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We, too: contending with the sexual politics of fieldwork in China

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to a feminist politics of fieldwork by elevating narratives that have been pushed to the periphery of academic and methodological debates, particularly in China Studies. Inspired by feminist geographers' understandings of positionality, as well as the global #MeToo movement, we detail how China's current historical moment—when patriarchy, the market, and growing authoritarianism intersect to commodify bodies and quell dissent—shapes gendered and sexualized fieldwork relationships. Drawing on our own experiences, as well as interviews with other China Studies researchers, the paper engages specific sites where researchers' bodies are sexualized and sometimes threatened. This includes banquets, karaoke bars, and the virtual spaces of messaging platforms and social media. We explore methodological implications of such relationships and share strategies that researchers have adopted as they attempt to make grim tradeoffs between personal security and 'getting the data.' The paper calls for more frank discussions of the sexual politics of field-based research, particularly with early-career researchers, and for a valorization of less-than-heroic approaches to fieldwork.

Sunny girls and heroic fieldwork

'If you have some time, you're welcome to come sit in my office! You're such a sunny girl.'—Text message sent by a local official in a Chinese city to a foreign female researcher (translated by the authors from Mandarin).

This paper is about the sexual politics of fieldwork in China. While the paper is years in the making, our motivation to publish it now sits at the

conjuncture of three primary forces. First, from the authors' personal experiences, and from conversations over the past decade with other researchers who work in China, we have found remarkably similar stories about navigating gendered and sexualized power relations in the field. Stories include responding to invitations like the text message quoted above, reacting to commentaries on the researcher's physical appearance, being pressured to drink alcohol to intoxication at banquets, visiting spaces of sex work like karaoke bars and massage parlors with gatekeepers, and fending off unwanted and sometimes violent sexual advances from gatekeepers and informants. While some of these stories are shared by both male and female researchers, for women in particular, fieldwork has regularly included sexual harassment (unwanted flirtation, verbal sexual advances, sexual propositions, and sexually motivated or gendered jokes), and for some, sexual assault (unwanted physical contact, forced kissing, attempted rape, and rape [Nelson et al. 2017]).

Second, although banquets, karaoke bars, alcohol, and sex/sexualized relations are ubiquitous in *informal* accounts of China-based fieldwork, they are largely hidden, excluded, or marginalized in *formal* accounts where we work in China Studies (a multi-disciplinary field including geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, historians and others). For the three authors, we discovered shared experiences among ourselves and others only in private conversations on the periphery of conference panels and workshops. Given the 'institutionalized notion of fieldwork as a masculinist rite of passage or an exercise of one's endurance' (Berry et al. 2017, 538), this is perhaps not surprising. Discussing how gendered and sexual encounters during fieldwork shifted or shaped the research project can carry a sense of shame, feelings of failure, and fears of damaging one's professional standing and reputation (Moreno 1995; Diprose, Thomas, and Rushton 2013; Nelson et al. 2017).

This bring us to the third convergence: #MeToo. We are inspired by the flood of women who have publicly shared their experiences of sexual harassment and assault, and by the difficult and necessary conversations that Tarana Burke's movement has sparked. As the movement spreads in universities, we feel encouraged to examine our experiences in print, and to understand them as part of patriarchal power relations—and their contestations—that connect us to women everywhere, though unevenly. Particularly relevant for this paper, in 2018 the #MeToo movement was taken up by women in China, prompting both public denunciations of sexual misconduct by men in power, and subsequently, further suppression of feminist activism (Parkin and Feng 2019). As researchers based in North American and European universities—and as white women, in the case of the three authors—we recognize that ours is a #MeToo of privilege (Watt 2018; Williams 2017).

At the same time that these three forces have propelled us to write the paper, they also reveal tensions between our disciplining as ethnographic

researchers and our experiences in the field. As graduate students in the early 2000s in North America, our primary concern as we embarked on long-term field-based research was not to abuse our positions of power as white, English-speaking researchers. In graduate seminars we were cautioned to acknowledge the power differential between us—the 'powerful Western researcher'—and research participants (Said 1978; Chakrabarty 2000). We were not, however, equipped with approaches to power that could simultaneously account for our systemic privilege at a structural and 'global' levels, and the recurring moments of powerlessness and vulnerability we experienced in the field as female-presenting researchers. Instead, the implicit model in our research methods seminars was a white, male, able-bodied researcher: the 'heroic fieldworker' (Rose 1993, 70) as described by a contributor to this paper,

> Within anthropology, these [ethnographic] methods often produce the 'heroic fieldworker' trope, moving effortlessly from place to place, making connections with a wide range of people and gaining their trust, and presenting your work as the product of your ability to navigate these spaces without inflicting harm on yourself and your research subjects/interlocutors. To the extent that we 'fail' to do this (ex. being the victim of an assault or unwanted attention in the field) and our failure does not produce new brilliant insights, we are understood to have failed in acquiring the necessary knowledge to be in the field.

