Global Nightscapes in Shanghai as Ethnosexual Contact Zones

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Beginning in the 1980s, bars and dance clubs re-emerged as important zones of intercultural interaction within Shanghai, particularly for expatriates with otherwise little casual social contact with Chinese citizens. Based on interviews with bar- and club-owners and customers, and on field-notes from participant observation over the last 15 years, this historical ethnography describes the changing organisation of the ethnosexual contact zone of the nightlife. Nightlife is a context in which casual interactions among foreign travellers, sojourners and settlers and the increasingly mobile People's Republic of China (PRC) citizens are common and relatively spontaneous. Despite the complexities of these interactions, the ethnographic evidence here points to the continued relevance of postcolonial racial categories in which a struggle for gendered status within the nightscape is described as a competition between a dominant but declining Global Whiteness and a rising Global Chinese racial identity. This mapping of a fractious global nightscape challenges the idea of a seamless transnational capitalist class, and instead points to racial and gendered sexual competition as an important feature of the leisure culture of transnational mobile elites.

Keywords: Expatriates; Race; Sexuality; China; Contact Zones; Nightlife

Global Nightscapes

With waves of foreign skilled migration beginning in the 1980s, Shanghai has emerged as one of the major ‘contact zones’ of global capitalism (Pratt 1992: 4; Yeoh and Willis 2005), with Western and Asian expatriates and mobile PRC nationals competing and interacting in the same transnational labour markets and the same social spaces. Although the notion of contact zone is evocative of spaces of face-to-face interaction, little ethnographic research has been conducted on how elite skilled migrants from various national and ethnic backgrounds interact in the face-to-face
contact zones of emerging global cities, including workplaces (but see Ho; and Ye and Kelly, this issue) and leisure venues (Walsh 2007). It has become increasingly obvious to researchers that global cities cannot be studied as abstract nodes in transnational networks of capital and demographic flows. We also have to consider the local topographies of these transnational flows (Burawoy 2001; Sassen 2007), including how categories such as race, nationality, gender and sexuality interact in local urban geographies of globalisation. This paper maps the social geography of intercultural contact in one global city by looking at the practices of transnational migrants in one category of social space—the international nightlife zones of Shanghai. These global nightscapes are shown to be spaces of racial and sexual stratification and an important site for the production of racialised and gendered identities for skilled migrants.

This mapping of the social topography of Shanghai’s global nightscapes takes the perspectives of elite transnational migrants—North Americans, Europeans, overseas Chinese, and socially and geographically mobile PRC nationals—who also participate in these spaces. The term nightscape refers to socially constructed geographies of commercial nightlife activities (Chatterton and Hollands 2003). Nightscapes can be organised into nightlife genres—bars, dance clubs, KTV (karaoke) clubs, saunas and brothels (see Farrer 2008)—physically contiguous nightlife zones (nightlife districts or bar streets), and nightlife circuits of individuals moving through these genres and zones (sometimes idiosyncratic but often standardised routines). This paper focuses on the nightlife genres and zones the most commonly featured in the nightlife circuits of transnational migrants.

The idea of a global nightscape refers to the ways in which these local urban nightscapes are sites of transnational flows (Appadurai 1990) and also constructed through globalising cultural and corporate processes that homogenise and stratify nightlife experiences (Chatterton and Hollands 2003). Pragmatically, nightlife globalisation means that anyone familiar with nightlife in other global cities could pick his or her way through Shanghai’s global nightscapes with relative ease upon landing in the city, using the categories of spaces learned already in similar settings, such as bars in London or Chicago, international dance clubs in Singapore (Ye and Kelly, this issue) or expatriate nightlife circuits in Dubai (Walsh 2007). This does not mean that global nightscapes are constructed identically across global cities. While Shanghai’s British pubs described below resemble those described by Walsh in Dubai, religious restrictions in Dubai produce more ethnically segregated clubbing spaces in that city (Walsh 2007). Globalised nightlife spaces are thus differentiated and heterogeneous sites of sexual and racial stratification. Even in the early manifestations of global nightlife culture in the twentieth century, dance halls were sites of both racial conflict and interracial intimacy (Cressey 1932). To use a term from Nagel (2003), global nightscapes are ‘ethnosexual contact zones’ in which individuals find solidarity with co-ethnics, but also seek contact across ethnic boundaries, with one major form of cross-ethnic contact being sexual interaction (Tanaka 2007). At the same time, these patterns of stratification, avoidance and mingling are shaped
by local policing and more subtle forms of urban governance (Chatterton and Hollands 2003).

