

# Love in a Transient Sexual Field: Female Chinese International Students' Racialised Desire on Mobile Dating Applications

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## Abstract

Race has been documented as an imperative criterion in partner selection among migrants. However, most existing studies on this issue focused on second-generation migrant groups and paid little attention to how race governs transient migrants' partner selection. This study thus examines UK-based female Chinese international students' racial preferences in partnering on mobile dating applications (MDAs) to add a transient dimension to the literature. Drawing on Gomes's concept of transience and the sexual field framework proposed by Green, I argue that Chinese international students are situated in a *transient sexual field*, a subfield of the broader *UK sexual field*. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 female Chinese international students studying at 12 UK universities who use MDAs to date people of the opposite sex. The findings suggested three reasons contributing to participants' racialised desire: (1) persistent Chinese traditional norms and patriarchy; (2) uncertainties and opportunities of transient migration; and (3) pre-existing racial stereotypes and the racial hierarchy in the UK. The findings offer insights into how Chinese traditional culture, the transient migrant status, and racial stereotypes are interwoven to influence Chinese international students' partner selection in the UK.

## Keywords

Chinese international students, dating applications, intimate partnering, racial preference, sexual field, transient migrant

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## Introduction

Recent years have witnessed an increasing number of Chinese students coming to the UK to pursue higher education. In 2022, around 151,152 Chinese international students studied in the UK, accounting for the largest number of overseas students in the country (HESA, 2023). In addition to academic development, educational mobility has increased opportunities for international students to engage in interracial interactions (Rodríguez-García, 2015). Linked with their migration trajectory and future plans (Kim, 2017), international students' race-based partnering preference is an important indicator of their racial attitudes which inextricably influences campus climate (Ang et al., 2021; Hwang, 2013; Ritter, 2015).

To date, a body of sociological literature (e.g. Chappetta and Barth, 2022; Ranzini and Rosenbaum, 2020; Ritter, 2015) has investigated the racial dating preferences of Asian migrants in the US, Canada, and Australia. 'Asian' here mainly refers to East Asian migrants, differing from the UK context where it often refers to South Asian migrants (Ali and Sayyid, 2006). Most prior studies suggested Chinese migrants' overall intra-racial partnering tendency (e.g. Chen and Liu, 2021; Hwang, 2013; Lichter et al., 2015). Female Chinese migrants were more likely than their male counterparts to engage in interracial romantic relationships, especially with White men (Chappetta and Barth, 2022; Hwang, 2013). However, prior studies which were primarily conducted in the US, have largely focused on relatively long-term migrants such as first- and second-generation migrants.

The present research thus explores, for the first time, female Chinese international students' racial preference in partnering in the UK. In many Western countries, including the UK, female Chinese international students outnumbered their male counterparts (Wang and Miao, 2015; Zhang and Xu, 2020). Chinese women often experience stigmatisation and judgement when dating people from other racial groups in China (Lan, 2015; Liu et al., 2021). However, it remains unknown as to what racial preference female Chinese international students have and the reasons behind their decisions when being exposed to increased interracial dating opportunities in the UK.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 18 UK-based female Chinese international students who use mobile dating applications (MDAs), this research aims to address two questions: (1) What are the racial preferences of UK-based female Chinese international students in partner selection on MDAs? (2) Why do they have these racial preferences? The findings suggest participants' predominant interracial dating preferences on MDAs in the UK, which are influenced by persistent Chinese traditional norms and patriarchy, uncertainties, and opportunities embedded in transient migration and the racial hierarchy in the UK. I argue that educational mobility provides most participants with opportunities for upward sexual mobility – enhancing their desirability compared with their status in China – and allowed them to date people across various racial groups. However, this mobility also evokes uncertainties about future life plans and brings insecurities when dating Chinese peers, who may secretly maintain multiple relationships due to geographical distance from China.

This research aims to make three contributions to the literature. First, it provides insights into broader sociological understandings of intimacy and migration experiences.