We internalized the sanctions against those who fail to 'conquer' the field. What's more, unlike scholars who work in explicitly sexualized spaces like KTVs (karaoke bars, called KTVs in China, are entertainment spaces for singing that often host or facilitate female sex work. See, e.g., [Zheng 2006, 2009, 2012]), bathhouses (eg. Bain and Nash 2006), swingers clubs (eg. De Craene 2017), and around sex work (eg. Grenz 2005), we didn't develop sophisticated analyses of gender, sexuality, and power in preparation for our research, nor did we fully conceptualize our own gendered and sexualized positionalities as we moved through research sites (Newton 1996). We knew that our work on food politics (Schneider), urban planning (Wilczak), and environmental protection (Lord) would take us into male-dominated domains, but we did not anticipate that our bodies would figure so centrally in our research experiences. This, too, reflects our privilege.

Positionality, sexuality, and unwanted sexual encounters in fieldwork

As feminist geographers have shown, the heroic fieldworker trope is a reification of positivist, masculinist epistemology that flattens positionality. It feigns objectivity, while hiding the tensions, inequalities, assumptions, and erasures that shape the production of knowledge (Rose 1993; Sundberg 2003), and it conceals how the social positions of researchers and research participants shape questions, methods, and findings (England 1994; Mullings 1999; Rose 1997).

Reflexivity, a strategy to situate geographic knowledges and the researcher's social location and background, has become commonplace in feminist geography to avoid these false claims of neutrality and universality (Rose 1997).

Yet sexuality and unwanted sexual experiences during fieldwork remain scarce within discussions of reflexivity and positionality. Exceptions in the literature include considerations of how sexual and erotic subjectivities shift in the course of research (e.g. Cupples 2002); exploring how the sexual desires of the researcher and the sanctions against recognizing or engaging such desires impacts research trajectories (e.g. De Craene 2017); the impacts of 'innocuous sexualizations' like flirting during data collection (Kaspar and Landolt 2016); and analyzing how unwanted sexual encounters affect the research process and bring feelings of shame for the researcher (eg. Diprose, Thomas, and Rushton 2013).

In addition to the still nascent literature on sexuality and positionality, scholars have discussed the 'afterlives' of fieldwork's sexual subjectivities. For example, Cupples (2002), Kulick and Willson (1995), and Sharp (2005) note the omission of sexual encounters and desires in written research accounts, which has served to perpetuate myths of sexual neutrality and heroic fieldwork. Moreno (1995) both exemplified and challenged this omission, sharing her experience of rape in the field while writing under a pseudonym, and detailing the patriarchal sanctions that prevent scholars from including sexual violence in research accounts. More recently, Nelson et al. (2017) studied how sexual harassments and assaults in fieldwork negatively impact especially female scholars' career trajectories, highlighting the failure of universities to consider the field as a workplace and to extend institutional rights and protections to people working 'off campus.'

In this paper, we are trying to understand our own experiences of sexual harassment and assault during fieldwork, as well as the shared and recurring experiences we have identified through conversations with colleagues in China Studies. Like Diprose, Thomas, and Rushton (2013), we are concerned with understanding the personal, professional, and methodological impacts of such 'unexpected sexual encounters' (2013, 292). At the same time, we are concerned to situate these shared experiences and implications in the broader sexual politics that mark Chinese social life today. As Cupples argues, especially in cross-cultural contexts, researchers encounter stereotypical sexualities and unfamiliar gender and sexual norms in the field site, around which they must constantly negotiate positionality (2002, 383). In other words, the sexual politics of the particular place and time of fieldwork are crucial for unravelling the expectations and norms that shape the conditions under which research is done and positionality is negotiated.

In the disciplines that make up China Studies—particularly those that engage ethnographic methods—discussions are beginning about sexual

harassment and assault during fieldwork (Hanson and Richards 2017; Kloß 2017; Pollard 2009). There are few accounts, however, of the specific sexual politics that shape fieldwork in China (with the exceptions of Mason 2013; Gaetano 2016). To further this discussion, in the sections that follow we briefly trace the historical roots of the sexual politics of present-day China, intersections of gender and sexuality in fieldwork, and the emotional and methodological consequences of sexual harassment and assault for female-presenting researchers in particular.

Narratives

Material in the paper is drawn from the authors' personal experiences and narratives from other researchers who do fieldwork in China. The three authors are white, cisgender, heterosexual women from middle class Canada and the US. Each of us has conducted ethnographic research for periods of one to two consecutive years in male-dominated contexts in China during our PhD and postdoctoral studies. In addition to examples from our own fieldwork, we purposively interviewed, discussed with, and solicited written and oral testimonials (in English) from 12 colleagues in the social sciences and humanities who have conducted, or are currently conducting, fieldwork in China. Contributors come from universities in five countries, and are variously women (8), men (4), Chinese citizens, non-Chinese citizens, ethnically Han, white, brown, heterosexual, and queer. Contributors work in different provinces, and in both rural and urban spaces. All of us work primarily in Mandarin Chinese, and some of us work with assistants. Two contributors are tenured; others are PhD students, postdocs, or assistant professors. To protect the anonymity of our contributors, we have removed identifying details about their identities, research topics, locations, and disciplines. Although we cannot be anonymous as authors, to protect our own research sites and relationships, we do not distinguish our own narratives from those of our colleagues. Instead, we attribute all quotations to 'contributors' as an undifferentiated category. The vulnerability of discussing this topic, particularly in print and at early career stages for most contributors, requires this practice.

