around, within \$20. But I don't want something like that. But when I was talking [about] this [restaurant] to him, he doesn't ask me "how much does it cost?"

As she differentiates herself from other ‘spoiled’ Chinese young women, it is not solely because she wants to receive luxury gifts for her birthday or on Valentines’ Day from her boyfriend. She tells me that her family belongs to the top 0.5% wealth bracket in China, so if she wants a luxury item, she will get it herself. What is more important is a shared nonchalance regarding the ownership of luxury items and dining out in a fancy restaurant. She got whom she desired, a person with adequate capital in terms of money and taste.

Luanfeng’s perception of the middling economic power of people in the United States reveals how the distinction process inverts the structures of desire and desirability—Americans possess relatively fewer resources in terms of consumption power and consequently have fewer opportunities to leverage such resources as sexual capital to attract wealthy Chinese international students like Luanfeng. Rather, it is the Chinese students who grew up in the metropolitan areas such as Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai, who become connoisseurs of good brands, good restaurants, and other cultural boons, and thus have the ability to apply them to greater advantage in sexual fields of consumption.

The partnering of interviewees in sexual fields at elite US campuses is grounded in a process of distinction that challenges the antiquated contrast between the developed West and developing China. These individuals were mostly raised as only-child by upper-class parents who studied, worked, or ran businesses in Japan, Korea, or the United States. Their parents traveled abroad frequently with or without their children and advocated safe sex instead of abstinence. Hai’s mother, who raised him following her divorce, supports Hai’s homosexual identity and has frequent contact with Hai’s boyfriend in China. Luanfeng’s parents had paid for her trips to foreign countries even when she was a high school student. Regardless of whether they embody the ideal of sexual cosmopolitanism, their partnering reveals sexual stratification based on their accumulated cosmopolitan experiences and knowledge. Although it is uncertain whether their wealth translates into desirability in multinational sexual fields, it

is clear that the distinction process provides an additional explanation beyond ethnic homogeneity for the strong within-group partnering tendencies of Chinese international students. Just as differentiation process accentuates differences between interviewees and their American peers without engendering a sense of marginalization, the distinction process contributes a sense of superiority to Chinese international students in the sexual fields on campus.

Gendered Racialization

Although interviewees generally do not desire American students as partners, the belief that Americans would reject them is also prevalent. Gendered racialization is addressed in discussions of desirability. Research and the comments of interviewees generally supports conclusions regarding the marginalization of Asian men in American sexual fields (Balistreri, Joyner, and Kao 2015); however, views regarding the sexualization of Asian women, or so called, ‘Asian fetishes,’ are less consistent—with some interviewees believing the fetish exists, while others remain skeptical.

Several heterosexual male respondents, such as Xiang (21, male) were clearly frustrated by the desexualization of Asian men:

Xiang: You are not very competitive on Tinder. Yes, the market, there is a lot of white guys, and the white girls are looking for white guys. So they are not looking for Asian boys. So why use that? Nobody will swipe you to the right. [laughter]

Interviewer: Did you actually try to use American Tinder?

Xiang: Of course, I ... definitely downloaded it for several times then I delete[d] it because it's no use. I download and another time delete it.

Xiang admits that he is tall enough but not “big,” “wide,” and “thick” like American white men that are perceived to dominate sexual fields. Xiaowu (20, male) and Kang (20, male),

who experienced intimate interactions outside of Chinese ethnic groups, agree with Xiang. Even though Xiaowu is from a very affluent family background, graduated from a prestigious American high school, attends an elite university, and speaks perfect English, he nonetheless feels at a disadvantage when pursuing interracial relationships.

The remaining males expressed indifference to interracial relationships; nonetheless, they perceive a racial disadvantage for Asians in interracial fields. However, heterosexual female interviewees demonstrate a greater understanding of the dynamics surrounding the different values of gender and race/ethnicity. While acknowledging Asian fetishes or the proverbial “yellow fever” (i.e., the supposed appetite of white men for Asian women), my female interviewees rarely perceived them as obstacles. Instead, they were viewed as an advantage to be capitalized on in the interethnic fields of intimacy. Tingting (20, female) comments on the matter with confidence:

I don't think I have [a] disadvantage because I have never experienced racism ever like, when I'm in the States like no, I had never had [a] negative experience with people discriminating me or like punishing me because of my race. So, I assume that this rule would apply to relationship. And that advantage, a lot of written literature, Asian women are kind of like your wife of, you know ... masculine white male in general. Because Asian women [are] ... submissive and subdued and, ... they focus on family, and they care [for] children, they cook and stuff like that, which I don't agree with this stereotype, but I think this stereotype would give a certain benefit to me if I'm trying to have a relationship with whites.