It specifically enhances the understanding of the heterogeneity of migrants and draws scholarly attention to the intimate relationships of transient migrants. Intimate relationships profoundly impact transient migrants' mental health and migration trajectories, yet have been largely neglected in extant studies (Popadiuk, 2008; Robertson, 2020). This research further illustrates how racial hierarchies manifest in intimate relationships and intersect with migration trajectories. Second, it innovatively extends the concept of transience (Gomes, 2021) by applying it through the sexual field framework. This article demonstrates how migration status interplays with the multiple sexual fields to shape migrants' intimate relationships. Third, this study conceptualises the dating space in China as the *Chinese sexual field* and one that international students lived in as a *transient sexual field* within the broader *UK sexual field*. In this way, this research attempts to answer Green's (2014) call for examinations of how multiple sexual fields relate to each other and even broader, to the migration process, to shape individuals' sexual desires.

### *Intimacy and interracial partnering in contemporary China*

Cultural norms play a significant role in people's formation of intimate relationships. Compared with Western countries, romantic love and intimacy were not prominent and valued in China historically (Liu et al., 2019). There is no equivalent term for dating in the Chinese language. Chinese individuals, instead, commonly use *yuehui* 约会 (joint activity) and *lian'ai* 恋爱 (romantic relationships) to refer to romantic love (Wang, 2017). Confucian ideas and Chinese traditional norms emphasise dating and marriage as the duty of continuing the male lineage and the union of two families (Zarafonetis, 2017). Thus, Chinese young people are often encouraged to marry Chinese people, whereas interracial marriage can be sometimes perceived as potentially harmful to prospering family lineage and cultural heritage (Lou et al., 2015).

Racial preference is adopted in this research because most participants classified daters into different racial groups – *zhongzu* 种族 in their words – based on physical attributes such as skin colour and the colour of pupils. The photo-driven mechanism of MDAs led to participants' emphasis on users' appearance for assessing their racial background. *Zhongzu* can be translated into race or ethnicity, among which race was leaning more on biological and physical differences while ethnicity is often interpreted as people who have a shared history and culture (Cornell and Hartmann, 2006). In addition, the participants often racialised themselves as Chinese or Asian, occasionally using the pronoun 'we', while referring to non-Chinese or non-Asian individuals as 'they' or 'foreigners' during interviews.

Interracial dating was a rare occurrence in China due to restrictions on the residence of foreign nationals before 1987 (Pan, 2014). The implementation of the 'Reform and Opening-up' policy in 1987 improved diplomatic relations between mainland China and other countries and subsequently encouraged more interracial romantic relationships. In contemporary China, interracial dating is increasingly common and sometimes featured on talk shows and television programmes (Pan, 2014). Although a more positive image of interracial partnering emerged after the 2000s, Chinese people's negative attitudes towards it still persist (Lou et al., 2015; Zhang and Allen, 2019).

Particularly, Chinese women's interracial partnering often subjects them to stigmatisation and judgement (Lan, 2015). For example, Chinese women marrying partners of different races are sometimes portrayed as 'sexual deviants', 'traitors of the nation', and even 'White fuck' on Chinese social media (Liu et al., 2021: 497; Zhang and Allen, 2019). In contrast, mainstream cultural norms in Western countries such as the UK, the US, and Canada are more supportive of ethnic diversity (Pilkington, 2020). Being exposed to different cultural norms and racial attitudes, it is worth exploring whether Chinese female international students in the UK reconfigure their racial preference or maintain the one that they held in China.

### *Migrants' racial preference in partnering online*

Technological advancement has changed people's ways of establishing romantic relationships and generated mobile intimacies characterised by uncertainty and ambiguities (Newerla and van Hooff, 2023). Online dating services, such as dating websites and applications, are especially popular among migrants due to their lack of social networks in the host country (Qian, 2022). These new technologies enable migrants to connect with people from various racial backgrounds immediately. Questions have been accordingly raised about whether online dating facilitates interracial relationships or still maintains homogeneity of relationships among migrants.

To date, very few studies focused on Asian migrants' racial preferences online, which were mainly conducted in the US and European countries (Hwang, 2013; Lennes, 2021; Potârca and Mills, 2015) and produced equivocal results. For instance, Ritter (2015) found that Asian migrants preferred dating White Americans rather than dating Asian people. This result was contested by Cai and Qian (2023), who demonstrated that most Canadian Chinese migrants showed intraracial dating preferences. The contradictory findings can be attributed to age (Hwang, 2013; Qian and Qian, 2020), educational attainment (Tsunokai et al., 2014), and length of stay in the host country (Lichter et al., 2015). Despite discrepancies in overall racial preferences, a consistent gendered pattern has been discovered by prior literature. Asian women were found more likely than their male counterparts to engage in interracial relationships (Chappetta and Barth, 2022; Hwang, 2012, 2013).