We focus on gender, sexuality, and power in this paper, and briefly engage with what whiteness means in our research sites, and how whiteness intersects with the other categories we explore. As an initial treatment of these issues in China, we do not fully explore the heightened vulnerabilities of nonwhite, queer, or differently abled researchers. We hope that the paper contributes to further discussions.

Positioning sexual politics in China's market economy

China's current political moment and history offer unique challenges for field researchers. For the purpose of our analysis, four dynamics are key:

worsening gender inequality within China since the market reforms of the late 1970s; the rise and repression of non-state feminist activism; the renegotiation of gender and sexual norms in the context of global neoliberalism; and the country's elite-oriented sexual economy.

First, like many social reformers in China in the early 20th century, members of the Communist Party saw improving the status of women as key to the project of re-assessing feudal/Confucian values, modernizing the nation, and building a more just society. After the Party's accession to power in 1949, the equality of women was enshrined in the Constitution and their social, economic and political status was elevated. Although real improvements were achieved during this time, including bringing women into the workforce, this often resulted in women shouldering the double burden of labour inside and outside the home (Zheng 2017). The market reforms that began in the late 1970s eroded earlier gains in gender equality, as women's participation in government declined and workplace discrimination increased (Rofel 2007). In 1990 the average salary of an urban woman in China was about 77.5% that of a man, and by 2010 this figure dropped to 67.3% (Hong Fincher 2018).

Meanwhile, state agencies such as the national All-China Women's Federation have supported the resurgence of so-called traditional values, including the stigmatization of unmarried career women in their late 20 s as 'leftover' women (Hong Fincher 2014). The rise of market logics has also instigated an increasing sexualization and commodification of women's bodies, including a shift in ideal womanhood from the strong, androgynous socialist worker idealized in Mao-era propaganda posters, to the slim, hyper-sexualized female body that animates reform era (post-1978) media and advertising (Chen et al. 2001; Hanser 2005).

In the face of dismantling many state socialist institutional mechanisms for addressing gender inequality, China's current generation of feminist activists (there are, of course, multiple feminisms in China; see, e.g., Spakowski [2018]) have adopted creative ways of making their voices heard (Zheng 2015). Most visibly, in the early 2010s, a group of young activists later identified as the 'Feminist Five' began organizing public protests and performance art to draw attention to domestic abuse and sexual harassment. In 2015, they planned an anti-harassment campaign on public transportation for International Women's Day but were arrested two days before the scheduled action. Their detention sparked international outcry, and, ironically, ensured their global visibility. The Feminist Five were eventually released (on bail) and the government pursued its crackdown. In 2017, other feminist activists were forced out of their homes for planning to distribute anti-sexual harassment placards, and in 2018, with the #MeToo movement rising, censors deleted a petition against sexual harassment at universities (Hong Fincher 2016; 2018).

The suppression of public discussion about sexual harassment is particularly conspicuous in the context of China's widely acknowledged sexual economy. The sexual economy is dominated by wealthy and politically powerful men who purchase sexual services from women in a variety of roles, ranging from prostitutes, to ego-massaging karaoke hostesses, to relatively stable, long-term mistresses (Zurndorfer 2016). As we discuss below, conducting research with government officials and businesspeople often requires entering into the arenas where the transactions of the sexual economy take place. For all researchers—regardless of gender identification, sexuality, ability, age, or race—this means that gender and sexuality come to the forefront of social interactions.

In our research sites in urban and rural China—especially, but not only at banquets and when visiting KTVs and massage parlors with gate keepers—we experienced binary and heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality, and a conflation of the two under the notion of men as strong and forceful and women as yielding and passive (see Evans [1995] for a history of constructions of gender and sexuality across 20th century China). Scholars argue that this active-male/passive-female construction is applied variously to public (business, government) and private (romantic, familial) relationships in China, as well as to the booming sex economy, where businessmen and government officials who consume commodified female bodies are the core customer base (Zheng 2006, 2009, 2012; Zurndorfer 2016). According to Zheng Tiantian, 'in the patriarchal state where resources are in the hands of males, what is left for females is to find a sexual niche—that is, to decorate an essentially male world' (2012, 22).