In Tingting's view, the sexualization of Asian women exists as folklore rather than in her lived experience because she never personally encountered racial objectification. However, due to her socialization in an era characterized by the global proliferation of American sexual scripts (Altman 2002), Tingting understands the pervasive objectification of Asian women

depicted in cultural products as a potential source of sexual capital rather than a burden derived through her ancestors' domination by white men of the colonial era (Alexander 1994).

The reinterpretation of gendered racialization as an advantage for Asian women is not universally held. Despite Xiu's (20, female) taste for parties held by her American friends and her history of making out with white men there, she still believes her bodily attributes will not be valued as erotic capital:

[B]ecause you are slim, [Asian women] don't look that sexy. ... [In] parties ... [Americans] are looking for someone to have sexual actions ... will look for girls who looked really hot ... they will prefer like, white girls, and black girls and Asians [in that order].

McClintock (2010) found that a sample of Stanford Asian undergraduate students consisting of a majority of second generation Asian American students and approximately 10% first generation Asian-American students are willing to hook-up with other racial groups, but prefer homophily in dating and committed relationships. However, my interviewees tell different stories. In their experiences, the value of Asian women to American men stems from the racial assumptions held in the larger American context rather than fetishism of the Asian female form. Racial and gender politics play different roles in the assessment of desirability within interracial sexual fields among Asian Americans and Asian international students, respectively.

The Southern context renders the sexualization of Asian women less likely, revealing complex relationships between racialization and desirability of Asian women. In the American South, Asian women are not as desired as they would be in the North or California, according to Minzhen. Acknowledging the racism at her majority white campus in Alabama, Minzhen claims that her American friends joke that if she moves to California, she will get a

lot more attention than in Alabama. Minzhen agrees that more diverse, potentially less racist environments such as California might give her a better position in the sexual hierarchy. For her, higher desirability of Asian women is hardly realistic in the Deep South. The interpretation of the factors contributing to the desirability of Asian women varies among female interviewees. According to Tingting, desire reflects the persisting colonial fantasy of Western men who project outmoded ideas onto Asian women. For Minzhen, desire for Asian women stems from the appreciation of diversity and liberal attitudes of American men.

Reorientation

The processes of differentiation, distinction, and gendered racialization constitute the moral constraints on out-group partnering imposed within their ethnic networks. The constraints involve defining the boundaries of who belongs to the in-group and out-group in the structural processes of desirability. Korean international students are considered members of the in-group due to sharing similar sexual scripts. In cases of distinction, only Chinese international students are counted as the same group members, resulting in the exclusion of non-Chinese, Chinese Americans, or Chinese people who have never experienced migration. Gendered racialization repels racial others, either white or black. By doing so, the reorientation process reveals complex and contingent logics related to partnering with ‘undesirable’ others that further explain the dominant tendency of homophily among Chinese international students.

Only a few interviewees attempted to engage in the out-group sexual fields, with others reporting indifference or antipathy toward the pursuit of inter-group relationships. In an example of the distinction process, Hai candidly disparages partnering with an out-group member who is not a Chinese international student. Hai plans to attend a graduate school with his boyfriend, whom he met in the United States when the boyfriend was an exchange

student, and they continue seeing each other long-distance with the support of his mother in China. For him, having an out-group relationship is irresponsible and represents “crossing the line,” because the couple could not be expected to have shared life trajectories (e.g., preparing for coming to the United States, studying as an international student).