Nevertheless, existing studies largely suffer from two limitations: the tendency to treat migrants as a homogeneous group and the dependence on large-scale quantitative data (e.g. Cerchiaro, 2022; Qian and Qian, 2020; Rodríguez-García, 2015). Conflating transient migrants with second-generation migrants is problematic since transient migrants have unique living experiences and identities that differ from second-generation migrants, who typically have stronger connections with the host country (Liu and Chung, 2023; Zhang and Allen, 2019). In addition, although tracking the rate of interracial partnering helps to grasp the national dynamic of racial relations, the role of race in the partner selection process cannot be revealed (Lin and Lundquist, 2013). As Telles and Sue (2009: 140) highlighted, there is a need for relying on 'qualitative and ethnographic data to better understand the racial dynamics between couples in these relationships', which this research aims to achieve.

## Theoretical framework

### *The concept of transience*

The migration process has become nuanced and complicated since an increasing number of people cross countries with evolving aspirations and agendas. Gomes (2021) accordingly proposed transience as a new conceptual lens to understand dynamics within migrant(ion)-mobility rather than depending on the dichotomy of permanent/temporary. Specifically, transience refers to ‘a phenomenon where migrants regardless of visa and residency status are, for different reasons, spatially unsettled and transnationally mobile’ (Gomes, 2021: 649). Even temporary migrants who have obtained permanent citizenship can still be transient since citizenship may not secure employment or stability in the host country. This concept emphasises how migration journeys are fluid, dynamic, and unpredictable, which mobile individuals may not fully control. It focuses on migrants’ in-between status and lived realities, indicating the fact that each migrant group has unique experiences. The concept of transience is suitable for depicting the intimate life of UK-based Chinese international students who have an unsettled and mobile life in the host country.

### *Sexual field framework*

According to Bourdieu (1998), fields are terrains composed of social relationships between positions. Actors with different levels of capital – the currency of the field determining individuals’ positions – compete for privileged statuses in the field (Grenfell, 2009). Building on this concept, Green (2011) formulated the sexual field framework to specifically investigate people’s sexual desire (i.e. the traits that sexual actors wish for from intimate partners), desirability (i.e. the traits that sexual actors need to attract partners). According to Green (2008), the sexual fields are stratified, institutionalised matrices of relations into which erotic/sexual actors transpose their desires. Individuals’ sexual lives are situated within various sexual fields, which are shaped by sexual actors’ desire and desirability but also exert influences on them. Within every sexual field, individuals’ sexual preferences overlap to shape a ‘structure of desire’, which determines the desirability of individuals (Green, 2011: 245). Acknowledging the structure of desire, individuals can evaluate their own sexual capital – ‘the quality and quantity of attributes that an individual possesses, which elicit an erotic response in another’ (Green, 2008: 29). Some sexual actors possess the agency to either maximise their sexual capital (Green, 2015) or alternatively, exit the current sexual field and enter another one (Farrer and Dale, 2014).

Among all forms of sexual capital, race was found to be a significant one transcending different sexual fields in previous studies. Han and Choi (2018: 148) argued that Whiteness was ‘a universal currency that supersedes all other characteristics deemed worthy within any given sexual field’. The sexual field framework offers valuable insights to explain international students’ racial preference in partnering and considers the influence of structured opportunities and obstacles (Kim, 2017). Most extant research applying the sexual field framework, however, focused on the LGBTQ+ community, especially gay men (e.g. Ang et al., 2021; Wu and Trottier, 2021). This research

contributes to the sexual field framework by investigating cisgender heterosexual transient migrants' racial preferences on MDAs.

### *Transient sexual field*

I conceptualise the dating space in China and in the UK as *Chinese sexual field* and *UK sexual field*, respectively, each embedded with distinct rules and cultural norms. Within the broader *UK sexual field*, there are various sub-fields, one of which is arguably shaped by the transient living status of international students – what I refer to as the *transient sexual field*. In this sub-field, these international students confront rules, cultural norms, and hierarchies of sexual capital that are different from Chinese ones. Importantly, transient migration status may reshape these students' understanding of desirability (Kim, 2017), the sexual capital they possess and strategies for accumulating sexual capital.