The growing population of foreigners living in and visiting Shanghai has fuelled the development of Shanghai’s global nightscape. According to Chinese government sources, 130,000 foreign nationals were residing legally in Shanghai in 2008 (Lu 2008: 273), but unofficial estimates were higher. Consular and chamber of commerce officials I interviewed estimated that 70,000 to 100,000 Japanese, 20,000 to 30,000 Americans, and 12,000 to 20,000 Germans were living in Shanghai on various types of visas (personal communications 2006). With the exception of Willis and Yeoh’s original research (Willis and Yeoh 2002; Yeoh and Willis 2005), this group has also been studied very little by social scientists, with no ethnographic studies. Increasingly expatriates find themselves in the same labour and housing markets and consumer spaces as a fast-growing Chinese population of ‘returnees’ (haigui) with foreign degrees, and upwardly mobile Chinese from Shanghai and other provinces, competing to join and define what Sklair (2001) has called the ‘transnational capitalist class’ but which, in this study, is shown to be a racially and sexually heterogeneous mix. Although expatriates are only a portion of this geographically and socially mobile population, they are a highly visible portion, especially in the cosmopolitan nightlife scenes which are the subject of this paper. Expatriates—especially European and American and overseas Chinese—have long been visible consumer market leaders in Shanghai, and even important ‘attractions’ in Shanghai’s nightlife scenes (see Farrer 2002; Field 2008).

Global nightscape are also important in the political and commercial promotions of cities, or city branding. Increasingly, nightlife is used to promote global cities as destinations for tourism and investment. Nightlife developments in Singapore, such as the ‘Three Quays’, have been used to promote Singapore as a cosmopolitan (rather than simply an Asian business) city (see Ye and Kelly, this issue), just as the redevelopment of a ‘cleaner’ Times Square has been used to promote New York as a safe city for tourism and living. Now, nightlife zones are also being used to promote Shanghai as a new cosmopolitan metropolis, especially the developments of Xintiandi and Shanghai’s historic Bund that have become showcases of the city’s modernity and openness to foreign culture (Hibbard 2007; Ren 2008). Even before these recent developments, Shanghainese long-associated nightlife with the image of the city (Cheng 1989).

Global nightscape are also sociologically important because they are among the most open and loosely governed ‘contact zones’ for mobile populations. In comparison with the often covert or unstated racial and ethnic stratification of professional workplaces (see Ho; and Ye and Kelly, in this issue), the nightlife zones of global cities allow for more-overt expression of racial, ethnic and gendered discourses, but also more chances for subverting ethnic hierarchies and crossing boundaries through sexual intimacy. Nightscapes are spaces in which people seek out intercultural, interracial and cross-gender sociability for a variety of reasons, including the actualisation of fantasies of mobility, status and boundary-crossing.
sociability (Liu-Farrer 2004). Global nightscapes are, in this view, zones of move-
ment, productivity and contradiction within the racialised and gendered fractions of
the transnational capitalist class.

Nightlife may be particularly important for understanding the cultural and social
lives of mobile expatriates. Similar to Walsh’s study of British expatriates in Dubai,
many of my informants said that night clubs, going out and consuming alcohol were
more central to their lives in Shanghai than in their own homelands. Many
informants were young and single and thus more prone to nightlife activities.
However, even among older and (more-or-less) attached people, nightlife in
Shanghai was described as having a pull that was unequalled in their home countries.
Many were attracted by the permissive sexual atmosphere associated with a ‘holiday’
or ‘vacation’ mentality (see Walsh 2007). Social isolation and removal from long-term
social networks attracted foreigners to nightlife. The same factors also influenced
Chinese informants. A young Western expatriate in a first job and a young Chinese
office worker from outside Shanghai were equally in need of social contacts, and
many such people found one another in the nightlife. A factor particular to non-
Chinese-speaking foreigners, however, was their relative inability to enjoy many other
cultural activities in a city where few had an adequate knowledge of the Chinese
language and Chinese culture. Many sought comfort with their own co-ethnics in
ethnically marked nightlife spaces. For some of the same people, however, nightlife
was seen as one of the very few options for integrating or participating in a larger
Chinese society outside work. From the perspective of expatriates, nightscapes consist
of a patchwork of enclaves, or escapes from Chinese society, such as German or Irish
pubs, and contact zones, or spaces in which socialising with Chinese people was
possible, such as bigger bars, dance clubs and bar streets.

Because of limits on length, this paper focuses mostly on the latter— the contact
zones—and on the expression of masculinities and femininities in these still racially
mixed but class-stratified spaces. It is organised in three parts: a general introduction
to the development of Shanghai’s global nightscapes, a section on transnational
masculinities, and one on transnational femininities. I outline the boundaries and
 hierarchies that characterise Shanghai’s global nightscapes, while also elucidating the
tactics of contestation and competition of various participants.

Data and Methodology

This paper represents an overlap of two qualitative ethnographic studies. The first is a
series of studies of nightlife interactions in Shanghai conducted over the past
15 years, including interviews with owners and workers in the types of establishment
discussed below, and hundreds of nights of ethnographic observations and interviews
conducted from 1993 to 2009. The second is an interview-based study of long-term
expatriates or settlers in the city, involving over 200 interviews with expatriates and
their Chinese partners, friends and co-workers conducted from 2002 to 2009,
with some ethnographic involvements lasting much longer. The author is a white
North American male and frequent visitor to this scene, which may colour some of the findings and interpretations. However, this paper is not an auto-ethnography, and is constructed from interviews with foreigners and Chinese alike, and men and women of all social classes. Although ethnographic, the aim is not a micro-level account of the interactions in one particular space, but rather to map out the zones of ethnosexual interaction. It does not attempt a full typology of Shanghai’s nightscapes, which has been partly addressed elsewhere (Farrer 2002, 2008). Nor does it deal with the large and important populations of Japanese, Taiwanese or Koreans in the city. Methodologically and theoretically, however, it attempts to address questions that would apply to similarly mobile populations in other global cities.