Gender and sexuality also intersect with race and geopolitics in the field. The authors of this paper were confronted with the shifting meanings of whiteness (Faria and Mollett 2016) during China's current geopolitical moment, or what Farrer (2011) describes as the ethnosexual politics of 'a dominant but fading global whiteness and a rising global Chinese racial identity' (761). The rise of 'traditional' norms of femininity for Chinese women as passive has been accompanied by the proliferation of hypermasculine, hypersexual standards for Chinese men that are both influenced by, and in tension with, Euro-American models of masculinity (Liu 2018; Zhang 2014). In this context, achieving perceived sexual dominance over a non-Chinese woman can take on a new significance as a marker of status and virility. We were often invited to lavish, high-level social events far beyond our typical experience as graduate students or postdoctoral researchers, simply because our presence as white foreigners lent a certain status and cosmopolitanism (Yan 2017). At the same time, we often felt uncomfortable or threatened by the overt sexualization and objectification our (white, female) bodies elicited. This was particularly evident at banquets and post-banquet events.

Rites of passage: banquets, karaoke bars, massage parlors

Although often translated into English as 'connections,' the Mandarin word *guanxi* more accurately denotes deliberately cultivated and affectively charged bonds built on the foundation of long-term obligations. Under the centralized economy, actively cultivating good *guanxi* through performing reciprocal favors was key to accessing important goods and services (Yang 1994). Market reforms have changed the nature of relationship-building in China, but *guanxi* continues to be important in government and business spheres as a means of obtaining things like market information, bank loans, and state contracts (Yang 2002; Chen 2016).

In China today, *guanxi*-building banquets are a regular and central part of business, government, and many forms of non-governmental professional life, including research. Alongside meetings and other formal activities, institutions (or individuals) host banquets as midday lunch events and as evening dinners. Banquets are spaces where attendees who aspire to rise through the ranks of their institution can connect with people in positions of power outside the formality of the workplace. Almost always, an invitation from a gatekeeper to attend a banquet is a required step towards building the *guanxi* that leads to research contacts and sites, and as such, these invitations cannot be easily refused.

Guanxi-building at banquets is lubricated by heavy consumption of food and alcohol. Toasting, usually with grain-based distilled alcohol called *baijiu*, is essential and follows a protocol. A host first toasts the highest-ranking guest, and the two empty their glasses. Other guests then toast the guest of honor, before embarking on a trip around the table to toast each banqueter individually. Toasts must be reciprocated, such that at a banquet with 15 people, the norm is that each person engages in a minimum of 30 toasts. Intoxication is the common result, accompanied in some cases by a feeling of warmth and connection, and in other cases, by illness and marginalization. Men especially are goaded to drink more, often having their 'manhood' questioned if they opt not to (Osburg 2013).

Several contributors to the paper did not anticipate the centrality of banqueting in their research, and how often it replaced data-gathering expeditions. As one contributor puts it,

> I often set out in the morning for what I thought was a site visit for interviews and observations […] I would end up returning home after midnight (or the next day after a hotel stay), following a lunch banquet, a half-drunk interview I conducted in the afternoon, a dinner banquet with more drinking, and a trip to the KTV. I learned very early in my fieldwork that banquets were key to access and relationship building, and that even if I didn't make it to the 'field sites' I was aiming for, I always learned something about social hierarchies and power in the institutions I was studying by being a participant observer at banquets.

Take your position(ing)

Cupples's notion that we are positioned by those whom we research (2002) is acutely true at banquets in China, where, as attendees, we are literally *positioned by others* who tell us where to sit. Banquet space is prescribed, and invitees sit around circular tables, following seating protocols based on rank: the most important guest sits facing the door, and others are arranged around him/her (typically male) according to their relative importance. A young woman may be seated next to an important male guest to act as his personal hostess—'the girl,' as Yan (2019) describes the role. Researchers may be seated as guests of honor or unwitting hostesses near the highest-ranking attendee, or further down the pecking order. In some cases, women are relegated to women-only tables (Mason 2013).

Being positioned by others can also include being shoehorned into some-times unfamiliar or uncomfortable gender roles and sexualizations. For for-eign non-Han (especially white) women working in China, stereotypes can include being easy sexual targets, being less threatening than male research-ers, and being trustable. Foreign (especially white) male researchers may be stereotyped as knowledgeable, fierce drinkers, or sexually opportunistic. As a foreign male contributor explains, 'I don't have to work to get respect. China is a patriarchal society in which it is taken for granted that men should be in roles of authority, knowledge and power, so we do not have to establish that.' Another foreign male contributor shares,

> Performing masculinity is […] an important part of making connections and navigating certain spaces in China, even (or especially) among marginalized groups […] It's easy for me to make connections with men under the guise of 'making connections' that might be beneficial to all parties involved […] It's more difficult, but not impossible, to make connections with women who are younger than me, though it sometimes leads to joke-making or speculation about my intentions […] Sometimes I worry that people think I am a lecherous foreigner.