In addition to the processes of sexual differentiation and gendered racialization, interracial relationships are also risky for one’s reputation. Female interviewees are more cautious, even when they confess that they are tolerant of sexual permissiveness and the liberal ‘American’ lifestyle. Zhihong (19, female) said: “the sex culture here [in the United States] is very prevalent. I need to be more careful here than I need to be in China.” She has to be vigilant in abstaining from the typical American ‘hypersexual’ practices and sustaining her Chinese “mindset” about sex and relationships. She believes interracial dating can make her less “careful” and contribute to her participation in the ‘hypersexual’ trend of American sexual culture. Yang (20, female) specifies the risks Chinese women invite when they intimately engage with non-East Asians. When asked to explain the differences in having intimate relationships in China and the United States, Yang recounts a story she heard from China:

Maybe because people are warning girls not to have sex with foreign men. ... Many girls, they wanted to go abroad but it’s hard to have a green card or anything without money or without certain status. They wanted to marry foreigner for green card or something. Or just to try, or whatever. Because the only way they get to know those foreigners are through bars or company ... Maybe two years ago, it’s still true but, I don’t know about now. At the bar people [a Chinese woman and a foreigner man] get [drunk] a little bit, so they go to a hotel room and have sex. Then, Chinese girls would start thinking we’re having a relationship while the foreigners [don’t] think that way.

Like Yang, many of the interviewees suggest that the confusion regarding sexual scripts makes Chinese women vulnerable when having sex with foreigners. Misinterpretations regarding the nature of a relationship can occur in either inter- or intra-group relationships, but Yang and others believe such confusion and its aftermath will be exacerbated in interracial relationships. In addition, other Asians may label women who date foreigners as seeking out social mobility (i.e. “green card”) and as being less “careful,” in Tingting’s words.

Nationalist sentiments in support of policing women’s sexuality (Mohanty 2003; Nagel 1998) are also prevalent. Hai describes the vitriolic comments under a YouTube video channel produced by expats in China:

"You're such a shame to us. Why are you serving foreigners?" Because people sometimes hold quite a hostility towards foreigners. And “you're only being with him, because he's good at having sex,” things like that. Every [YouTube] video they uploaded, the comments are, are always really angry comments, saying things like, "Keep your hands off our Chinese girls. Stop. Just get the hell out of here."

Although the cases Hai and Yang describe deal with occurrences in China, female interviewees who did not have any relationships or sex outside of their ethnic group perceive risks while in the United States. The sexual policing of women continues in the United States, shaping Chinese international students’ desires regarding with whom to share intimacy.

As the reorientation process powerfully influences those who have never experienced interracial relationships nor wanted to have one, individuals experiencing such relationships pay a high price for deviating from the sexual norms of their ethnic group. Kang feels isolated from his Chinese peers due to his previous relationships with European and American women. Minzhen encountered ostracism after an American male student, who

helped her on campus when she just came to the United States, became intoxicated and knocked on her dorm room door at night. Although Minzhen ignored him, she was later accused of inappropriate behavior with the American student by her Chinese international friends. Luanfeng dated a Korean soon after she entered her school and had to bear racial insults from him throughout the relationship. His threats suggested that she, as a Chinese woman from 'a developing country,' would never be in a serious relationship with a white American man but would instead only be subject to sexual manipulation. The ethnocentrism, the gendered nationalism, and the gendered racialization that those interviewees experienced within their own ethnic cohort led them to look for strategies to navigate social as well as sexual fields on campus, shaping their friendship and partnership decisions.

In sum, the desire about whom to partner emerges from the complex logics of sexual fields my interviewees perceive and experience. Assimilation is only partially desired or in many cases shunned, challenging assumptions about its necessity for international students in the sexual fields of the Southern campuses. Transnationalism is apparently dominant in shaping the desire and desirability regarding partnering, with the epicenter of imposing transnational ties and affinity arising from host-country Chinese international communities and institutions rather than China itself. Cosmopolitan lifestyles embodied by well-off interviewees, in contrast to the predicted sense of sexual egalitarianism, generate stratification of desirability based upon one's field-specific sexual capital. In the structural processes of sexual differentiation, distinction, gendered racialization, and reorientation, Chinese international students reinterpret race/ethnicity, gender, and class, creating new hierarchies of desirability among themselves and others.