The Re-Emergence of Shanghai’s Global Nightscapes as Ethnosexual Contact Zones

Shanghai’s international nightlife scenes can be divided into at least four major genres of establishment, all of which are products of global flows of people, capital and culture over several decades—discos and dance clubs, bars, karaoke clubs and saunas and barber shops, often brothels (Farrer 2008). I only deal here with bars and dance clubs, because they are the sites in which transnational mobile elites compete and interact with one another in relatively open spaces. Many of these spaces have predecessors in the pre-1949 era of foreign settlement in the city, and were closed down in the 1950s. Here I focus on their redevelopment since the opening and reform measures of 1978.

Dance clubs are the most prominent of Shanghai’s nightlife venues. Although commercial social (ballroom) dance venues opened in Shanghai in the early 1980s (Liu 1989), Shanghai’s international dance scene dates back to the opening of the disco in the Jinjiang Hotel in the late 1980s. At first, hotel discos were restricted to foreigners in a deliberate policy of limiting social contacts between local Shanghainese and foreigners. Massive ‘disco plazas’ began opening in Shanghai in the early 1990s, attracting both foreigners and Shanghai youth, and opening up unprecedented interethnic contact zones in the heart of the city (Farrer 1999, 2002). By the late 1990s, an international-style clubbing scene emerged in which Shanghai was reintegrated into global circuits of dance and music culture, including overseas investment capital, foreign (often ‘overseas Chinese’) managers, international DJs and international fashion styles (Field 2008). Over the past 20 years, Shanghai clubs have become more clearly stratified by age, ethnicity and music style. By 2008, many hip-hop clubs (such as ‘Guandi’ or ‘Bonbon’) catered to a young group that included Shanghainese youth and high-school students from the international schools in Shanghai. Some clubs (such as ‘Babyface’ on Huaihai Road) were known among expatriates as ‘local’ (i.e. Chinese) clubs. In contrast, a few dance clubs on Shanghai’s newly redeveloped Bund catered to an older, heavily European crowd, partly because of the higher prices associated with the scenic and touristic location. Although ‘Babyface’ was rumoured to restrict the entrance of single ‘foreign’ (white) men, most
clubs were open to anyone with cash. Doorway selection based on looks and connections, common in London and New York, was rare in Shanghai. Despite informal ethnic segregation and occasional discrimination, racial and age segregation in Shanghai clubs was very relaxed in comparison to many larger cities in Europe, Japan or the US, and seldom would a visitor feel unwelcome or afraid on these grounds. Some regular clubbers described nightlife circuits of wandering between these venues precisely to enjoy the novelty of differently marked spaces.

Bars are another important genre of space in Shanghai’s global nightscapes. Small privately owned bars sprang up near the big international hotels that opened in central Shanghai in the late 1980s (Farrer 2008). The style of service was more Japanese than Western and, indeed, some were opened by Shanghainese who went to Japan to work in the 1980s. Although modest by contemporary standards, Shanghai’s bars in the 1980s were associated with the glamour of the new ‘high society’ of the market economy, and with ‘gold-digging’ local women who looked for husbands or simply easy money among the private entrepreneurs and foreigners who frequented them (Ah Yan 1988). By the late 1990s, a scattering of international-style British, American and Irish pubs began serving the growing expatriate population. Some served as ethnic enclaves in which few local Chinese regular customers could be seen, while other bars attracted a more mixed clientele.

A major turning point in the development of Shanghai’s global nightscapes was the advent of lively ‘bar streets’ on Hengshan, Maoming and Julu Roads during the late 1990s. Until this period, ethnosexual contacts in Shanghai’s international nightlife had been mostly limited to young clubbers and the relatively small and marginal bar scenes near hotels. On Maoming Road, in contrast, local and foreign entrepreneurs opened dozens of venues, in an unplanned development that included restaurants, dance clubs, live-music pubs, ‘hostess’ bars and numerous street vendors. Maoming clubs and bars did not charge entrance fees, and prices were reasonable even to students and young Chinese office workers. In the summer of 2000, on weekend nights, literally thousands of customers clogged the narrow street, making it impassable to car traffic. Live and recorded music blared out from open terraces. The vast economic gulf between Shanghai’s rising middle classes and the migrant poor was a veritable street performance every Friday night. This nocturnal panorama included the fashionable and sexily dressed bar customers, prostitutes accosting middle-aged foreign visitors, rural children aggressively selling flowers, and beggars mobbing taxis arriving at the bars. Exasperated policemen stopped fights, tried to control street prostitution and urged on traffic.