At the same time that we are positioned by others, we also *position our-selves*, in part by learning (or perhaps subverting) gendered and sexual scripts and behaviors. As researchers—and indeed as people—we regularly make choices about how we will perform gender and sexuality. Will a male researcher drink to intoxication at a banquet, even if he doesn't like to drink alcohol? Will gay and lesbian researchers flirt with members of the opposite sex in order to meet informants' expectations? Will a female researcher 'play dumb' or demure to elicit detailed explanations, even if she is accustomed to spirited debates? Will a single female researcher wear a wedding ring to avoid unwanted advances? While there is a degree of agency in how we position ourselves vis-a-vis stereotypes in the field, these choices have impli-cations for our research in terms of access, relationship-building, the kinds and quality of information we are able to glean, and ultimately, our

methodological decisions. As we discuss later, these choices also impact our-selves and our bodies, and they reflect a tension between the power we can gain from choosing how to represent ourselves, and the vulnerability we experience when dragged into other people's expectations. Drinking—or not—at banquets encapsulates this tension well.

To drink or not to drink

Banquets are often occasions for 'male bonding,' where men perform mascu-linity through drinking (Loubere 2014). For a female-presenting researcher, the first question to ask when looking at banquet culture is, where do women fit in these male-dominated, booze-soaked events? The simple answer is that women fit where they are placed. This can mean being placed at a separate women's table.

Katherine Mason, a foreign, white, female anthropologist working in China, decided that she 'would banquet as "one of the women" rather than attempting to become "one of the men"'(2013, 112). This decision meant that while she could be excused from drinking to intoxication—since women are not held to the same standards of drinking—she would also be exiled to the women's table, and largely excluded from building *guanxi* with those (men) partaking in trust-through-binge-drinking at the power tables. Mason's decision not to drink brought her closer to the women with whom she shared tables and led her to write about how they operated 'outside' of ban-quet drinking culture. The choice not to drink can have other benefits, as a female contributor says,

> On a few occasions I've had the sense that I've been ignored by officials in a way that helps me do more of the listening I want to do. Not as much pressure to drink alcohol, which is helpful for a total teetotaler.

But the choice *to drink* can also be beneficial for women researchers. One contributor states, 'When my hosts were men (which was most of the time), I found that drinking [alcohol] helped "grease the wheels" of the relationship. After a drunken banquet, I was often invited to other events and meetings.'

In some ways, the choice of whether or not to drink is thornier for male researchers. For men, the norm is to drink, ideally to intoxication. According to a foreign male contributor, 'There is an expectation that I drink based on my gender. I can't get out of it because I am male.' Pressure to drink can be both overt and unspoken. Nicholas Loubere (2014) writes that a researcher's ability to 'play the game' of drinking with hosts can determine his or her ability to make connections with important gatekeepers and access research sites. Similarly, graduate students in China regularly receive coaching on how to drink and toast as part of their informal research training. As one con-tributor observes, being able to drink is sometimes presented as an 'essential

research skill;' and a gendered one at that. According to a foreign male contributor,

> Drinking […] seems necessary. And it is clear that women are often not included in the drinking. Or at least, sometimes there is more drinking when women aren't present, and the drinking is part of my ability to get closer to the folks that provide me with access to material.

There are hazards to playing the drinking game: the researcher may become too drunk to interview or observe effectively, or may endanger their health and safety. Loubere (2014) missed an interview because he was too ill after a banquet. A female contributor similarly shared that she missed an important interview after a night of heavy *baijiu* drinking. She was never able to fix the relationship with her research contacts or recover the 'face' that she lost from trying (and failing) to banquet as one of the men.

KTV: sing for your data

When all have been toasted and dinner is finished, banquets are often followed by a trip to the KTV (karaoke bar) where more *guanxi* is built through song. Groups reserve private rooms with big screens, couches, microphones, musical selections, and an attendant for food and drink. Guests can also reserve hostesses as part of the room cost. Women who work at KTVs may be assigned to one or multiple men to keep them company, drink, sing, and/or have sexual interactions onsite or outside the KTV (Zheng 2009). In these situations, men bond and compete through the bodies of women who are paid (usually by the banquet host) to keep their company in the KTV room, or afterwards in a massage parlor, sauna, or hotel room. As anthropologist Mayfair Yang (2002) describes, in China's male-dominated business culture, *guanxi* is built through 'a long night sharing the pleasures of masculine heterosexuality and giving women's bodies and sexual services as gifts' (Yang 2002, 466; see also Zheng 2006). Male sex workers who cater to women (known as *yazi*, or ducks) and to men (known as 'MBs' or money boys) are on the rise (Minichiello and Scott 2014), though we didn't encounter them in our research.

