

CHAPTER

1

Sexual Mobility, Migration, and Sexual Fields

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Sexual Mobility and Sexual Fields

Many migrants experience what I call *sexual mobility*, or changes in their sexual status, sexual opportunities, and even sexual interests during migration. Some people migrate for sexual reasons, such as pursuing sexual variety or more available partners (Paquin 2014; Statham et al. 2020), making a living from sex work (Agustín 2006), engaging in extramarital affairs (Liu-Farrer 2010), finding a more accommodating context to live as a sexual minority (Carrillo 2018), or accompanying a partner with an expatriate assignment (Cangià 2018). These could all be described as “sexual migrants” (Carrillo 2018). While sexual migration can be a useful term, it places a great emphasis on sexual (or conjugal) motives, which often become entangled with a multitude of other considerations. Even moves officially recognized as “marriage migration” frequently involve a mix of motives, including material comfort, social status, and ease of mobility (Groes and Fernandez 2018). On the other hand, sexuality may also emerge as an important element of migration stories, even when it would not be reported as a primary motive or an incentive for mobility. For example, economic migrants may move for a job, with unforeseen consequences for their intimate lives (including marriage or divorce, and a gain or loss of sexual opportunities). Refugees and asylum seekers are not likely thinking of sex when they leave home, yet sexual violence or a lack of

sexual intimacy may become critical issues in their journeys.¹ These are not “sexual migrants” in the usual sense, but mobility has consequences for their sexual and intimate lives. Sexual mobility is thus a broader concept than sexual migration, capturing experiences of eroticism independent of accounts of motive or desires. The sexual mobility concept also avoids the trap of “methodological conjugalism” or the tendency to privilege marriage-like relations and diminish the importance of sexual interests and interactions that are not conjugal. Sexual mobility also differs from the accounts of “intimate mobilities,” or “the intimization of mobility,” a concept that highlights the processes that facilitate mobility based upon intimate relationships (e.g., spousal and adoption visas) (Groes and Fernandez 2018: 2). Sexual mobility, as I define it, concerns the relationship between geographic mobility and a larger social field in which sexual desires and sexualities are experienced and defined. Linking to the discussions of tangled mobilities in this volume, the concept of sexual mobility shows how geographic mobility organized around movement in one social field (e.g., career mobility or educational mobility) becomes inadvertently entangled in mobility in other fields, in this case, sexuality. Different forms of mobility—economic, social, educational, sexual—are entangled in ways that actors cannot easily foresee, because linkages across social fields (e.g., the impact of career mobility on dating opportunities) are often unexpected by actors within them.

My concept of sexual mobility rests on the idea of a sexual field, represented in a growing body of research explaining how sexual life is organized at the social level (Martin and George 2006; Green 2008, 2014; Farrer 2010; Leschziner and Green 2013).² This conceptualization of sexuality as a field is itself loosely based upon the ideas of Bourdieu, with ancillary concepts such as “sexual capital” (the resources that provide sexual status within a field) and “sexual habitus” (the engrained dispositions that govern sexual action) adapted from Bourdieu’s broader opus (Bourdieu and Waquant 1992; Green 2008). A sexual field is constituted by relations among differentially desirable and differently empowered actors in a sexual scene, determining what forms of desire and action are legitimate, who has the power of sexual initiative and refusal, and what is conventionally at stake in sexual interactions. In short, a sexual field is a socially constructed account of the rules of the “sexual game,” in which some players have the power to set the rules to their advantage, while others may follow or contest these rules. There are multiple geographically and socially bounded sexual fields, ranging from mainstream heterosexual dating scenes to minority sexual subcultures, each operating according to different rules (Martin and George 2006; Green 2008).

Migrants typically experience sexual mobility as an unexpected consequence of exiting one sexual field and entering another, finding themselves

in new “sexual games” in which they may feel unexpectedly disadvantages or (more rarely) advantaged. They may either find partners more easily, and find their sexual status enhanced, or they may experience greater difficulty, and thus have a diminished or lowered sexual status. They may adjust their sexual preferences and strategies to fit the new situation, or may even withdraw from the field altogether (Farrer 2010; Farrer and Dale 2014). Even for migrants not actively seeking partners or partnered sex, sexual fields provide a sense of status that may become an essential element of self-esteem, self-efficacy, or gender identity. Tracing sexual mobility, therefore, is less about establishing the motives of migrants than about investigating the nature of the sexual fields in which migrants are embedded and re-embedded, a process that may transform motives and reshape desires. Sexual mobility is not limited to migrants moving across borders but may also involve the mobilities of fields themselves. This can involve, for example, the advent of transnational sexual scenes, such as commercial sex work or nightlife subcultures, in emerging global cities (Farrer 1999, 2019: 136–37; Groes-Green 2013; Groes 2018). Thus, such sexual mobility may impact people who experience little geographic mobility but find themselves interacting with migrants from other places in new transnational fields that emerge in their cities. Sexual mobility is, therefore, mobility within or across sexual fields, and is related to, but not equivalent to, geographic mobility.