Maoming Road in the summers from 1999 to 2003 was a space of rampant social intercourse among foreign visitors, local Shanghainese and Chinese from other provinces on a scale not seen before in Shanghai. It was known as a place where foreign men could meet local Shanghainese women for romance, or a Chinese prostitute from the provinces. There were seemingly fewer relationships being formed between Chinese men and foreign women, and the racially skewed sexual marketplace was a source of the interethnic tensions on the street. Although seldom reported in
the state-run Chinese media, some of these fights became urban legends among the foreign community, including the following story posted on a popular English website:

Three weeks ago at the end of Mao Ming Road I got beat up by about 20 Chinese guys. They broke two bottles on my head and beat me with a wooden stick screaming ‘Go back to your country!’ I ended up in the hospital with ripped clothes and full of blood. Luckily the only damage was a broken nose and three big scars on my face… I’m an American living in Shanghai for a bit. I don’t usually have conflicts and haven’t hit a person since I was 14. That’s 16 years ago. I was walking down the street of Mao Ming and a little Chinese guy kept wanting to fight me. He wouldn’t stop. I was laughing at him thinking, ‘Why would this skinny little 20-year-old want to fight me?’ It became a stupid argument and I finally just punched the punk in the face. I hit him once. That’s all. Not a smart move. Soon about 20 guys came and beat the crap out of me, almost killing me. Warning to all foreigners: DON’T GET IN A CONFLICT WITH ONE CHINESE GUY HERE BECAUSE THEY WILL ALL JUMP YOU REAL BAD! You are a foreigner and don’t forget it. When it comes down to [it], it is them against us. They will all team up against you… (posted on ‘Shanghai Expat’, 23 May 2004).

This unverifiable story was widely discussed among Westerners in Shanghai. There was also a popular version in which a foreign man was beaten to death on the street (although this is almost certainly not true). The Chinese, in turn, also had their negative perceptions of the foreigners on these streets. One taxi driver told a Chinese female informant riding in his taxi, ‘Of course foreigners love it here. They can just do whatever they want. There is ‘no law and no heaven’ (wufawutian). They could never get away with this in their own countries’.

This eclectic and sometimes explosive scene ended abruptly in the summer of 2003 when many Maoming bars were closed for noise violations. Rumours abounded of the hidden hands of high officials living in the vicinity, but informants who experienced the crackdown described traffic problems, public fighting and drunkenness, open-air music, and aggressive solicitation by prostitutes on the streets as reasons for the street being closed down. Shanghai’s Public Security officials, while extraordinarily tolerant of such behaviour in private establishments, drew a line at such open public display. Noise violations were easily prosecuted, because they could be blamed squarely on the bar-owners. This was the second time in three years that the street had been closed down by the police, and it never recovered.

With the suppression of Maoming Road, Shanghai’s bar streets did not disappear, but they were increasingly stratified by class. A related turning point in Shanghai’s nightlife geography was the now-world-famous development of ‘Xintiandi’ in the 1990s, which transformed a swathe of vintage housing into an upper-class shopping, restaurant and nightlife space. In contrast to Maoming Road, a public street, Xintiandi was a thoroughly privatised form of ‘public space’ controlled by a Hong Kong real-estate company, eliminating begging, street-vending and other unauthorised uses of its deceptively open courtyards and greenways. After Xintiandi,
nightlife was no longer considered a politically or morally suspect feature of urban geography. Instead, Xintiandi presented a relatively sanitised and heavily policed pedestrian mall in which disorderly behaviour was rarely observed or tolerated. Street-walking prostitution (which became common in Xintiandi for a time) was suppressed by a security force that exclusively worked there. Foreign and domestic tourists and young white-collar Shanghainese eager to experience global nightlife for the first time flocked to the area.

A similarly gentrified nightlife development emerged on Shanghai’s postcard waterfront, known as ‘The Bund’. Starting with the opening of the exclusive restaurant and bar venues at ‘Bund Three’ in 2003, a series of exclusive nightlife venues in renovated buildings on Shanghai’s colonial-era riverfront also began attracting the wealthiest of tourists and nightlife sophisticates of both sexes. Expatriates were a major presence in most bars on the Bund, partly because of the association with historical foreign Shanghai, but Chinese white-collar workers, artists and entrepreneurs were also important customers. Bars on the Bund could be described as an urban ‘stage’ for the transnational elite of all races and nationalities. Unlike Maoming Road or Xintiandi, there was no street-level socialising on the Bund, and the elite clientele were separated by a busy highway from the domestic tourists who strolled along the embankment of the Huangpu River. Some Bund bars also established a reputation for cutting-edge design and style.

Bar Rouge—opened by two already successful French nightclub entrepreneurs on the seventh floor of the stylishly renovated former British Chartered Bank building—was known in 2005 as Shanghai’s hottest bar, and as a hangout for expense-account expats, fashion industry insiders, models and English-speaking Chinese prostitutes. Many of the customers were foreign businessmen and women, ‘overseas Chinese’ and ‘returnee Chinese’ working in international business. English was the common language. An anonymous on-line review from an (ostensibly) Asian female customer describes why she enjoyed the bar:

I spent several Friday nights at Bar Rouge and it was very fun. Everybody rolled up in smooth cars such as BMW’s Z, Mercedes M class, and plenty of convertibles. Pros: *definitely a place to see and be seen *well-dressed men and women *getting attention from guys was not hard—show a little skin, a little smile, and a sexy little walk (all that isn’t a problem if you’re an Asian girl! yeah ladies!) . . . . *everybody knows how to dance and friendly grinding is welcomed and returned *plenty of seats to sit on—or a lap *bathrooms very clean most of the night—and very far from the men’s so you always feel safe *always a watchman during after hours to get a taxi and chase away the derelicts (Posted on ‘Smart Shanghai’, 22 August 2005).