Banquets, and particularly post-banquets, are common sites where women are sexually harassed, in part because they are exuberant events that encourage excess eating and drinking and are typically a bonding/power match between already powerful men. One contributor describes her experience,

> A contact I had been trying to work with for months invited me on a 2-day research trip. During the day, I was one of two women in a group of 13, attending meetings and touring facilities. Between our meetings and tours, we had a lunch and a dinner banquet, where I became drunk […] Things were going well, and I was invited to join the group (including a local party leader) at the KTV. When we

got to the room, there were eight women waiting there [...] it became clear that they worked at the KTV, and were there for singing and dancing and some kissing with the men. As time went on, I felt my position shift from 'colleague' to 'one of the women' in the room. One man who had been flirting with me all day became physically aggressive. He kept touching me and trying to kiss me. At the end of the night, he followed me to my hotel room, where I had to push him away by slamming the door of my room. He banged on the door and yelled for several minutes telling me to let him in, like he felt entitled to me. The next day, he invited me to visit his company on a subsequent research trip, which is exactly the kind of opportunity I was looking for, if not for the groping. I didn't go.

This anecdote clearly illustrates the shifting positionality of the researcher from 'honored guest' to 'sexual conquest.' Similarly, Gaetano shares about her fieldwork in China,

as a woman I felt uncomfortable in the private space of the (men's) KTV club, where other women offered sexual services, and where I was susceptible to inebriated men acting on libidinous impulses (2016, 56).

Gaetano, too, fended off a post-banquet advance from a colleague by closing and locking her hotel door (55).

Male researchers also have to contend with sexualization and sexual expectations. Foreign or local male researchers might be expected to perform their masculinity by engaging with female sex workers during karaoke, or afterwards at a massage parlor. To refuse sexual relations with a sex worker may be insulting to the host who has 'offered' a woman to the researcher as a sign of good relations, and who is often a gatekeeper. For male-presenting researchers, the failure to comply with gendered and sexualized expectations for heavy drinking and participation in the sex economy can result in a loss of face for himself or his host, and potentially, the loss of research relationships.

Everyday sexualization and intimacies

In the wake of recent anti-corruption campaigns, government banquets have become less lavish (Xinhua 2018). They remain, however, important sites for *guanxi*-seeking researchers, and trips to KTVs and massage parlors continue. While the post-banquet trajectory takes researchers into overtly sexualized spaces that host sex work, 'everyday' professional spaces—including banquets themselves—are also rife with gendered and sexualized encounters. For example, anthropologist Li Zhang (2011) discusses interactions with research participants,

[O]ften times, simply because I was alone and eager to talk to people, migrant businessmen mistook me as interested in sex trafficking because women were not supposed to interact with unfamiliar men alone in their local cultural milieu. [...] Despite my repeated explanations that I was a student researcher interested in

> migrant lives for academic purposes, many thought that I was simply too embarrassed to tell the truth. Even as an ethnographer, I could not escape the local assumptions about gendered boundaries and moral codes (216).

This is to say that while female researchers are eager to present themselves as experts, they are often seen through a sexual filter. One contributor shares,

> In one bizarre incident during fieldwork, the women sitting at a banquet were asked to stand up for the pre-toasting speech given by the host, who happened to be the highest-ranking official in the locality in which we hoped to conduct research. The official started by celebrating women's participation in this project. He then appraised each woman one at a time, highlighting her intellectual and physical attributes, and how generally pleasing she was to him, before asking her to sit down. He did this until only one woman was left standing. The young Chinese graduate student who stood as the great 'pageant' winner was his girlfriend, and this might have been a way to impress other men with his romantic 'conquest.' After toasting, and as everyone sat down, one of my male Chinese colleagues jokingly criticized the leader for this unusual speech and implied it might have been 'uncivilized' (*bu wenming*) and disrespectful of women, but the criticism was brushed aside, and we started eating.

In this particular instance, the initial intention of the local official might have been to sincerely celebrate female researchers, but it rapidly shifted into sexualization and objectification. It illustrates how researchers may be more 'accepting' of powerfully gendered and sexualized hierarchies if they're eager for data and research relationships. Without wanting data, one could decide not to participate in such charades, and could perhaps openly dismiss the official as a clumsy patriarch; but a researcher who needs data is more likely to accommodate these incidents, avoid confrontation, smile awkwardly, and tacitly accept being objectified.

Text messaging and digital intimacy

New complications arise with mobile phones and text messaging as everyday sites of sociality. As Varis (2016) describes, online and offline contexts can become blurred in qualitative digital research, and communications online are held to different standards than what is acceptable in physical, offline contexts. In the contemporary Chinese context, most qualitative research is at least partly digital: in order to build social networks and stay in contact with informants, researchers must use WeChat (*Weixin*), China's dominant online messaging and social media platform. Before WeChat, it was common to formally exchange name cards. This has been replaced by a markedly more casual, 'Let's add each other on WeChat.' Such interactions give even newly established relationships a veneer of informality and intimacy that can be advantageous to researchers, but also presents new challenges.