The goal of this chapter, in short, is to lay out the implications of this concept of sexual mobility for studies of migration, and to describe the tangled nature of sexual mobility—not only entanglements between sexual life and migration but between sexual and the other types of social fields that migrants move across. In doing this, I rely upon my two decades of qualitative research on sexuality and sexual mobilities in Shanghai, the cosmopolitan business center of China (Farrer 1999, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2016, 2019; Farrer and Dale 2014; Farrer and Field 2015). To supplement and extend this analysis, I also refer to studies published in other contexts. While my previous publications on Shanghai sexual scenes are detailed ethnographic case studies, the goal here is primarily conceptual, to show how the concepts of sexual mobility and sexual fields can contribute to migration studies more broadly.

Sexual Mobility as a Framework for Studying Migration

Looking at social life in terms of fields raises several empirical and theoretical questions.³ The most general one is about the emergence of autonomous fields of sexuality with their own rule makers, arbiters of merit, and

field-specific resources that are, to some extent, independent of those in other fields. It is not self-evident that sexuality constitutes a field, given that sexual relations and interests are implicit and entrenched in all forms of social interactions, whether in the arts or politics, or family life. Existing studies of sexual fields have demonstrated that the concept is useful in some sexual contexts, with the most typical examples being gay nightlife scenes. Still, it is not evident that all sexual interactions can be conceptualized as fields (see Green 2014).⁴ Sexual spaces become organized as fields only as part of a process of differentiation, and by disembedding sexual and erotic interests from other areas of life. It is a process in which actors become collectively oriented toward a range of affective and corporal interactions that are then judged by relatively autonomous criteria (Green 2008). In general, sexuality in premodern societies seems deeply embedded in other social relationships—notably the political, family, and economic spheres—and thus the idea of a field of sexual activities that operates relatively autonomously from dynastic politics and economic interests seems quintessentially modern and Western (see Giddens 1992). This may not be the case, however. The worlds of medieval romance in Europe, India, and Japan offer examples of cultures of erotic interaction that were distinct from the dynastic and reproductive sexual norms of the age (Reddy 2012). The late Ming world of relationships between male literati and educated courtesans—based on an idealized concept of romantic feelings (*qing*)—might be considered another type of premodern, or early modern, sexual field (Zurndorfer 2011). Sexual fields are specific historical constructs, to be sure, but they are not unique to our era, and certainly not to the West. For migration studies, it is important to first consider the conditions for the establishment of distinct sexual fields in both sending and receiving regions, and to then see how migrants experience mobility within and across them. Some such sexual fields are transnational in their structure and may involve sexual interactions among partners with extreme inequality in resources.

A second general question about sexual fields is the issue of stratification within the field, or the unequal distribution of resources, power, and authority. This structuration of the field is often expressed in sociological research by the term “sexual capital,” or sometimes “erotic capital” (Gonzales and Rolison 2005; Green 2008, 2014; Hakim 2011). Sexual capital refers to the resources, competencies, and endowments of a person that provide status as sexual agents within a field (Gonzales and Rolison 2005; Martin and George 2006; Farrer 2010). The concept of sexual capital implies not only an unequal distribution of sexual resources (or desirability and status) but possibly skewed rules of the game that benefit some types of actors over others. For the researcher, it may be difficult to discover how the rules are

established within a sexual field, but it is usually possible to ask who benefits from these rules, and to observe how others may contest or attempt to subvert them. For example, race is a central component of sexual status in mainstream American sexual fields. Gonzales and Rolison (2005) show that, regardless of income, white men in the United States enjoy higher levels of sexual capital than black men, black women, and white women, allowing them more sexual opportunities and more latitude for sexual experimentation. In an analysis of the sexual popularity of white men in Japan—at a time when Japan was rich and many Japanese women earned more than their Western lovers—Kelsky (2001) argues that the whiteness and culture of Western men were “hegemonic constitutive elements” of the freedom and modernity that Japanese women longed for in general (ibid.: 148). Certainly, a key question for sexual mobilities involves repositioning migrants in gendered and racialized sexual hierarchies as they enter new sexual fields. These may intersect with other forms of stratification—economic, cultural—in contradictory ways.