Many other anonymous reviewers on the same English-language site found the Bar Rouge to be pretentious, expensive, and full of wealthy posers and prostitutes. These critical comments focusing on price and snobbishness also point to the increasing class stratification of Shanghai nightlife, and the sense that even many foreign
internet reviewers—to say nothing of lower-class ‘derelicts’ turned away on the street—no longer felt at ease in Shanghai’s choicest establishment.

In sum, Shanghai nightlife has become increasingly stratified and segregated, especially by class, age and musical taste, and to a lesser extent by nationality or race. Zones of contact and friction remain but, as Chatterton and Hollands (2003) write of Europe, regulation and policing have furthered the process of gentrification and stratification of nightlife districts in Shanghai, as less-governable spaces are closed down and replaced with more-easily governable middle-class tourist zones. In Shanghai, the governance of nightlife in the city underwent a transformation from a focus on the suppression of vice through campaigns such as those seen on Maoming Road in 2000 and 2003, to a promotional approach focused on developing sanitised and classy nightlife districts worthy of a global city. Expatriates and the transnationally mobile Shanghainese tended towards these more expensive and approved venues in the prestigious development zones, though they also could make use of the remaining underground scenes for clubbing and cruising.

Competing Racialised Masculinities in Shanghai’s Global Nightscapes

Expatriate men—especially white European and North Americans who fit the image of laowai (‘foreigners’)—have enjoyed an elevated status since the beginning of Shanghai’s international clubbing scene. Indeed the first discos in hotels catered exclusively to foreign guests. Popular discos in the early 1990s allowed foreigners in for free, or encouraged foreigners to attend by distributing VIP passes to obviously foreign-looking guests (Farrer 1999). White men were seen as big spenders who attracted young Chinese female customers hoping to meet foreign men. Such policies annoyed Chinese regulars and especially foreigners with Asian faces who were not always accorded VIP treatment.

As foreigners became less rare and the spending power of the Chinese increased, free passes for foreigners or foreign students became a thing of the past. Still, interactions inside clubs remain marked by widely recognised racial and gendered categories. White and Asian, Chinese and foreign, men and women—all experienced nightlife spaces very differently. From the point of view of white or Asian foreign men, Shanghai clubs were an easy place to meet Chinese women, and many foreign men described Shanghai’s clubbing scene as a ‘sexual paradise’. One young blond American told me that he could take home a different woman every other night that he visited the popular Park 97 during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Eric, a handsome 28-year-old Chinese-American man in the fashion industry, described his luck meeting women at Shanghai clubs:

Everything gets so easy to you—it’s handed to you on a silver platter. So you are back in the States and you think you can get only a [lower] quality of woman, but here, they look as beautiful—for example, I go through model after model, actress after actress! And they are beautiful and stunning...
Men realised that they were trading on their economic and national status in these seductions. Foreignness still meant glamour and sex appeal. Eric described it simply as a ‘difference’. Whereas white men relied on their exotic looks to signal difference, Chinese American and Japanese men relied more on their ‘foreign’ cultural backgrounds and the prestige accorded their nationality.

Some informants described a racial hierarchy in which white men and Chinese-American men competed for attention from Chinese women, some of whom preferred white men, and others preferred Asian-looking men with bicultural backgrounds. African and South Asian men were seldom mentioned, but it was clear that they were positioned closer to the bottom of the hierarchy. Nationality mattered as much as race, with US citizenship generally conferring high sexual status.

Women’s racialised sexual preferences for men could be read as personal preferences or as politically significant prejudice and ‘arrogance’. Asian men sometimes complained that foreign men had an easy time in the clubbing scene, and resented their sense of sexual entitlement. They also challenged these racial hierarchies. Chinese-American Eric’s transnational cultural capital as a fashion-industry insider was probably his most important clubbing resource, but he also spoke at length about the importance of specifically Chinese cultural capital:

> You have the pure ABCs [American-born Chinese] and then the people like us—people who are multicultural—we all speak English perfectly, and Chinese and then you have the white crowd. ABCs and us get along a lot better—the white crowd always have this extra-superiority complex—we have all noticed it out here. They somehow get themselves into a lot of fights for no reason. You know in Asia, if you’re ABC or local or whatever, there is a concept of face. You give each other face. So if you see a table in a club and there are women there, and they are with a group of guys, and you pretend to maybe know one of the guys and he introduces you to the girls, and that’s OK, but you don’t just walk up and hit on their girls—it just causes trouble, especially with the locals. And even for us or ABCs, it’s the same thing. But I realise for white guys, they always go in there and get themselves into trouble and they always wonder why...haha...like if you are going to hit on this girl who is sitting there with 20 guys, come on man. I don’t care how drunk you are, it’s just logic. But they are like, ‘What happened?’ That’s why you have a black eye there and stitches there...They have that complex where they feel they can do more and just get away with it.

