The University of Chicago
Department of Sociology

ASIANS & FRIENDS CHICAGO:
THE POLITICS OF INTERRACIAL DESIRE IN A GAY FRIENDSHIP GROUP

by
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ABSTRACT

How is racial inequality reproduced and resisted in relationships of intimacy (friendships, sexual relations, romantic connections)? How does racial inequality operate both through individual negotiations and differentiated stakes, and through collective, idealized group-building? This study explores questions for the relationship between gay Asian men and gay white men, through a case study of Asians & Friends Chicago (AFC), a gay friendship group of gay Asian men and their gay (majority white) friends. The group’s individual stories and interactional dynamics are documented and analyzed through mixed qualitative sociological methods: archival analysis of AFC Archives, participant observation of the group’s interactions at official events and informal gatherings, and in-depth interviews with 24 group members. Through the lens of the sexual fields’ framework, AFC emerges as a field with collective norms and practices that all members respond to: non-sexual friendship, post-racial inclusivity, and prioritizing the Asian-white romantic relationship. These logics are organizational responses to gay Asian men’s low desirability in other sexual fields, and gay white men’s potentially fetishistic desires for them. At the same time, as Asian members and white members enter the field with different stakes, AFC’s organizational logics both attempt to recalibrate these stakes while still repeating similar racial/sexual inequalities outside the group. This social mapping thus explores how resistances to racial inequality and sexual fetishism can potentially reach an organizational (yet uneven) level, as gay men think through their different contexts how to individually and collectively articulate their desires for intimacy and companionship.
INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND


(Courtesy: Gerber-Hart Library)

This photo shows a group of approximately 80 men standing in front of the coast of Chicago, celebrating an event called “International Friendship Weekend.” This is an annual meetup of a still-existing national organization called “Asians & Friends,” a friendship and social group for gay Asian men in the United States. The Chicago chapter that was hosting this event, Asians & Friends Chicago (AFC), was founded in 1984, and currently consists of approximately 40 regular members and another 20-30 intermittent members. The group holds two official meetups a month: a dim sum lunch on the first Sunday of the month, and a party or dinner event later in the month. However, the group also holds extra events as fundraisers for their annual Pride Parade Float, and members also informally hang out as regular friends.
Let us look at the photo itself and evaluate what it signifies. The annual event’s name, “International Friendship Weekend,” is as general as an event name can be; there is no explicit marker that this is a gay or an Asian group. Instead of identifying itself explicitly based on the members’ race/ethnicity and sexuality, this group relies on neutrality and inclusivity from its names, through terms like “international” and “friends.” Second, if this is an organization of gay Asian men, why are there so many white members in this photo? Indeed, the group name—Asians and Friends—signifies that this friendship group consists of not just gay Asian men, but also non-Asian (and perhaps non-gay?) members.

This photo and its contexts serves as a point of departure for this paper, which takes this friendship organization—Asians and Friends Chicago (AFC)—as a case study for the racial politics of desire, and how the stickiness of interracial relations and desire is dealt with, negotiated, and reinstated individually and organizationally. This paper starts with this following broad question: How is racial inequality reproduced and contested in intimate relationships? Through a qualitative analysis of ethnographic data of AFC events, in-depth interviews with AFC members, and archives of the group since its founding, this paper answers this question by following (1) how negative associations with gay Asian men and gay white men who desire them are contested on both individual and organizational levels, and (2) how unequal racial dynamics are both repeated and resisted in spaces of intimate relationships, through the language of friendship and sexual/romantic desire.

Current literature regarding gay Asian men in the United States has highlighted modes of discrimination and diminished desirability that these men experience within gay spaces (Fung 1995, Eng 2001, Wat 2002, Han 2008, Nguyen 2014, Han 2015). Specifically, gay Asian men are stereotypically associated with aspects such as feminized masculinity (Han 2015),
bottomhood—the receptive position in gay anal sex—and its feminized/passive associations (Nguyen 2014), and ritualized rejection in gay spaces such as bars, bathhouses, and online dating platforms (Poon & Ho 2008). These negative associations predominantly highlight gay Asian men’s lower level of desirability in comparison to other races; in other words, within mainstream gay “sexual fields” (Green 2014), gay Asian men carry less sexual capital than gay men of other races.

An adverse and peculiar effect of gay Asian men’s diminished desirability on the gay playing field rests on those who desire gay Asian men in the first place, as these desires are deemed as “fetishistic.” For example, terms such as “yellow fever” (for people who strictly or predominantly date Asians) and “rice queen” (gay men who solely or primarily desire Asians) locate both a certain type of people and a stereotype: people who are strictly attracted to Asians. Existing research that follows this line of argument includes fat admirers (Goode & Preissler 1982) and transamorous people (Tompkins 2014, Twist 2017), which map out how these desirers legitimize their relationships and situate their relationships in relation to how “society” views them.