A third empirical question is about the spatial and social boundaries of fields, a central issue for studies of sexual mobility experienced in migration. Sexual fields seem to be demarcated quite narrowly in some studies, such as a single type of gay bar in some ethnographic case studies (e.g., Green 2008), or much more broadly in actors’ shared recognition of sexual rules, actors, and goals on a dating website. There are sexual fields that cross multiple national borders or transnational sexual fields (Farrer and Dale 2014). Clearly, in the latter cases, the boundaries of a field may be vague. Still, experiences of boundary crossing remain central for a study of sexual mobilities. We should ask what happens when migrants enter a new sexual field, how they become aware of new norms, actors, and standards of desire, and how they may seek to modify or challenge the rules of the game. Sexual fields exist at various scales—local, national, and transnational—and may be embedded loosely within each other (Jackson 2009). Mobility within a transnational field, such as one loosely constituted by gay sexual scenes in Asian cities, still involves adjustment to national and local variations in the larger transnational field.

A fourth question, especially relevant to the study of sexual mobilities, involves socialization into the field. The relational approach of field theory has the advantage of highlighting how notions of desirability and appropriate forms of desire are constructed within the sexual field as opposed to being “naturally” given outside of it. In the case of migrants, people may be entering new sexual fields and thus acquiring new forms of “erotic habitus” (Green 2008) and the sexual dispositions of actors peculiar to that field, including specific preferences, styles of interaction, and ways of self-presentation. Therefore, one consequence of migration may be a great deal

of uneasiness with sexual mobility (Farrer 2010) and resistance to accepting a subordinate or marginal role (Farrer and Dale 2014). Migrants, however, may also find acquired sexual habitus to be empowering and liberating (Ding and Ho 2013).

The fifth focus of empirical research is the convertibility of sexual capital. The generic conception of “fields” allows that one form of “capital” may be convertible into another (cultural into economic capital being the classic example from Bourdieu: see Bourdieu and Waquant 1992). Capital conversions in the sexual field may go in both directions, and both may be construed as a type of sexual agency. Forms of cultural capital—nationality, education, language ability—may be actualized as sexual capital (or sex appeal). Sexual capital may be converted to economic capital, not only through transactional sex but also through various intimate exchanges (Ding and Ho 2013; Groes-Green 2013; Groes 2018; Priscitelli 2018). Capital conversions—from sexual to economic and social capital—transform the sexual field into a lattice of connections and opportunities for some migrants, a space that not only motivates but enables mobility. These lattices of opportunity may be created not only for migrants but for people who come into contact with migrants in emerging transnational sexual fields. I have used the concept of mobility lattice to describe how transnational social fields—such as a specialized culinary field—provide resources for the careers and geographic mobilities of migrants (Farrer 2019, 2020). Sexual fields may also be mobility lattices for some migrants, providing capital conversion and further mobility possibilities.

Finally, the central questions for migration studies involve the mobility within and across sexual fields that accompanies geographic mobility. Migrants not only move in space but within and across social fields. These may include employment, cultural, and—the focus here—sexual fields. Geographical mobility may be facilitated by the transnational structure of a field, such as the highly structured economic fields of corporate employment, or it may involve migrants crossing the boundaries of fields and losing field-specific capital (such as recognition of professional credentials) in a new context (Erel 2010). Sexual mobilities are analogous, but given that transnational sexual fields are generally less institutionalized and more localized than cross-border economic fields, migrants are likely to experience sexual mobility as a move *across* sexual fields, not within them, and thus experience abrupt shifts (often a loss) in sexual status. These six types of generic questions underlie the discussion that follows. I use my own and other scholars’ research of sexuality to show how sexual fields shape the experience of migrants, how migrants are socialized into sexual fields, and how migrants exercise agency in the field.

Migrants in Emerging Sexual Fields: Producing a Transnational Sexual Field in Shanghai

Sexual mobilities are tied to the emergence of new sexual fields. One emergent sexual field in which migrants (albeit often second-generation migrants or the children of migrants) played a significant role was the development of urban dating culture in American cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Working-class “ethnic” men and women participated in a new culture of premarital sociability and intimacy that became a culture of “going out” or “dating” in US cities (Bailey 1989). This replaced the previous culture of “courting,” which was centered in domestic spaces. While some types of migrants were marginalized within this emerging national sexual field (especially people of color or non-heterosexual youth), many migrants, including many “ethnic” women, found dance halls, amusement parks, and cinemas to be arenas for integration into urban American society (Peiss 1985). Young ethnic women living in crowded tenements in cities such as New York were pioneers of some of these practices as they were generally excluded from the courting culture that required a specialized space in the home (the parlor) to meet men. The new dating practices formed a heterosexual sexual field in which young people gained autonomy from their parents. This new national sexual field empowered youth over adults, and men over women. Young men (who spent money on dates) became the arbiters of what was to be done on dates, while women were expected to hold the lines on sexual intimacy (while still becoming progressively intimate with their “dates”). The second-generation European migrants who participated in this dating culture became “Americanized” (and “whitened”), because dating not only structured a national sexual field but a new national youth culture based on both heterosexual intimacy and reconfigured racial boundaries (Peiss 1985; Bailey 1989).