Strategies across Sexual Fields

The increase in student migration to the United States has transformed college campuses into multicultural, transnational sexual fields that present a variety of sexual opportunities for mobile individuals. People may experience a change in status over the course of interacting with individuals across multiple contexts, all while having different levels of resources to utilize as sexual capital. In the interracial and interethnic sexual scenes of university campuses in the American South, Chinese international students encounter benefits and constraints stemming from the norms imposed through specific fields. Below, I outline different strategies Chinese international students adopt across intra- and interracial sexual fields.

- **Withdrawal:** Disinterest in host-country sexual fields, regardless of the race or ethnicity of partners
- **Within-group exclusivity:** Interest only in partners within their racial or ethnic group
- **Between-group exclusivity:** Preferring partners outside of Chinese sexual fields
- **Inclusivity:** Seeking alternative relationship strategies, with an openness toward inter- and intraracial sexual fields.

Withdrawal from sexual fields in the host country is the most common strategy of those who already have a committed partner in or from China. Coming from the same school in China, surviving the application processes, and enrolling in the same university in the United States, Meimei (18, female) and Guojun (22, male) are satisfied that their partner shares a similar migration trajectory and demonstrates an ability to plan a mutual future. Lijun (19, female) ended up having a long-distance relationship with her boyfriend enrolled in an American Northern university and is relieved to avoid sexual fields in the United States.

This is because Lijun has witnessed her Chinese international peers become too enamored of the ‘liberation’ that accompanies a boyfriend or girlfriend in the United States, which often results in painful breakups, gossip, and ostracism from the core ethnic group.

Withdrawal also occurs as male interviewees accept their lack of sexual desirability in the sexual fields in the United States. Xin (20, male) is among two interviewees who mentioned the financial burden his migration incurred on his family. After dating two Chinese international students for a short period, he learned that the effort required in capitalizing on opportunities in the United States effectively rendered dating a waste of time and money. Believing he needs to find a partner that could please his family, Xin—the least affluent among my interviewees—was the person with the greatest level of cosmopolitan aspiration, or desire to join the global community laid out by his university. He avoids interacting with other Chinese international students as much as possible to participate in school events with students from diverse backgrounds, yet he is happy to delay any chance of having a relationship in the United States until this study-abroad experience affords him the chance of finding a better partner at home (Abelmann, Newendorp, and Lee-Chung 2014).

Within-group exclusivity is another common response of interviewees, and entails interest in an intraracial relationship either with another Chinese or Korean international student. Those belonging to this category admit that having a committed or casual relationship with a Chinese (a) ensures their privileged status, (b) overcomes their perceived disadvantages in interethnic or interracial sexual fields, and (c) accentuates their existing sexual and cultural advantages.

Many students were predisposed to the within-group exclusivity through their migration trajectories, beginning before their departure to the United States and continuing through a diverse series of institutional supports. Nearly everyone attended either an international high school or an educational institution that helped them apply for US colleges

in which they built social networks that extended to the United States via social media. After admission, some had departure meetings with other Chinese students who would soon matriculate in the same college or were invited to WeChat (i.e., the Chinese version of Snapchat) groups mostly run by Chinese organizations from the university. Receiving help from other Chinese international students in a new environment, my interviewees grounded their friendship networks within extant networks that also functioned as spaces for partnering with other Chinese students. In combination with their transnational ties to family, the influence of the institutions that shape the migration trajectory encourage within-group exclusivity.

This strategy is also facilitated by advanced communication technologies that enable international students to overcome geographical limitations and to access specialized sexual fields exclusive to Chinese participants. Green (2013) notes that advanced communication technologies allow access to specialized sexual fields, such as apps and dating sites specific to gay men, Jews, observant Christians, and a wide range of sexual fetishes. While such apps expand the pool of potential partners beyond people one directly encounters, and perhaps provide a less risky platform for broaching intimacy by attenuating the experience of rejection, they can also amplify homogeneity in coupling decisions. Chinese international students can participate in social media that reinforces and supports in-group identifications and intimacy choices in a foreign context. While acknowledging the smaller number of international students on campus compared to that of the Northeast or West Coast, students try to expand their within-group sexual fields with other Chinese students beyond geographic limitations with assistance from Chinese social media.