According to Bourdieu (2020: 221), it is crucial to pinpoint 'a dominant principle of hierarchisation, which is the unequal possession of the specific capital at stake' when defining a field (Xu and Ma, 2023). Within both the Chinese and the transient sexual fields, the sexual hierarchy is derived from the unequal distribution of sexual capital, which determines individuals' positions in the sexual fields. However, compared with China, competitors in the *transient sexual field* are from more diverse racial backgrounds, and what constitutes sexual capital is likely to differ between these two fields. The racial hierarchy and gendered norms in the *transient sexual field* may also differ from those in China, thus reevaluating migrants' sexual capital and leading to changes in their partner preferences (Ang et al., 2021; Farrer and Dale, 2014).

## Methods

The data in this research were drawn from 18 one-to-one semi-structured interviews with UK-based female Chinese international students, conducted between January and April 2022 online. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who had been using MDAs in the UK for more than three months to increase the possibility that they had richer information to share during the interviews (Litsey, 2021). Specifically, I posted advertisements on Chinese social media (e.g. Weibo and Red) to recruit participants after receiving ethical approval from (Durham University) in January 2022.

All participants grew up in mainland China and self-identified as Chinese international students, referring to higher education students from the People's Republic of China (1949-present) who 'have crossed borders for the purpose of study' (Heng, 2019: 608; Xu, 2021). At the time of the interviews, the participants were current MDA users studying at 12 UK universities. All participants lived in urban cities in China and were raised in intermediate middle-class families (Goodman, 2014). They were aged from 20 to 30 and were studying various disciplines (e.g. humanities, arts, and science). They used at least two mobile dating applications, including Tantan, Bumble, Hinge, Tinder, Soul, Coffee Meets Bagel, Tashuo, and Jimu.

Each interview lasted from 30 to 90 minutes and was conducted in Chinese on Zoom. All participants have used Zoom to attend classes, so they were experienced in using this software to share their experiences with me (Llewellyn, 2022). In addition, all

participants preferred using audio chat and audio was recorded with their consent. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities.

Reflexive thematic analysis has been adopted to analyse the interview data, which emphasises the researcher's subjectivity as a resource to explore participants' experiences in-depth (Braun and Clarke, 2021). With the assistance of Atlas.ti software, I followed the six-phase process to analyse data: familiarising myself with data, systematic data coding, generating initial themes based on coded data, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining and naming themes, and writing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2021). After thoroughly reading the transcripts, I established preliminary codes based on participants' responses. Examples of the initial codes include (1) Chinese men are dominant and do not respect me, (2) Chinese men do not prefer my body shape and appearance, (3) I am too straightforward to date Chinese men, and (4) dating male Chinese international students brings a sense of insecurity. I then identified the relations between codes and grouped these codes into categories. With categories, I generated three themes, including (1) avoidance of patriarchy and devaluated physical attributes in the Chinese dating market; (2) temporality, opportunities, and uncertainties embedded in their transient living status; and (3) racial hierarchy and stereotypes in the UK.

## Findings and discussion

Based on interviews, 17 participants showed explicit racialised desire in partner selection, while only one participant claimed that she was 'open to dating partners of any race' (Zoe, 24 years old). Specifically, three participants exclusively dated Chinese men on MDAs due to their shared language and similar cultural backgrounds. In contrast, 11 participants never matched with Chinese males on MDAs but preferred dating interracial daters, 'foreigners (*waiguoren* 外国人)' in their words. Foreigner in the Chinese context refers to non-Chinese ethnic groups with distinguishable non-Chinese physical appearance (Mao, 2015). Among all 'foreigners', White men were the most desirable partners. The remaining three participants intentionally excluded daters from certain racial groups such as people with Black and Middle Eastern heritage. Although these results differ from some published studies in Australia and Canada (Cai and Qian, 2023; Chen and Liu, 2021), they are consistent with those in the US, suggesting that Asian women living abroad preferred to establish interracial intimate relationships (Hwang, 2013; Kao et al., 2019).