In my fieldwork in China in the 1990s, I documented the emergence of a similar national field of youth sexual culture in the post-Mao era. It was a space where, as in the United States a century earlier, young people gained partial autonomy from their parents by engaging in intimate behaviors in contexts outside the home—including, from the early 1980s onward, social dance halls in which young men and women practiced premarital intimacy (Farrer 2002; Farrer and Field 2015). The role of international migrants in creating this new sexual field was negligible at first. This field emerged in an indigenous process of liberalizing sexual mores, which swept China after the “reform and opening” policies of 1978 (Pan 1993; Evans 1997; Farrer 2002). Beginning in the 1980s, and spreading and deepening in the 1990s, a widespread “romantic revolution” in China extended a new legitimacy to

premarital sexual intimacy as long as relationships were based on romantic “feelings.” Race was not salient but urban and rural status were clear markers in this field (Farrer 2007). Although foreign migrants were barely visible in urban China until the late 1990s, images of foreign sexuality and foreign ideas of sexuality did play a role in these cultural developments (Farrer 1999). The popular narrative of “sexual opening up” (*xingkaifang*) implies an opening up of China to foreign sexual ideas (Farrer 2002). Farquhar (2002) describes a “newly eroticized public landscape” in 1980s China, which included images of sexualized foreign bodies and tales of foreign sexual prowess. However, these images were always in contrast with an image of the Chinese themselves. The latter was presented as relatively chaste and earnestly focused on marriage.

Through the mid-1990s, international migrants, especially men, who tried to participate in the Chinese dating scene—regional or local Chinese sexual fields—generally found that these rules applied to them also. Dating, especially if involving sexual intercourse, was linked to expectations of marriage; and this mainstream Chinese sexual field was not configured flexibly for foreigners who tried to enter it (Farrer 2019). Nathan, an American who eventually married a Chinese woman, described the strict enforcement of local cultural norms that foreign men faced when dating Chinese women in Beijing in the 1980s:

Actually, I wasn't all that interested in Chinese women. I didn't find them all that attractive at first. And it was really not possible to date Chinese women. I also saw how things went with my American friends, and I thought it was way too much trouble to go through all that to be with a Chinese girl. It was illegal for a Chinese person to come to stay with you in a hotel or in any of the places foreigners stayed. For instance, once I went away for two weeks, and I lent my apartment to this American guy. When I got back, he wasn't there. And I asked what happened to him. He said that the police came in when he was there with his girlfriend. They asked if they were married, and when they found out they weren't, they took them into the police station and gave them a scolding. It was so traumatic that a week later, he proposed to marry her. (2002 interview)

In this context, short-term affairs were perilous for the Chinese, particularly for women who faced strict community scrutiny about premarital sex, in addition to state paranoia about Chinese socializing with foreigners. Many dating couples were rushed into marriage by authorities and relatives. Many Western migrant men I interviewed described not only alienation from the norms and practices in this Chinese sexual field but aversion to the young women embedded in it. This finding is in keeping with the idea that

“desire” is also shaped by socialization into the field, and is not merely a pre-given, individual predilection.

When interviewing Nathan, I was surprised at his account of not being “interested” in Chinese women in the 1980s in Beijing. By the time of our interview in 2002, expatriate men had created their own transnational sexual field inside China, and they had begun inviting Chinese, especially young women, to participate in it. Nathan and his friends were eager participants. As I have written in a monograph on Western migrants in Shanghai, expatriates can be characterized as “power migrants,” or migrants with the resources to transform the societies they move into, including the urban nightscape (Farrer 2019: 198). This power extends to producing and reshaping sexual fields. Western migrants in Shanghai, and Chinese business people trying to appeal to them, began transforming Shanghai nightscapes in earnest in the 1990s, creating spaces that became sites of a new transnational sexual field in which the rules of mainstream Chinese society did not apply. Bars and discos attracted Chinese with glamorous images of foreign eroticism, and became spaces where Chinese youth could engage in actual erotic encounters with foreign visitors (Farrer 1999). With the increasing numbers of foreign residents and tourists in the late 1990s, Shanghai’s nightlife districts developed into full-fledged ethnosexual frontier zones in which Western expatriate professionals rubbed shoulders with Shanghainese white collars and Hong Kong entrepreneurs, as well as many female Chinese sex workers (Farrer 2011; Farrer and Field 2015).