Xiang met his current girlfriend, who is another Chinese international student in a neighboring state, while using a Chinese version of Tinder during his first semester in the United States. He admits that the long-distance relationship with his girlfriend was inevitable,

due to the lack of Chinese international students in the American South. He acknowledges that he was able to start a relationship—despite dearth of international students in the South—and receive emotional support from his girlfriend through the use of telecommunication. As a consequence of being separated from his girlfriend all the time, Xiang occasionally arranges casual sex with other Chinese international students or young professionals near his town, through access to the Chinese hook-up scene laid out by the Chinese version of Tinder. Likewise, Hai and Baoqiang (20, male) use Chinese versions of gay dating apps to hook up with Chinese men in the United States. Connecting to other Chinese gay men in New York or Los Angeles rather than in Southern towns where fewer gay men are located, Baoqiang and Hai use breaks from school to enjoy erotic ‘homes away from home’ consisting of hook-ups with Chinese partners. Along with their ability to make trips and afford erotic vacations, the online sexual fields for Chinese at home and overseas allow my interviewees to develop a sense of sexual geography consisting of available Chinese partners within the host country.

Between-group exclusivity is a strategy whereby students opt out of the East Asian sexual fields in the host country and seek partners from other social groups such as American students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. This strategy represents the counter-reaction to gendered racialization and the reorientation process that ostracizes those who attempt interracial partnering.

A strategy of out-group exclusivity requires female interviewees to reorganize their friendship networks and adjust their gendered position across different fields of social relations. Minzhen left the network of Chinese international students on campus after being ostracized by her Chinese international peers. Afterwards, she started to work on campus and made American friends who set her up with a white American, her current boyfriend.

Luanfeng joined a sorority at the suggestion of her new white American boyfriend, a choice ridiculed by her previous Korean boyfriend as one that put her at risk of sexual exploitation.

In contrast, Xiu divides her friendship networks into ‘party friends’ and ‘study friends’—the former with Americans with whom she engages in intimate relationships, the latter with Chinese international students with whom she abstains from intimate contact. She prevents Chinese peers from knowing about her sexual activity with American students. However, she goes to parties with American friends and seeks support and advice from her American friends who help reduce her “guilty feelings” about making out at the party. She has constructed two different social systems—an interracial sexual field with fun and excitement of spontaneous sexual activities and a desexualized support system with studious and caring Chinese international friends.

As these strategies of partnering entail a sense of securing or contesting belonging, Buyun (22, female), Luanfeng, Xiaowu, and Kang say that they seriously consider migrating to the United States permanently. They all are much inclined to “Western” culture in opposition to a Chinese culture that they interpret as collectivist, oppressive, and patriarchal. Luanfeng and Buyun appeared confident and were not defensive in response to being accused of ‘green card seeking’ when they reported their interests in obtaining a green card by marrying American men.

According to previous literature, finding and marrying a partner from a more developed country was often desired by third-world women, who actively strategize pursuit of first-world white men for her escape from the exploitative home country (Pessar and Mahler 2003). Even international students studying in the more developed Western country are predisposed to this fantasy, as marrying a local would stabilize his or her stay in the host country and help prolong academic development (Kringelbach 2015). However, as these studies emphasize, only those who are able to bridge the national and racial divides achieve

success in their partnering project. For Luanfeng and others in this category, pursuit of interracial relationships is less about sexual asylum-seeking but more about managing opportunities and preserving the relative flexibility of their migration trajectories (Frändberg 2015; Ong 1998). As global elites, they have better capabilities than third-world migrants depicted in the previous literature. The families of both understand their strong antipathy toward Chinese traditional norms and provide both emotional and financial support for their relationships with white boyfriends. Buyun's family pays for her boyfriend's travel expenses so that he may visit China with her during the break. Xiaowu did not have a girlfriend at the point of the interview, but considering that his parents own real estate in the United States and travel back and forth between China and the United States, he does not necessarily require an American spouse to maintain ties with the host country. Kang is more determined and desperate when saying "I would do whatever it takes to not go back to China. ... If I like[d] China, I would not be here." Kang possesses a range of resources that assist him including credentials from a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) major from an elite university, and fluent English skills.