## Patriarchy and devaluated sexual capital in the *Chinese sexual field*

### *'I don't like Chinese men'*

Nine participants proactively refused to date Chinese men due to their prior unpleasant dating experiences or unpleasant kinship in China. These participants believed that the dominant norms in the *Chinese sexual field* were patriarchal, feeling obligated to conform to male desires to attain desirability, despite their reluctance. Although appearance has been highlighted as a crucial factor in partner selection on MDAs in previous studies



(Chen and Liu, 2021), most participants only emphasised the unacceptable behaviours of Chinese men. For example, participants stereotypically portrayed Chinese men as ‘toxic and disloyal’ (Jenny), ‘misogynistic’ (Kelly), and ‘chauvinist’ (Yee). To justify their decision, participants shared further details of their own dating experiences. For example:

I have a phobia about Chinese men (*kong guonan* 恐国男) because my last romantic relationship was disastrous. I was afraid of my ex-boyfriend who was a chauvinist. He forced me to have sex with him even though I felt uncomfortable. (Yee, 25 years old)

Most Chinese men are average but arrogant (*puxin* 普信), and they never respect women but objectify us as capital for them to show off. My ex-boyfriend shared our sex life with his classmates on a WeChat group to show his sexual potency. (Jenny, 25 years old)

These accounts reveal that Yee and Jenny’s negative dating experiences were influenced by the coexistence of patriarchy and gender hierarchy in contemporary China. Despite the promotion of gender equality in China (Yan, 2003), the shadow of patriarchy is still present, with many Chinese men monopolising, controlling, and objectifying women as a way to display their masculinity (Zheng, 2012). Corroborating Yee’s experience, 40.7% of Chinese adolescent females have experienced sexual coercion in sexual experiences based on a nationwide survey (Pan and Huang, 2013; Zuo et al., 2018). Most participants felt that their ex-boyfriends viewed them as passive objects to satisfy sexual needs or fulfil male dominance.

In addition, kinship also played an important role in my participants’ exclusion of Chinese men. Chinese patriarchy operates not only a gender axis but also a generational axis (Santos and Harrell, 2017). Kelly (23 years old) complained:

My father is a traditional Chinese man who always ignores my mother’s emotional needs and wants to control her life. He also requires me to be a submissive and obedient (*tinghua* 听话) girl and forces me to follow his planned path.

Chou (24 years old) echoed this sentiment: ‘My father is a dictator in my family, and I must follow what he said’. *Tinghua*, or being subordinate to a man – one’s father when young, husband when married or son when old – is a long-standing significant patriarchal feature that ‘proper’ women should embrace in Confucian thinking (Santos and Harrell, 2017). *Tinghua* also implied a gender hierarchy as men have the power to control women and require them to be submissive (Wang, 2017). Kelly and Chou, who feared dating men like their fathers, strategically chose to date non-Chinese men in the UK.

### *‘I am not attracted to Chinese men’*

In a sexual field, individual desires aggregate to shape the structure of desire, which is a ‘hegemonic systems of judgement’ (Green, 2011; Martin and George, 2006: 127). The structure of desire determines the dominant currency of sexual capital and individuals’ sexual status in the field (Green, 2014). Those who are unable to conform to the structure of desire will find themselves in a disadvantaged position in the sexual field. This was the case for three participants, whose physical appearance or personal traits were



perceived as undesirable in the *Chinese sexual field*. For example, Laura (24 years old) shared her experience of being judged by Chinese men on MDAs:

When I was living in China, I did not receive any dating matches from Chinese men on dating applications. My height and body shape were not desirable, and some users even called me 'fat'. Honestly, I experienced body shame at that time.

Similar to Laura, Yee and Chou also received negative comments from Chinese men on MDAs such as 'you are too fat' (Yee) and 'your skin is too dark' (Chou). Their physical characteristics did not fit the structure of desire in the *Chinese sexual field*, which favours women with big eyes, fair skin, double eyelids, and slim (Ma, 2022; Zhang, 2012). Some participants described a specific unreachable ideal beauty standard for Chinese women which they were unable to conform to. Daisy (23 years old) said, 'Chinese men like women who are light-skinned, young and slim (*baiyoushou* 白幼瘦)'. Light-skinned, young, and slim are beauty ideologies deeply rooted in patriarchy and Chinese traditional norms. Youth is linked to women's fertility, fair skin is associated with higher social class and innocence, while a slim body is bound up with femininity (Un, 2007; Zhang, 2012). Unable to conform to these beauty standards, some participants occupied subordinate positions in the *Chinese sexual field*, which led to their refusal to date Chinese men in the *transient sexual field*.