These spaces operated according to Western rules—or more specifically, the rules of white male expatriates living in Asia. Asian women were expected to be sexually interested in white men, and white men in Asian women. Marriage was indeed possible in some cases, but most relationships were short-term flings while others evolved into compensated dating. The age gaps between expatriate men and their local girlfriends or lovers were often much greater than would be expected back “home” in Europe or North America. Both Asian men and white women reported feeling marginalized in these sexual scenes, whereas the Chinese women who participated reported a sense of release from the norms and expectations of the dominant Chinese dating scene (Farrer 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2019; Farrer and Dale 2104; Farrer and Field 2015). This was a sexual field that flourished in Shanghai at the height of direct Western investment and expatriate managers’ mobility into this city in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As described in the next section, these racialized power relations and the participants’ relative statuses would shift rapidly after the financial crisis of 2008.

There is no doubt that migrants played a substantial role in creating the transnational sexual field in Shanghai. However, it is important to note

that there were parallel local, national, and transnational sexual fields developing in the city. For example, throughout the 1990s, vast numbers of ballroom dance halls formed a sexual scene for middle-aged married Shanghainese, with their sexual hierarchies and standards of interaction. At the top of the sexual hierarchy were good dancers, a type of field-specific sexual capital. Non-Shanghainese (rural-to-urban) migrants were marginalized in these dance halls, no matter how young or attractive they were. This was a *local* sexual field with a strong Shanghainese nativist bias, in which international migrants played no role (See Farrer 2002; Farrer and Field 2015). The dominant premarital dating culture of Shanghai, in contrast, was mainly a *national* sexual field with a moral tone set by official state media, and with similar rules of interaction across other Chinese cities (though rural-to-urban migrants were largely excluded). The interethnic sexual field described above was quite marginal at the national level. However, it was part of a transnational sexual scene that extended to other Asian cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taipei, where these affluent migrants also worked and played according to similar field-specific rules.

Gendered Experiences of the Sexual Mobility: Adjusting to the Transnational Field in Shanghai

Migrants collectively shape emerging sexual fields in some cases, but individually they are shaped by them. As journalist Ted Fishman wrote in his book *China Inc.*:

Sex is one of the allures of Shanghai ... Here, the middle-aged overseas Chinese can find willing youth, burly German mechanics can find little girls who simply don't exist at home, and nerdy Western engineers can find girls so hot their friends at home would laugh. (Fishman 2005: 29)

Fishman attributes most of the sex appeal of elite migrant men in Shanghai to the easy convertibility of economic capital into sexual capital, giving middle-aged men with money access to young and beautiful women. This quote also points to the unexpected nature of this good fortune for many male migrants. It also shows how sexual fields are racialized and gendered, and how men and women, even with the same ethnic and racial background, may experience radically different forms of sexual mobility in migration.

In my research in Shanghai in the late 1990s and through the 2000s, many men described experiencing much more interest from women in Shanghai than they experienced back home. Theirs was an experience of

upward sexual mobility. Whiteness was a component of sexual capital for some men, including those who actually had only modest incomes but were seen as desirable by women because of their race and nationality (Farrer 2010). This sexual scene also attracted many internal Chinese migrants. Shanghai was considered to be a city for young, single women to develop a more individualized sexual persona and to explore their sexual options in a freer context (Pei 2011). Moreover, foreign men did not associate migrant women's migrant status with the stigma of "provincialism," unlike many urban Shanghainese men. Some young (rural-to-urban/*waidi*) migrant women thus also experienced a type of upward sexual mobility when entering this emergent transnational sexual field. These women's geographic and economic mobility into the city thus became entangled with their sexual mobility in the spaces where they played (and sometimes worked).

The transnational sexual field that emerged in the 1990s involved a new type of casual sexual interaction for many Chinese, including "pick-ups" in the bars and clubs (and later, online dating). The rules of interaction in this sexual field were associated with the spaces in which they occurred. Nightclubs, in particular, were a context in which relationships were defined by their casual, spontaneous, and playful characteristics. As one American man explained:

That is one of the reasons that I really prefer to meet girls in the nightclubs, because out in the clubbing scene it is really about "play." I think that term really encompasses what people mean in China by going out. If a girl is out in a club, she knows that it is just play, and she won't expect to develop a long-term relationship with anyone she meets there. (2005 interview)

The conventional understanding of the nightlife scene as being about "play" meant that Chinese women understood that a sexual encounter could be just "playing around" or "one-night love." The conventional definitions of these social spaces thus shaped the relationships that were considered "normal" within this sexual field.

Some men played in this sexual field for years, some compulsively. When I asked Carl, a 40-year-old single white American, if he got tired of dating a different woman nearly every week, he replied sarcastically, "What? Get tired of having sex with hot 21-year-old girls? Nooo" For him, as for many men, the visceral excitement associated with new sex partners required no explanation, nor did the attractions of women in their early twenties. All men would want the same thing if they were honest, he said. In many cases, however, migrants remarked that this field had altered their behaviors and tastes, causing them to form new nightlife habits and adopting

new standards of desirable partners (e.g., only focusing on Chinese women, a racialized preference some derisively labeled “yellow fever”).