WeChat allows users to post status updates and photos, send messages among individuals and groups, and transfer money. This means that the researcher can maintain direct contact easily with informants, and also cultivate goodwill in other ways by liking or commenting on people's statuses or providing informants with a more well-rounded (albeit curated) sense of the researcher's personality. Although this form of digital intimacy can help build a sense of trust and warmth between both parties, the ambiguity of 'likes' and emojis is slippery.

The quote at the outset of the paper is a text message one of the contributors received from a government official that she had met once, and had spoken with briefly in the presence of other officials. The topic of discussion was a recent local policy—nothing that would seem to invite a 'sunny girl' kind of tone. The researcher felt a mild panic upon receiving the message. This official's approval was necessary for the project to continue, so she didn't want to offend him. But, having had to fend off overtures from officials previously, she didn't want to encourage the flirtatious tone either. Her response was to wait a day before replying with a brief and formal, 'Thank you,' and subsequently turning down an invitation to dine with the official and his friend, pleading busy-ness. Prior experience in the field meant that the researcher was able to make a decision weighing an elusive 'closeness' in the relationship and her own personal comfort and safety—a topic we discuss in the following section.

WeChat can extend the roles and relations that dominate the banquet scene. A contributor states that her fieldwork involves being hit on, constantly, including when chatting with informants online. It is therefore important to attend to tone and nuance in this digital sphere where personal and professional boundaries become perhaps even more blurred than is standard for contemporary Chinese social interactions. About online interactions with a male contact, another contributor shares,

> [T]he fact that he is a man makes the relationship feel more complicated. When he WeChat's 'I miss you,' [in Chinese] I worry what he means. And then I worry that I am 'leading him on' or taking advantage of possibly romantic feelings on his part in order to advance my research.

Bodily threats

In addition to wading through gendered expectations and fending off unwanted advances online and in person, many contributors note cases of sexual harassment and assault during fieldwork, particularly around banquets and post-banquet activities. Researchers develop what are essentially 'tradeoff analyses' to calculate potential risks and determine how much they are willing to bear to develop a relationship that might lead to data.

Because this compromise is felt most acutely by people with less power (often women) who find themselves in precarious positions in unfamiliar environments, it is important to reflect on the methodological impacts of these realities. 'How much risk am I willing to take for data?' is a personal question shaped by expectations that are at once self-imposed, disciplinary, and cultural, and influenced by what researchers around us are producing. At stake is a negotiation between the professional and the personal. More specifically, researchers must consider how to incorporate (gendered and sexualized) risk into research designs and reflect on what methodological sacrifices they are willing to make to stay safe.

Uncertainty is part of research. Many research stories start with the simple fact that securing fieldwork is much more difficult than anticipated. Snowballing falls flat, connections dwindle, and field sites close off. With fieldwork comes anxiety, compelling us to take risks we might not entertain in our everyday lives in hopes of securing solid relationships and data. Contributors to this paper narrated gendered and sexualized risks including drinking hard liquor to intoxication with gatekeepers, negotiating personal (sexual) boundaries with inebriated people (officials, informants, gatekeepers), negotiating with hotel clerks to secure one's own hotel room (after realizing that hosts have not made such arrangements in advance), dancing with informants and gatekeepers at KTVs, being groped (or being expected to grope) at KTVs, and using all means necessary to push an assailant (informant/gatekeeper) out of one's hotel room. Without being equivalent, these events are symptomatic of the intersection between gendered and sexualized expectations and how positionalities and risk are negotiated during fieldwork.

Methodological implications and coping strategies

In China, the bonding that is foundational to building research relationships often takes place at banquets under inebriation where women are often (albeit not always) marginalized and/or objectified. In these situations, when a 'researcher' becomes a '*meinü*' (a widespread title meaning 'pretty lady,' but used as a more generic 'Miss'), or when interactions swing from professional content to sexual expectations, what are the methodological implications for conducting fieldwork? What choices can researchers make?

For one contributor, being groped and feeling unsafe during fieldwork led her to disengage from ethnographic research altogether and focus instead on secondary data. For another, continued sexual harassment from a gatekeeper led her to consider abandoning her field site. Beyond these radical options, contributors shared other coping strategies. One contributor adapted her research approach to seek out primarily female research

participants and gatekeepers, including women in positions of power, and populations of mostly women (see also Mason 2013). Another changed her research questions so that she could answer them by working with and observing groups that were not hogtied to the culture of banqueting. Having a close, long-term female friend from a host university was key to another contributor's research. As she explains,

> [M]y research buddy forcefully elbowed me out of the room post-banquet as one inebriated official with whom we were trying to establish a research relationship suggested moving the party to the massage parlor. She also cleverly turned a visit by a drunk official to our hotel room (who claimed he was looking for his coat) into an interview. It's unethical to interview someone inebriated, but it was also a survival mechanism to de-escalate a situation where we both felt at risk.

Some contributors adopted expected behaviors during participant observation to 'blend in' at banquets, KTVs, and elsewhere, including drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes, or *not* drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes, depending on the context. Others made a point to discuss spouses and partners or invented a spouse and wore a wedding ring to ward off unwanted attention or harassment during interviews and observations.