Tension between white and ethnically Chinese men related to their different approaches to the space of the club. Chinese men—including ‘overseas Chinese’ men with more connections to the local culture—were more likely to book tables and invite a group of friends to share the space. Booking a table was also a way of indicating social and economic status, and claiming ownership of social space through agreeing to pay a high minimum charge (usually RMB 2,000–5,000 or US$300–750). White expatriates tended to come in pairs and cluster at the bar, meeting women on the dance floor and in the public areas of the club. Some ethnic Chinese men interpreted such foreign behaviour as ‘cheap’ and predatory. One
Shanghainese-American entrepreneur, who had lived in the US and worked in
the Shanghai nightlife industry for many years, said to me while talking near the
dance floor of Park 97:

Now the city is just filling up with this white trash. These guys, they come in here
and you can see them. They are all full of themselves, but they don’t have any
money. They are beer warmers. You go out to the bar and you see them holding a
beer for an hour. They will come in and dance with a girl, and if she won’t agree to
go home with them right then and there, they won’t even buy her a drink. You ask
these guys what they do and they say, ‘Oh, English teacher’. That means what? That
means they are doing nothing here, nothing!

Behind this comment was a general sense that Chinese men would not show up in
such an elite club unless they had the money to reserve a table and purchase bottles of
liquor, while some Western men simply tried to rely upon their racial capital, despite
their low-paid job in the city. Or, as white informants said of themselves, they simply
preferred standing up at the bar where they could meet more women and talk with
passers-by of both sexes.

In sum, transnational migrant men—including Asian Americans—experienced an
enhanced sense of gendered sexual status in the clubbing scene. Social prestige among
men was predicated upon sexual competition for women’s attention, and this was
often construed as a kind of racial competition between the dominant Global White
and a rising Global Chinese. Despite the more extreme views expressed in these
quotes, sexual competition was not so strong as to lead to voluntary racial segregation
or a generally hostile atmosphere. Individual white men were often seen sitting in
mostly Asian groups, and there was little resentment or surprise over racially mixed
couples in clubs, although there was more over what was seen as predatory or
aggressive behaviour by lone men. Significantly, this rhetoric of racial competition
seemed stronger within the transnational population than among the local
Shanghainese men, who were generally more welcoming and tolerant of foreigners,
perhaps because they felt themselves to be less a part of the international scene.

Competing Racialised Femininities in Shanghai’s Global Nightscapes

The women who frequented Shanghai’s clubs included Chinese women from
Shanghai, other provinces and overseas, as well as foreign women. Chinese women
included many university students and office workers from a wide range of
backgrounds and income levels. In particular, it was not unusual to meet white-
collar women from other Chinese provinces, living and working in the city alone.
Such ‘New Shanghainese’ were an increasingly important mainstay in Shanghai’s
global nightscapes and, unlike men with a similar background, they did not need to
spend much money in such clubs, because men would often buy them drinks or
invite them to their tables.
Eve, a successful white-collar professional who grew up in Qingdao and had never lived abroad, explained why she hung out in the international nightlife, dating foreign men who were also living alone in the city with few friends, similar to her situation:

Yeah well I think there isn’t so much an expat by definition, by skin color, whatever; it is basically a lifestyle decided by the fact that you are alone in this city—like whether you come from a different country or city is the same thing—your family is not here, your friends are not here . . . you are alone in this place, you rent a place and this is your world. So you are alone—you have two options—one is to go out and one is to go home and watch a DVD and most of us choose to not go home and watch a DVD . . . If you don’t have a boyfriend or husband here, your parents here, then you go out . . . and you go out and because the expats here are the same . . . they don’t have their family and friends here, so they go out . . . and number two, probably those people who have a very stressful job, they work hard and play hard. And I am the same way—half of my office is foreigners so it’s not because I am Chinese that I can take more stress or I don’t feel the stress so it’s the same way . . . and I enjoy a few good drinks, and good music, and also you have to be able to financially afford it so that’s another thing . . . and I am lucky enough to have a reasonably good job and can keep up with it . . .

Eve said that she went out nearly every night of the week to a bar or club. She had dated a Dutch man for four years, and now was very much hoping to meet another foreign boyfriend. She was not attracted to Chinese men because they did not share her interests and lifestyle.

Some women in this scene more explicitly preferred Asian-looking men. Olive, a 22-year-old Shanghainese night-club promoter, said she preferred meeting ‘cute ABCs’. She described how her female Shanghainese friends judged men they meet at Babyface, one of their favourite venues.

My girlfriends are all different. Some pay attention to looks. Other friends pay more attention to material things. Of course they all want to have both of these things, but they will have different priorities. I think the type of people who go to Babyface care more about money. They will look at how many bottles of liquor a man will open on a table. The size of the table will tell them the minimum charge he had to pay, and that may tell you if he is has money. A girl will notice these things, because she may be just looking for a rich guy to buy her something, or maybe she will think that with a rich guy she can have more fun. After all this is just a way of measuring the quality of a guy . . . Others are looking to meet some good-looking guys. Everyone pursues beauty, looks at appearances, right! But no one goes to a club look looking for ‘a good person’ or someone with ‘character’; there’s no way you would go to a club looking for that!