In addition, this study found that personal characteristics are also an important part of sexual capital. For instance, Ann (25 years old) was refused by Chinese male daters because she was too straightforward (*zhijie* 直接) when expressing her opinions. Similarly, Candace (30 years old) also has such experience and commented herself as 'too sharp (*xili* 犀利) for Chinese men'. These characteristics contradicted long-standing traits in Chinese communication that 'proper' women must embrace such as tenderness (*wenrou* 温柔) and implicitness (*hanxu* 含蓄). Challenging male authority and the patriarchal system reduced participants' sexual capital in the *Chinese sexual field*. Acknowledging the unachievable structure of desire in the *Chinese sexual field*, some participants chose to quit the 'game' – resisting the existing structure of desire (Farrer and Dale, 2014), which was encouraged by their migration to the UK. These women's strategic partner selection reflected their 'bargaining with patriarchy' (Kandiyoti, 1988: 274) – selecting non-Chinese daters for their perceived more egalitarian relationship within the broader patriarchal system. Instead of fully rebelling against patriarchy, the participants made calculated choices to negotiate their positions within constraints (Kandiyoti, 1988).

## **Temporality, opportunity, and uncertainty in the *transient sexual field***

Within the *transient sexual field* characterised by transitions, opportunities, and uncertainties, the participants renegotiated their desires and positions. First, the temporality of the *transient sexual field* created a 'time of experimentation', where participants tended to experiment with interracial dating during their transient stay. For instance, Li, a 22-year-old Master's student said, 'I stay in the UK only for one year and I want to gain

new experiences. If I want to date Chinese men, I can do it when returning to China after graduation'. The transient status of the sexual field prioritised the racial status of non-Chinese people, particularly White men, and increased their desirability.

Second, the *transient sexual field* in the UK also presented opportunities for upward sexual mobility. The *transient sexual field* presented new beauty standards and a different structure of desire where some participants found themselves in advantageous positions when selecting partners. For instance, unlike the negative comments Laura (24 years old) received from Chinese men as aforementioned, many non-Chinese daters in the UK appreciated her body shape and appearance. Yee (25 years old) echoed this sentiment, saying, 'Foreigners often compliment me and say I am pretty'. These experiences demonstrate the field-dependent nature of sexual capital (Green, 2015), where certain undesirable physical features in one sexual field can be highly valued in another.

Finally, the uncertain nature of the *transient sexual field*, coupled with the distance from Chinese social networks shaped many participants' insecurities towards dating male Chinese international students. The uncertainties were related to participants' unresolved future plans after graduation – whether to return to China, secure a job and stay in the UK, or move to another country. Eve (21 years old) emphasised that 'Most Chinese international students will stay in the UK for only several years or even one year, and their future plans after graduation are uncertain. Very few students are interested in establishing long-term serious relationships here'. Given the time-limited visa, some participants believed that their male counterparts preferred short-term relationships while studying in the UK. This is not in line with my participants' expectations, as most of them (16 out of 18) desired long-term monogamous relationships and disapproved of 'fast-food relationships' (Kelly, 24 years old).

Four participants raised concerns about the behaviour of Chinese international students, including cohabiting with others shortly after meeting each other or changing partners frequently. Cindy (22 years old) highlighted that 'many male students start dating one person, sleeping with another one, and quickly cohabit with yet another person.' This was echoed by Eve who commented that the intimate lives of most Chinese international students are 'extremely promiscuous (*luan* 乱)'. As Martin (2018: 696; 2021) proposed, international students are living in a 'zone of suspension', where they are away from normative gendered courses and have more autonomy in experimenting with different intimate relationships. The participants' responses confirmed that premarital cohabitation is not uncommon among Chinese international students (Martin, 2021), however, cohabitation too soon was seen as unacceptable, unreliable, and unconventional behaviour. The 'zone of suspension' became a 'zone of insecurity' where participants felt hesitant to establish long-term monogamous intimate relationships with their peers.