While these strategies might be useful in some cases, in others, the messiness of fieldwork is too difficult to anticipate. For instance, if an official who holds the strings to your fieldwork asks you to kiss him on the cheeks, 'as they do in the West' (one contributor tells), what should you do? If you are on the highway in a car with three men, and the discussion turns to how adorable (*ke'ai*) you are and why you are alone in China, with the men snickering after slipping into local dialect that you don't understand (as another contributor reports), how do you respond? Although there is no single strategy for dealing with these situations, knowing that they might arise can help researchers develop personal boundaries and further coping strategies.

Conclusion

Unwanted sexual encounters in the field have personal, professional, and methodological implications (Diprose, Thomas, and Rushton 2013). Some impacts are immediate, while others emerge more slowly, and with a longer affective horizon. Several contributors to this paper spoke of a 'post-fieldwork hangover' when they felt exhausted from negotiating power relationships, and sometimes from heavy alcohol intake and sexual violence. For many, the 'post-fieldwork hangover' is a lingering feeling of shame and failure related to experiences like those shared above. Contributors have been reluctant to share these encounters and feelings, even with academic advisors and mentors, much less in publication. To the question of whether she

engages gendered and sexualized experiences in her writing and analysis, one contributor responds,

> I wish I could do so. However, I often do not because many of my experiences involve potentially dicey situations such as partaking and observing women's heavy alcohol use during fieldwork, or being non-consensually touched during participant observation in bars. For example, if I were to publicly disclose that I was intoxicated during some of my fieldwork, I would expect others to question the veracity of my observations. That would probably be the least of it, too, given potential legal liabilities, IRB-related complications, and professional and ethical norms in my discipline. However, I wish there was a way to have these conversations on ethics and gender during fieldwork, because in a lot of ways, fieldwork is unlike any other social interaction, and there are so few resources on surviving these encounters, acting ethically, and thinking through the impact on one's work.

Feminist scholarship on sexuality and positionality, and the emotional turn in geographic (and other social) research, are creating more space for these conversations. For instance, feminist scholars are challenging the power of shame, and the fallacies of the masculinist, sexist, heteronormative, heroic fieldworker trope (e.g. Berry et al. 2017). Others are theorizing what critical engagement with emotions can reveal about power relations, reflexivity, and positionality (e.g. Laliberte and Schurr 2016). This paper contributes to these expanding literatures by offering narratives of how researchers experience and negotiate the intersection of gender and sexuality during field research in China, and how unwanted sexual encounters, shame, and exhaustion impact the research process. We situate personal experiences within the broader sexual politics that mark social life in China today in order to bring historical and political economic relations more centrally into our analysis of power and positionality.

We hope that this paper is useful for early-career researchers, especially those initiating fieldwork for the first time. When we began our own long-term fieldwork, we were unprepared and, frankly, naïve, about how gender and sexuality would influence our research. Even as we became more aware of the risks of sexual harassment and assault, the specter of 'failing' to collect meaningful data combined with the ever-increasing push for research outputs in the unevenly precarious neoliberal university (Caretta et al. 2018), led us to prioritize 'getting the data' over personal safety and emotional well-being. We want to contribute to conversations in the literature and in informal spaces (e.g. Huang et al. 2018; Watt 2018; Williams 2017) that urge researchers to consider the possibility of unwanted sexual encounters in the field, to think through coping strategies (including some that we've suggested here), and to build systems of support with peers (Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2020) and through relationships with mentors. For China field-work in particular, a crucial first step is for researchers and mentors to know the rules and expectations for *guanxi*-building banquets and post-banquet

events, and to anticipate methods for navigating power relations and shifting positionalities when attending them.

Finally, this paper is situated in the #MeToo moment when sharing stories of sexual harassment and assault is becoming part of a collective conversation, in universities and otherwise. The #MeToo movement is hopeful and it raises new questions. For instance, how can institutions deal with the sexual harassments that many researchers face as part of their regular off-campus work, including fieldwork? How do discussions about the impacts of sexual harassment and assault on the research process become more central when institutions (universities, colleges, departments) remain patriarchal, neoliberal, and research-output-obsessed? How do feminist ethnographers avoid essentialist representations and universalizing claims when theorizing and writing about sexual politics in field sites? And how do geographers, anthropologists, sociologists and others critically engage the #MeToo of the privileged and the #MeToo of the marginalized, in ways that make space for the voices of both without reproducing racial, gendered, sexual, class or ableist power hierarchies and inequalities? This last question applies to inequalities between and among researchers, as well as to uneven relationships between and among researchers and the people with whom they work in the field.

An important piece in settling these questions must involve striving for *less-heroic fieldwork*, where scholars acknowledge and communicate the emotional and bodily vulnerabilities they face conducting fieldwork, while reflecting deeply on their positionality in the field and their social positions and privileges more generally.

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Disclosure statement

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