Inclusivity entails the participation in both the intra- and interracial sexual fields. Among my interviewees, only Xiang adopted an inclusive position despite his perceived disadvantages in the interethnic field. At the time of the interview, he was planning to join an Asian fraternity on campus:

I will try that this semester. I have a couple of friends in that frat, and they just want me to go there, and I would do the rush to see if they accept me. Yes, I would do that. They tell me ... even though it's like Asian frat, ... they still have got a lot of white girls that come to their party, so I will give it a try ... Maybe I'm wrong about my disadvantages ... Maybe I'll find myself more attractive on the party.

Xiang planned to position himself in ‘ethnosexual contact zones’ (Farrer and Dale 2013) in which the values of race and gender would be different from other sexual fields on campus. Ethnocentric student organizations at US universities predispose students to intraethnic sexual fields, beginning with the relocation aid provided to newcomers and continuing with ongoing friendship building activities the organizations host on campus. For Xiang, however, the Asian fraternity is directly related to opportunities of intimate partnering with interethnic and interracial female students. The student directed Asian fraternity eschews the ethnocentrism of more established, adult-driven institutions, and instead invites multiculturalism by hosting parties and inviting “white girls.” In this manner, the fraternity offers Asian male students a heightened sense of status at interracial parties (i.e., allows them to play host) and broadens their participation in various sexual fields.

Xiang’s quote further indicates that the inclusive strategy of joining the Asian fraternity stems from his relationships with other Asian males in the fraternity. That is, Xiang pursues intimate partnerships with “white girls,” not by interacting with Americans, but through the mediation of an Asian organization. As with students adopting exclusivity, this demonstrates the important role of ethnocentric institutions in orienting Chinese international students toward either intraracial or interracial relationships, with the results varying based on the individual characteristics of students and institutions. While individual pursuits of interracial relationships are generally condemned, the Asian fraternity has the tacit objective of increasing the sexual status of pledges within in the sexual fields on campus (Edwards and Jones 2009).

The extent to which the sexual orientation processes encouraged by Asian sororities and fraternities differ from other ethnocentric institutions (e.g., international schools) remains unclear. In any event, Xiang’s strategy could not be utilized by other Chinese international students in the American South due to the few active Asian-centric fraternities and sororities

in this region. In reality, many Southern universities contribute only the barest resources to Asian-centric international student associations (Marginson et al. 2010). The regional state universities I visited had small Chinese student organizations so inactive as to aggregate graduate and undergraduate students together while the elite schools separated undergraduate associations from the graduate associations. The variety in Asian-centered institutions is another privilege of attending elite, more multicultural universities.

Conclusion

Studies of international students and their intimate lives analyze international students together in terms of general categories such as East Asians or just ‘international students’ regardless of their academic courses and corresponding age variations (Ritter 2015; Suominen et al. 2011; Vivancos et al. 2009). Conflating international students, although importantly revealing the dominant tendency of in-group partnering to avoid cultural difference (Ritter 2015), obscures the relationship between students and their specific contextual environments. In this paper, I built upon Green’s sexual fields theory in order to analyze the structure of desire and desirability experienced by Chinese international students in the sexual fields of the American South. I proposed that the structure of desire and desirability is composed via processes of sexual differentiation, distinction, gendered racialization, and reorientation. I also suggested four types of partnering strategies—withdrawal, within-group exclusivity, between-group exclusivity, and inclusive—that Chinese international students use based on their lived experiences and their advantages and disadvantages in the sexual fields.

Instead of simply seeking white partners to obtain status or within-group partners to enjoy a shared cultural background, Chinese international students in the American South create logics of desirability specific to their sexual fields. The cultural and language barriers

that Chinese international students encounter include the different sexual scripts of advancing courtship (e.g., Lingzhen's statements regarding the role of sex in non-committed relationships) and level of participation in sexual activities, which can be adjusted in the perceived regional contexts of Southern Christianity and conservatism. The students perceive the higher desirability of being white men and women in the United States, but they also consider their desirability at the same time, realizing that their higher or lower desirability is contingent upon the fields' logics. Being a white American does not necessarily mean having a higher social status, because many of them are found to have less economic and cultural resources than Chinese international students, particularly in interracial sexual fields. Lastly, the reorientation process often imposes constraints on Chinese international students and proscribes the selection of partners beyond their own ethnic group.