Furthermore, living in the *transient sexual field* also creates a *relationship vacuum* which prevents participants from dating Chinese men on MDAs. Eight participants mentioned that the distance from China has enabled Chinese international students to maintain multiple romantic relationships simultaneously and secretly, one in China and one in the UK. Such concerns are specific to these international students' unique migration status in the *transient sexual field*.

## Racial hierarchy and stereotypes

Refusing to date Chinese men, 14 participants alternatively dated non-Chinese men on MDAs. However, not every non-Chinese dater was viewed as equally desirable, which revealed an explicit racial hierarchy and stereotypes. According to Bhopal (2018), White privilege is predominant in contemporary society, prioritising Whiteness and White identities over all others. White privilege was prominently reflected in participants' responses, as they assigned White men a higher racial status and perceived them as more desirable than other racial groups in the UK (Bhopal, 2018). Most participants, even those who have never dated White men, depicted White men as 'gentle', 'civilised', and 'egalitarian', and perceived them as superior to other ethnic groups. In addition, White individuals were believed as more likely to secure jobs in the UK and offer more egalitarian relationships than other daters.

Although educational mobility provided participants with more opportunities to encounter people from various racial backgrounds than in China, participants' pre-existing racial stereotypes were not changed radically but were strengthened due to the White privilege in the UK. Many participants preferred dating White men from the US, UK, and European countries. These findings are in line with previous research, which indicated that Asian daters who were less interested in dating Asians were more likely to date Whites (Fujino, 1997). As Green (2015) stated, every sexual actor possesses a capital portfolio with different capital in it, and the preferred element within the portfolio is field-dependent. The transient status of the sexual field in the UK prioritised the cultural capital and linguistic capital of partners, as the participants pursued adaptation to life in the UK. Thus, White daters' linguistic capital and cultural capital – evident in their privilege of English proficiency and familiarity with Western culture – converted to their sexual capital and enhanced their position in the *transient sexual field*.

Linguistic capital refers to 'fluency in, and comfort with, a high-status, worldwide language which is used by groups who possess economic, social, cultural and political power and status in local and global society' (Morrison and Lui, 2000: 473). In the current research, linguistic capital was closely linked with race as many participants believed that White men had a high proficiency in the English language. Seven participants mentioned that improving English skills was a vital reason to date White men. For instance, Emma (22 years old) only dated White British-born men to practise English speaking. Jane (20 years old) mentioned that her White boyfriend helped proofread her English academic writings. Participants' academic-oriented life in the UK prioritised linguistic capital possessed by daters, which accordingly secured White men's advantaged position in the sexual field.

Furthermore, cultural capital played a pivotal role in participants' interracial dating preferences. According to Bourdieu (2011[1986]), cultural capital is the cultural acquisition such as knowledge and skills, which specifically refers to knowledge of Western culture and customs in this research. For example, Chou (23 years old) stated:

I should not only stay in the social circle of Chinese international students but seize the opportunity to learn about Western culture and broaden my horizons. Dating locals is the best and most effective way for me to achieve these goals.

Participants who study a one-year programme in the UK echoed Chou's experience. Gomes (2021) argues that international students are likely to live in a parallel society, a society that includes only international students and runs parallel to local communities. However, most participants in this research complained of being trapped in the Chinese parallel society and wanted to transcend the ethnic enclave. Given the lack of intercultural experiences in the UK (Yu and Moskal, 2018), many participants chose to date White men to learn about Western culture.

The racial hierarchy was also reflected in participants' descriptions or imaginations of good White men, which indicates students' pre-existing racial stereotypes and internalised racism, a subtle form of racism which associates Whiteness with positive attributes (Pyke, 2010). Prior research indicated that many Asian women imagine White men as 'egalitarian knighthood' (Curington et al., 2021: 174). Although the decline of White-skin privilege was witnessed in China (Lan, 2022), participants' responses demonstrated the persistent global White privilege. For instance, Yee (25 years old) said, 'I always believed White men are gentle and know how to respect women. They usually obtain a higher degree with decent jobs. This is not the case for Black or Indian men, right? My dating experience in the UK evidenced these beliefs'. White people's advantageous position in higher education and the job market in the UK has been documented in existing research which highlighted the influence of structural procedures on the maintenance of White privilege (Bhopal, 2020). White privilege further preserves the dominance of White supremacy in social, political, and economic aspects (Bhopal, 2018, 2020), which increases White men's sexual capital.