An elevated sexual status was not limited to white male migrants. Ethnic Chinese men from abroad, especially Chinese-American men, were at the top of the sexual hierarchy in many respects, because not only could they participate in the transnational sexual field of casual play with multiple partners, but they were regarded by women as more fit also for the domestic Chinese sexual field centered on dating and marriage. Chinese-American men reported feeling like “kings of the candy shop” in Chinese cities. Chinese-American women, however, experienced downward sexual mobility, and were even labeled unwanted “leftover” women (Wang 2017). Their status as educated, foreign, and “independent” (a frequent self-description) did not readily convert to sexual capital in either the domestic or transnational sexual fields they experienced in Shanghai.

White Western women also reported downward sexual mobility when they arrived in Shanghai, especially during years in which white Western men seemed to be at the height of their sexual status (roughly 1998–2008 by most informant accounts). Many Western male migrants who participated in this sexual scene during this period reported reduced interest in “foreign” (white) women. As one 33-year-old African-American explained, “I typically don’t date foreign women. Just because I’ve dated foreign [white] girls before in the US, and again you want to experience what China has to offer.”

Expatriate women engaged in many strategies to avoid desexualization in a sexual field in which they felt marginalized. Some reported becoming more sexually aggressive and more sexually adventurous. Many informants ascribed this sexual “wildness” to the lack of ethics and morals in the Shanghai expat dating scene. They felt that expats had a view that they were “on vacation” and thus not beholden to the rules “at home.” This is a view common to other expatriate subcultures, such as the one studied in Dubai by Walsh (2007), in which women also face a field constituted by short-term relationships. Similar to the experiences of expatriate women in the Gulf, a Chinese-Canadian informant stated about Shanghai: “Back home, I would be considered promiscuous, but here I think it’s completely normal.” This, in turn, leads to women (and men) being more sexually open, active, and experimental than they would in their home country (Farrer and Dale 2014).

In short, elite migrants experienced sexual mobility when moving to Shanghai, but in opposite directions. White and Asian men from developed countries generally described a rise in their sexual status, while women with the same backgrounds experienced a drop. Both types of migrants described adjusting to the new “rules of the game” of a largely unfamiliar

sexual field in which short-term relations were a norm, and compensated dating was also much more common than where they were from. They developed a new sexual habitus, including new preferences in partners, new forms of self-presentation, and new patterns of interaction. Many Chinese locals, especially women, also joined this transnational sexual scene, developing a new sexual habitus focused on short-term interactions and a newfound indifference to chastity and marriage (or even marital status), which were still concerns in the mainstream domestic sexual field.

The sexual field is thus not only a space of mobility but also of socialization that differs by gender. Participation in the field provides not only sexual opportunities but sexual meanings. As Fligstein and McAdam (2012) write in their book *A Theory of Fields*, “strategic action in fields turns on a complicated blend of material and ‘existential’ considerations” (3). In sexual fields, these existential considerations extend to the moral nature of casual sex and the morality of sexual transactions (e.g., giving “taxi money” to casual female partners). Participation in new sexual fields involves, for example, learning new tactics of seduction but also new moral economies of sexual exchange or ways for understanding and legitimating the exchange of resources in sexual relationships (Priscitelli 2018; Groes 2018). Sexual mobilities are thus formative of new sexual subjectivities and new forms of sexual agency, and not only a question of rising and falling sexual status.

Shifting Entanglements and Capital Conversions: Sexual Agency in Transnational Sexual Fields

Relationships among players in a sexual field are not stable over time and may be contested, especially by new emergent elites. As Ho and Tsang’s (2000) research on interracial gay relationships in Hong Kong shows, racialized sexual hierarchies can change significantly in a short time, depending on shifts in economic and cultural power (such as the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997). Similarly, Hoang (2015) sees a decline in white male clients’ status, and a rise in the status of Asian clients in the sexual scenes in Vietnam. In some cases, the changing distribution of resources in the economic field may influence the distribution and locus of resources in the sexual field. In other cases, new groups of actors may emerge. Both phenomena happened in the transnational sexual field dominated by white male expatriates for a brief period in urban China in the late 1990s and early 2000s. By the late 2000s, Chinese men were not only much wealthier and savvier in the ways of these sexual scenes, but they were also able to reconfigure interactions to their advantage. Even the nightclubbing spaces of Shanghai were redesigned according to Chinese modes of sociability.

In those spaces, groups of acquaintances partied together at fixed tables served with expensive drinks. Such new “VIP” clubbing spaces left few opportunities for (foreign) migrant interlopers to engage in sexual pick-ups, even if they could afford to visit the clubs. By the 2010s, Mainland Chinese “*fuerdai*” (second generation rich) were the new “kings in the candy shop,” and not overseas Chinese or white foreign men. They were able to use their economic capital to reinvent the “rules of the game” within these transnational leisure spaces (Farrer and Field 2015; Field and Farrer 2018).