Olive personally preferred alternative rock cafés, but would occasionally go out with her friends to Babyface, wearing her sexiest ‘bling bling’ clothes, to meet men on the dance floor. After sitting and drinking with the guys at their ‘VIP’ tables, the men might take them out for a ‘night snack’ afterwards, occasionally leading to more
private sexual encounters. ‘Girls now are very open’, she said, dismissing the idea that casual sex was a moral issue. For her and her friends, men’s sex appeal included components of money, race, nationality, good looks and originality in their approach to women, all forms of ‘sexual capital’ that could be displayed or indicated in interactions with women in the club (Farrer 2010).

In comparison with white foreign men—who generally sensed a racial advantage over Asian men—many white foreign women saw themselves as sexually disadvantaged in the clubbing scene. They complained that they were ignored by foreign men, although they themselves seldom paid much attention to the Asian men they encountered in these spaces. Japanese women and Asian American women did not have the same complaints of being desexualised or ignored—though many did complain that foreign men were spoiled by the Shanghai women who ‘threw themselves’ at foreign men. This sense of gendered disadvantage was thus marked by class and nationality as well as race.

The greatest social and sexual barrier in Shanghai’s nightlife scenes appeared between white women and Asian men. Although increasing numbers of young Western women were working in Shanghai, they were less often seen dancing and flirting with Asian men. The racial barrier between white women and Asian men was attributed to a lack of interest on both sides. Nina, an Asian American woman, said that, despite her Asian appearance, the local Chinese were turned off by her independent personality:

I know that even by American standards I’m a bit of a freak in that I’m very independent, I travel on my own all the time. I don’t need a guy. So it takes a strong American guy to accept that—much more so relative to Asian guys. What are they going to do with someone like me? If I’m at a bar, they see that by the way I carry myself and the way I am interacting in a group. It comes across. I don’t try to hide that. And actually, I’ve had Chinese women tell me that. They might ask the same question which is ‘Oh, have you dated any of the local guys and what are they like?’ [And I say] ‘Oh they don’t come to me’. And I had one woman say ‘Oh, well yeah, because you’re not the type’. And I said ‘Oh!’ I knew what she was going to say but I just asked the question for the hell of it. I said ‘Oh, what do you mean by that?’ [She said] ‘Because you’re not the sweet, innocent type’. I said ‘You’re right! You’re right!’

Some foreign women said simply that they were not attracted to Chinese men, because they were too short or lacked the requisite cultural skills and shared interests. As this quote shows, ethnically ‘Asian’ women varied in their orientations to this dating scene, depending on their backgrounds and previous dating experiences.

In comparison to their general silence about Chinese men, many foreign women complained about the obsession of foreign men with local women. Frances, a white British woman who worked in a popular, high-end bar on the Bund, described her ambivalence at watching the flourishing dating scene between white men and Chinese women in her bar:
Four years ago, going to Park 97 after work, when I used to see a whole floor of Western men and Chinese women... the whole lounge was full of Western men and Chinese women trying to pick up each other.... I can't tell if I am being sensitive to it because as a Western girl it's a hard thing to see, so often, guys who only go out with Chinese girls. It can be a bit confronting, not annoying but I don't know, I guess it's disappointing. Not that I would suggest that they shouldn't see Chinese people, but that it's the only person they want to see—that they would choose a person by race rather than by meeting them, or by personality.

As reported by Walsh in Dubai (2007), expatriate women described a ‘holiday’ or ‘vacation’ mentality among the foreigners in Shanghai. In the clubbing scene this takes the form of men expecting women to warm to them very quickly. As Frances put it:

Especially in bars and nightlife and travelling—when people come to another city it’s a ticket to do whatever you want... like when you are at home with your parents and employer, obviously you have to be a bit more well-behaved... people are very badly behaved in Shanghai I think... They go out to bars and get really drunk... or go out and pick up a different person every week. It’s a good time for people to explore a little bit and do things they wouldn’t do at home...

Younger expatriate women reacted to this scene more positively, accepting the more permissive sexual ethics that seemed to be required of participants in Shanghai’s international nightlife. Sophia, a 23-year-old Bulgarian woman, described a sense of sexual liberation after arriving in Shanghai. When I asked her what changed for her in Shanghai, she said with a laugh:

I learned to fuck around. [I asked her if that was good or bad for her.] Yes, it was good. It was something that I couldn’t get away with back home. You can’t imagine how people back home talk about girls. Like, you would be a slut or a whore if you did that. But here, no one cares. You can do what you want.

In contrast, some single expatriate women in their 30s and 40s described avoiding the clubbing scene altogether, hanging out at expatriate-dominated bars in order to avoid the sight of Western men hunting or being hunted by Chinese women. Few expatriate men I spoke with had the same negative reaction to the interracial dating scene in Shanghai clubs, showing that the nightlife zones are structured by gender as well as by race.

Regardless of age, single expatriate women perceived themselves as competing sexually with local Chinese women. However, because they shared many of the same interests and lifestyles—as well as complaints about men—they often became friends with the ‘international’ Chinese women, who were English-speakers and interested in Western culture (and Western men), and often worked in professional white-collar jobs in the city. Thus it was not uncommon to see foreign and Chinese women enjoying evenings out together in the clubbing scene. These same-sex friendships, and outings in the nightlife, were both a way for Western women to integrate into ‘local’
society, and a way for ‘local’ women to integrate into the ‘international’ scene that these foreign women and men represented. As Walsh (2007) points out, same-sex friendships were often a more stable element of this transient global nightlife scene than were sexual relationships.