These patterns represent more than the combination of assimilative, transnational, cosmopolitan perspectives—rather, sexual fields theory delineating the contingency of desire and desirability for specific individuals in context was also necessary. In developing what is considered desirable in specific sexual fields, this meso-level fields analysis of Chinese international students reflects the meaning-making processes of trans-national student sojourners in the macro-level contexts highlighting the diminishing relevance of the US-centric understanding about world dominance and wealth and the persistent policing of intimate behaviors among transnational migrants.

Just as the intimate experiences of international students differ across groups and contexts, so too do the strategies of partnering. Many studies in education and epidemiology describe international students as lacking knowledge regarding the host country or sexual conduct and as suffering from implicit racial discrimination and higher sexual risks (Burchard et al. 2011; Lee and Rice 2007). My interviewees did not perceive themselves exclusively as disadvantaged minorities, nor did the majority attempt riskier sexual behaviors

such as casual sex, however. They decide whom to intimately engage with based upon their lived experiences from the sexual fields and the structure of desire and desirability. Many choose not to engage in partnering activities at all for their trouble-free life in the United States. Others choose to engage in either conventional or long-distance relationships in the United States with intra-group members who share their migration trajectories and other background characteristics. The students also expressed an exclusive preference for out-group partnering due to their antipathy for Chinese culture and aspirations of permanent residence within the United States. One outlier (Xiang) aims to engage in both within- and out-group sexual fields. Such strategies emerge from individual students' understanding about the structure of desirability and assessment of the currency of their cultural, economic, and social capitals in the interracial sexual fields. The analysis of interviewees' attitudes and conduct of positional strategizing of intimate partnering sheds light on the agency of Chinese international students and suggests that they cannot be solely considered a marginalized group.

In recent years the population of international students has increased in universities around the country, well beyond the commonly considered destinations in the Northeast and California. This paper's focus on experiences of international students living in the American South addresses the necessity of studying students away from the major destinations of international students. The pursuit of revenue through the recruitment of international students by colleges throughout the United States (Findlay 2011) guarantees the emergence of novel, regionally specific dynamics of intimacy. Therefore, future research should expand the analysis of intimate lives of international students across regions in the United States with an emphasis on underscoring the differences that result from (a) a larger population of intra-group students, (b) greater diversity in terms of host group residents and transnational institutions (e.g., ethno-centric fraternities), and (c) greater access to cosmopolitan milieus.

Such factors may contribute to a greater prevalence of less restrictive intimate strategies (e.g., inclusivity). However, similar research in different contexts may reveal the competing influence of these contextual factors in light of specific migration trajectories.

Additional areas that are ripe for study concern the engagement of international students with non-normative sexual activities or having non-heterosexual identities. While much has been written concerning non-heterosexual young migrants such as workers and their intimate lives in the host country (Cantu 2009; Carrillo 2004; Kong 2010), the literature regarding more privileged, non-heterosexual migrants (e.g., international students) remains—with the exception of Tarai's (2016) survey of self-identified LGBT students' level of campus satisfaction—limited. The extent to which gay and lesbian international students participate in sexual fields in the United States, particularly when the model for such conduct appears to be derived from American popular culture, warrants further study (Altman 2002). The experiences of Baoqiang, an interviewee who enjoyed interacting with other Chinese gay male students in big cities during breaks from school as a means of insulating his studies from his intimate life, are potentially indicative of unique forms of intimate strategizing.

Additional lines of inquiry into the intimate lives of international students involving more diverse populations can provide answers for questions concerning the manner in which students from various backgrounds engage in the urban or rural sexual fields and negotiate identities of gender, sexualities, race/ethnicity, and class while in the host country. Given the stated intention of many interviewees to eventually return home, however, future research should address the intimate lives of students resettling in native countries. The type of sexual practices and understandings introduced by students into the home context, and the resulting social consequences, represents the life trajectory of students that will become increasingly salient with the rise of transnationalism. Addressing issues such as these will diversify our

understanding of international student mobility and changing sexual culture in the local, transnational, and global scales.

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