At the same time that these *fuerdai* Chinese men saw their sexual capital appreciating—along with their economic capital—a new group of Chinese women were also entering this sexual field, some of whom had studied abroad and returned to China with advanced degrees and/or well-paid employment. Often labeled “returnees” (*haigui*), most of these women primarily sought their partners in the mainstream national sexual field that was undergoing rapid transformations (To 2020). However, according to many informants, this domestic sexual field was becoming increasingly patriarchal and dominated by considerations of men’s access to real estate (a marital apartment) and women’s youth and beauty (see Davis and Friedman 2014). Women beyond their late twenties and women with advanced degrees were actually at a disadvantage in the mainstream national sexual field, and hence labeled “leftover women” (*shengnü*). Some of them, therefore, sought alternative opportunities in the transnational sexual field, looking for foreign white or overseas Chinese men, not primarily for sexual experimentation (though some did: Farrer 2013), but as an escape from a patriarchal domestic sexual field (Zurndorfer 2018; To 2020). In these interactions, which increasingly began online, the women emphasized their expectations that men should be reliable partners with economic resources and marriage orientation, and thus challenged the primacy of “play” in the expatriate dating scene described above.

Here we see not only how economic and sexual status become entangled, but also how moving “laterally” into new sexual fields may be a way of *avoiding* entanglements of one sort, even though new ones might emerge. For Shanghai divorcees, rural migrants, and highly educated “leftover women,” movement into the transnational field can itself be a form of agency in which sexual stigmas salient in the national field—a rural background, higher education, or divorced status, all a type of negative sexual capital—can be avoided or reduced, and forms of positive sexual capital—international experience, foreign language ability—can be utilized (Clark 2001; Farrer 2008; Zurndorfer 2018; To 2020). For these women, participating in a transnational sexual field could be a form of sexual agency in which they sought relief from the patriarchal demands of the mainstream Chinese marriage market (To 2020). It was, of course, questionable whether romance

with foreign men offered a reliable break from entanglements with patriarchy in general. Still, it offered a break from some expectations of Chinese courtship and marriage, such as a traditionally filial relationship to a husband's mother.⁵ Participating in one type of sexual field (the transnational one) reduced entanglements, such as social expectations and stigmas, that limited action in another (the national one).

A sexual field is also a place where new forms of entanglement—between sex, money, and status—may be actively sought. “Entanglement” can here be understood as capital conversion. For example, we also see many marginalized women and men using their sexual capital as a convertible resource in emerging transnational sexual fields. In Mozambique, for example, young local women dating rich white migrants in the capital city pursue both short-term monetary gains and long-term relationships in a bid to win respect in the local society (Groes-Green 2013; Groes 2018). Brazilian women and Cuban men seek both material aid and relationships from their lovers from developed countries (Priscitelli 2018; Simoni 2018). In Thailand, marriage migrants pursue status and security through the exchange of sexual attention and caregiving (Statham et al. 2020). In urbanizing China, we also see the convertibility of migrant women's sexual capital through various forms of sex work (Ding and Ho 2013). In all these examples, women cultivate erotic and emotional capacities to enhance their well-being, produce income, and win respect in the local community (Groes-Green 2013; Groes 2018). As Ding and Ho (2013) write, “sexual capital involves the capacity for sexual expression and developing a new relationship with oneself, and has emotional significance, in addition to its potential for acquiring social and economic capital” (43). Through sexual mobility, sexual capital is converted not only to economic capital but also to social capital in the form of respect, status, and relationships.

In many cases, however, powerful actors in the sexual field may also oppose the convertibility of sexual capital, especially for marginal, working-class, and female migrants. Many governments, including China, criminalize prostitution or do not recognize sex workers as legitimate migrants (Agustín 2006). Government agencies question applications for spousal visas that seem based on sexual exchange rather than a normative middle-class ideal of emotional (and class) compatibility (Maskens 2018). Even nightclubs shape their spaces to make it difficult for women to achieve mobility in the sexual field, either through policing sex work or by creating exclusive VIP spaces to bar ordinary clubbers from accessing privileged elites (Field and Farrer 2018; Mears 2020). In particular, the criminalization of sexual exchanges also produces especially negative outcomes for female migrants (Agustín 2006; Ding and Ho 2013).