**Discussion: Global Nightscapes as Socially Structured Spaces of Consumption**

Global nightscapes are spaces of both consumption and production of the culture of global cities by transnational mobile elites, and for the expression and contesting of racialised masculinities and femininities among young professionals. Global nightscapes can also be seen as sites of ethnosexual competition and contradiction within the elite factions of the transnational capitalist class, now joined by mobile women and men, and by transnational Asians and Westerners. To complicate the analysis of migrant cultures, global nightscapes are also access points to an ‘international’ lifestyle for local residents of global cities, spaces that facilitate alliances and interactions with people travelling across national borders, blurring distinctions between local and migrant cultures. As complex ethnosexual contact zones, nightlife spaces produce multiple points of contact, alliances and conflicts, with greater freedom from institutional controls than the workplace. Nightlife patrons may avoid or seek contact across class and ethnic lines, flirting, fighting or fleeing depending on their desires or whims.

Despite the complexities of these racial and gendered topographies of contact, the ethnographic evidence here points to the continued relevance of postcolonial racial categories in a gendered competition between a dominant but fading global whiteness and a rising global Chinese racial identity. This mapping of a fractious global nightscape challenges the idea of a seamless transnational capitalist class, and instead describes racial and gendered sexual competition as an important feature of the leisure culture of transnational mobile elites.

Previous research generally points to an elevated sexual status enjoyed by white men and more recently Asian women in such transnational spaces, and the types of cultural resistance that such ethnosexual hierarchies provoke. Looking at Western men’s sexual capital from the point of view of mobile Asian women, Karen Kelsky (2001: 148) argues that the whiteness and culture of Western men are ‘hegemonic constitutive elements’ of the freedom and modernity that mobile Japanese women long for for themselves. Conversely, Susan Koshy (2004) argues that Asian women have gained ‘sexual capital’ in the West through glamorous accounts of transnational romance produced by Westerners. As Ho and Tsang’s (2000) research on interracial gay relationships in Hong Kong shows, these racialised sexual hierarchies can change significantly in a short period of time, depending on larger shifts of economic and cultural power. Similarly, Erwin’s (1999) participant observation study of the filming of a transnational romance family drama in Shanghai points to the symbolic claims of a resurgent Chinese masculinity, which had been seen to be in decline or ‘crisis’ in the first two decades of the reform era (Zhong 2000).
This ethnography of Shanghai’s global nightscapes maps these familiar racial and sexual categories onto a changing and contested topography of gendered and racialised nightlife zones that offer possibilities for multiple sexual strategies and idiosyncratic nightlife circuits. Within some specialised zones, many white men still experienced their embodiment of national and racial characteristics as a sexual bonus, as did some transnational Asian women and Asian men (particularly Asian Americans who embodied desirable physical and cultural traits). In this local mapping of national and racial bodies, some white women experienced distressing forms of desexualisation, though some younger white expatriate women described the ‘touristic’ space of Shanghai’s nightscapes as a liberating arena for sexual consumption and exploration. As Moskowitz’s (2008) ethnography of a ‘foreigner bar’ in Taiwan points out, even a single nightclub is a polysemic space in which different types of actor are differently able to mobilise their racialised and gendered attributes.

Although sometimes intensely competitive and even hostile, the interactions in the global nightscape mapped in this paper were largely narrated to me by clubbing insiders in a postmodern discourse of racial/sexual consumption rather than in terms of ethical or political action. For most informants, both the consumption and the embodiment of racial and sexual difference are part of the ‘touristic’ quality of ethnosexual contact zones. Transnational sexual capital is a good that clubbers try to both embody and consume. Being considered a desirable sexual commodity generally was not judged as insulting or alienating, whereas not being considered one certainly was. The complaints of some white Western women about desexualisation in Shanghai’s nightscapes are evidence of the status associated with this embodied sexual capital. Although limited in its focus on nightlife, this study suggests that one of the more important considerations in transnational mobility may be the enjoyment or dismay resulting from rising and falling sexual status in the nightscapes of global cities (Farrer 2010). Indeed this may be one motive for further transnational moves.

Finally, global nightscapes are not simply the outcomes of transnational flows. Spatial nightlife stratification is the product of deliberate urban planning focusing on developing some spaces into profitable nightlife zones and the suppression of more-unruly and unprofitable spaces (Chatterton and Hollands 2003). While previous studies have focused on this politics of nightlife development as neoliberal development and policing strategies, this study points to the less-overt racial and gendered politics of nightlife development. Global nightscapes are produced in a tension between goals of policing and controlling interethnic conflicts (and limiting interethnic intimacies), and those of promoting cities as attractive destinations for transnational elites, opening up and shaping the terrains of these cities as ethnosexual contact zones. The ‘play spaces’ of global nightscapes thus cannot be divorced from the politics of race and sexuality that shape both their formation and the interactions within them.
References