In addition, some participants explicitly excluded certain racial groups. Black men were the least preferred partners in participants' choice, aligning with the previous literature on Asian international students in the US (Ritter, 2015). Daisy, a 23-year-old post-graduate student noted: 'Black males are very strong with big muscles. I am afraid that they will beat me'. Such racial stereotypes also appeared in other conversations, for example, 'Indian people are too scheming' (Chou), and 'Middle Eastern people usually force their partner to follow their religion' (Candace). Between desirable White people and unwelcome Black people and Middle Eastern people, some participants mentioned the acceptable BBCs (British-born Chinese) and ABCs (American-born Chinese). Such preferences fall into the tri-racial system proposed by Bonilla-Silva (2004: 933), who argued that a tri-racial hierarchy ('Whites, honorary Whites and collective Blacks') had replaced the bi-racial hierarchy ('Whites and Blacks'). Racial stereotypes shaped many participants' preference for dating White men but excluding Chinese, Black, Indian, and Middle Eastern daters.

## **Conclusion**

This research examined the influence of racial status, associated with cultural capital, linguistic capital, and sexual capital, on female Chinese international students' partner selection in the UK. The findings illustrated participants' overall interracial dating tendency, shaped by the intersection of gender, culture, racial hierarchy, and migrant status. Specifically, three themes have been identified to explain participants' racial preferences, including Chinese traditional norms and patriarchy, transient migrant status, and racial

hierarchy in the UK. This is in line with Cai and Qian's (2023) research, which reveals that migrant status plays an imperative role in participants' racial preference. This study confirms the significance of acknowledging the diversity and heterogeneity of migrants.

In this research, I conceptualise the dating space in China and in the UK as the *Chinese sexual field* and *UK sexual field*, respectively. Chinese international students are situated in a subfield within the broader *UK sexual field*, a *transient sexual field*. This field is influenced by both Chinese and UK social values and cultural norms and is shaped by these students' transient living status. Embedded with opportunities and uncertainties, living in the *transient sexual field* discouraged participants from dating male Chinese international students for two reasons. First, increasing interracial dating opportunities and more privileged sexual positions in the UK encouraged most participants to date non-Chinese people. Second, uncertain future plans after graduation amplified female international students' insecurity about dating male Chinese international students. This research also indicates the influence of patriarchy and racial hierarchy on students' racial preferences. Some of my participants' negative dating experiences with Chinese men and devaluated sexual capital in China demonstrate the existence of patriarchy in contemporary Chinese society. However, not every non-Chinese racial group was equally preferred, which was shaped by the racial stereotypes and hierarchy in the UK.

Several limitations to this research need to be acknowledged. First, all participants in this research are cisgender heterosexual women. Future research can focus on sexual minority international students, investigating how transient migrant status, sexual orientation, and race intersect to influence their racial preferences in dating. Second, selection bias exists in this research since it is likely to attract people who are more willing to disclose their dating experiences and racial preferences in partnering. Finally, the conclusion of this research cannot be generalised to all Chinese international students in the UK. The aim of this qualitative study is not to represent all female Chinese international students' racial preferences in partnering in the UK. Instead, I focus on how the researched female students' racialised desires are shaped by the interplay of their transient migrant status and Chinese traditional norms and patriarchy in-depth.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this research contributes to the literature on transient migration, racial hierarchy, intimate relationships of migrants, and international student mobility. As transient migrants become a common group of migrants (Gomes, 2021), more work will need to be done to reveal their intimate relationships in the host country. Academic development is just one fraction of international students' multifaceted lives, dating and intimacy are commonly experienced by these young people, which is closely related to their migration trajectory and well-being (Kim, 2017; Zhang and Allen, 2019). By investigating international students' racialised desires, this research facilitates the understanding of how young Chinese people navigate traditional culture, diverse sexual values and racial hierarchy during their transient living in the UK, to select their partners and initiate romantic relationships.

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