Conclusions: Sexual Mobilities and Entangled Mobilities

An “intimate turn,” “affective turn,” or “sexual turn” is increasingly well established in migration studies, producing multiple conferences, special issues, and edited volumes (e.g., Mai and King 2009; Groes and Fernandez 2018; Statham et al. 2020), as well as this one. Much of this research insightfully focuses on the interior lives of migrants and the micro-social organization of sexual intimacy. Other studies focus on the institutional (especially governmental) and discursive organization of intimate or erotic experiences, such as Nicole Constable’s (2003) “cartographies of desire” concept. What the sexual mobilities perspective advanced here offers is a meso-social analysis of intimacy, desire, and sexuality. It moves away from the methodological individualism implied in many studies. Based on the concept of sexual fields, this approach sensitizes us to the social organization of sexual identities, opportunities, and desires at multiple geographic scales—local, national, and transnational—while emphasizing that sexual life is inherently social and not individual in organization. Migrants may come into contact with multiple sexual fields and have multiple and discordant experiences of sexual mobility. Based on the idea of sexual fields, the sexual mobility perspective offers particular insights on the entanglement of sexual mobility with mobility in other social fields through the mechanism of capital conversion.

Based on my partial review of this growing research literature, a few important trends could be emphasized through this lens. One is the role of migrants in the creation of new urban sexual fields. We can see the emergence of a transnational sexual field in Carrillo’s (2018) study of gay male migrants from Mexico to the United States, and in my studies of how migrants helped contribute to the creation of a sexual field in Shanghai. The latter study emphasizes how non-migrant “locals” come to experience sexual mobility within these emergent transnational spaces (Farrer 2019: 136–37). We can also see this type of emergent sexual field in the case of Mozambican women who participate in the creation of a transnational sexual field through their interactions with white men in Maputo (Groes-Green 2013; Groes 2018). Sexual mobility in this sense is about the dynamics or emergence of the field as much as it is about the mobility of migrants within it, and a historical and sociological analysis of the field itself becomes central to understanding these migrant experiences.

One obvious contribution of field theory is the emphasis on sexual inequality—or unequal access to sexual opportunities and status—and the struggles of migrants coping with sexual marginalization and downward

sexual mobility. We see this, for example, in Ahmad's (2009) study of the desexualization, "deprivation," and "melancholia" experienced by male Pakistani labor migrants to Europe. It is also in Pande's (2017) study of the sexual marginalization and emasculation experienced by migrant Bangladeshi men in South Africa and their strategies for coping. By contrast, Liu-Farrer (2004) shows how Chinese migrants deal with their marginalization in the dominant sexual fields in Japan by creating an alternative sexual space in the ethnic dance party circuit. We must also attend to the "resistance of the powerful," or how dominant actors endeavor to exclude migrants from sexual fields, as we can observe in the way Japanese men stigmatized the entry of Korean and Chinese men into the gay sexual field in Shinjuku Nichome in Tokyo (Baudinette 2016). These types of inequalities and barriers mean that for many, perhaps most, migrants from the Global South, sexual mobility is downward, as they find themselves marginalized in sexual fields in unfamiliar metropolitan environments.

Finally, my concept of sexual mobility offers accounts of sexual subjectivity and sexual agency for migrants that might be useful for revising a purely instrumental notion of sexual exchange. Much of the focus on discussions of "sexual capital" has been about the convertibility—especially the conversion of sexual capital to economic capital in "transactional" sexual relationships. However, beyond instrumental conceptions of sexual exchange, the agency of actors in the sexual field also involves projects of self-improvement and self-shaping as ways of navigating the field. There is also much to be gained from investigating the "existential" or moral investments of migrants in their positions in the field and their acquisition of new forms of sexual habitus that are transformative of sexual subjectivity. Interactions within a sexual field involve strategic and instrumental action, but the interesting questions are often about how the field shapes both the *ends* and the *means* of sexual interactions through sexual socialization.

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NOTES

1. For example, in her master's research conducted in Sweden, Hu (2016) found that a lack of sexual intimacy was a burning issue for male asylum seekers from Syria and other countries.
2. See Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Fligstein and McAdam (2012), and Martin (2003) for general background on field theory. The concept of field developed in sexual fields research borrows primarily from Bourdieu, but some studies, mine in particular, also borrow from the approach of Fligstein and McAdam (2012), particularly their emphasis on the "existential meanings" that actors acquire from acting in fields.
3. This conception of the historicity of fields of action is based on Fligstein and McAdam (2012).
4. Wacquant (2014) presents a broad critique of the idea of sexual fields, arguing that sexuality is not an autonomous field. Wacquant's view of field theory, however, relies very narrowly on Bourdieu's original texts, and ignores the emergent autonomy of sexual fields demonstrated in actual case studies.
5. As To (2020) points out, women do expect to maintain filial relations with their own mothers in marriage. However, I have observed among informants that by marrying a foreigner they may easily opt to have a more distant or a more egalitarian relationship with the "foreign" mother-in-law. This allows women to disengage from what has traditionally been the most stressful relationship for married Chinese women, that with the husband's mother (Farrer 2019: 205).

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