The findings from my case study of AFC both extend and challenge these important studies of gay Asian men’s experiences, and of desire framed as “fetishism.” Specifically, by thinking through (1) AFC’s ritual practices and (2) its members’ articulations of the group’s meanings with the sexual fields framework and the language of “sexual capital” and “structure of desire,” (Green 2014:27), I demonstrate how AFC generates a set of organizational/collective logics on members in response to negative social perceptions regarding relationships between gay Asian and gay white men. These logics—equal friendship, post-racial inclusivity, and prioritizing the Asian-white romantic relationship—yield two major effects on the group as a
whole: (1) provide an “inside” space where these negative perceptions from the outside are disregarded, and (2) reverse the structural order of desire, where gay Asian men in AFC now carry the most sexual capital (as opposed to experiencing thwarted desire outside). Individually, all members have to prioritize non-sexual friendship in their interactions with the group in order to remain in the group. However, these organizational logics are not enough in equalizing the playing field and eradicating potential dangers of improper or objectified desire between these two racial groups. On the one hand, gay Asian men’s higher sexual capital comes with a cost—of being desired by “creepy” white men who objectify them and only “see them by their race”—and they have to execute work to confirm that white men’s desire for them is legitimate. On the other hand, gay white men also have to demonstrate their legitimacy as pursuers of Asian men, by both abiding to the “friendship first” logic of the group, and by subduing their pursuits of Asian men.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

1) On the Periphery of Desire: The Case of Gay Asian Men

Studies on gay Asian men¹ in the United States have documented multiple angles where they are discriminated against. Humanities scholars such as Richard Fung (1995), David Eng (2001), and Nguyen Tan Hoang (2014) have investigated a vast array of literature and visual media to evaluate the diminished masculinity and/or feminized masculinity in cultural understandings of Asian-American men. Particularly in Nguyen’s book, *A View from the Bottom,*

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¹ The term “Asian” is a politically charged one: first, I am not using the term “Asian-American” since the latter term tends to evoke American citizens of Asian descent, while the Asian members in my study are a mix of Asian-Americans and Asians who live in America and who are not official citizens. Also, the term “Asian” encapsulates an entire continent, and the vast majority of Asian members in AFC are of East Asian descent. I use this term to follow AFC’s mode of identification: members identify themselves as an “Asian” member (usually followed by their country of origin). At the same time, I wish to acknowledge the messy politics behind this umbrella term.
he identifies how gay Asian men are often stereotyped and identified as “bottoms:” literally as people on the receptive end of gay anal sex, and culturally as an identifying category that is associated with submissiveness and feminization. Nguyen uses pornography, early Hollywood film, experimental art, and 20th century literature to both identify this tenuous association of gay Asian men with bottomhood across visual culture, and subsequently reframe and subvert this association as an empowering point of view: Asian men’s perspective allows for a thorough confrontation with the mechanics of gender categories, their arbitrariness, and their subsequent potentials of redirection on vectors of pleasure, for example (2014:27).

Within sociology and anthropology, studies of gay Asian men and masculinity have focused on different modes of these men’s negotiations and bargaining strategies in response to racist, sexist, and intersectional hegemonies (Poon & Ho 2008, Han 2014, Bader 2017). To provide examples of prevalent works: Anthony Chen (1999) provides the preliminary framework of masculinity analysis for Asian men, as he discusses how culturally feminized Asian men develop different techniques to gain legitimacy as men. Cheong-suk Han (2008) highlight the potential dangers of these bargaining techniques as rationalizations for gay Asian men to have unsafe sex. Han’s book project, *Geisha of a Different Kind* (2015) thoroughly identifies the historical constructions and meanings of gay Asian-American stereotypes (feminized, the “least” desired, etc.), and provides modes of everyday life tactics that gay Asian-American men deploy to think themselves with and beyond these stereotypes. Finally, Martin Manalansan’s *Global Divas* (2008) documents Filipino-Americans in New York, and how their articulations of identity and everyday experiences create alternative pathways to understand citizenship, gender, sexuality, and race. These studies have been foundational to the sociological understanding of gay Asian men: how they experience discrimination and are subject to stereotypes, how they
map out on vectors of masculinities (gender) and racial dynamics (race), how these stereotypes contribute to adverse sexual choices, and how these men respond to and negotiate around these stereotypes. At the same time, these studies take on the overall position of “Asian as victim” (of hegemonies, stereotypes, discrimination). While this perspective is a necessary point of analysis for the racial construction of gay Asian men—especially in implied hierarchies of gay men in America—my case study of AFC extends on this racial construction of gay Asian men further. Specifically, the group’s norms and practices around serve as a collective response to gay Asian men’s lack of desirability in other spaces and increase Asian desirability in AFC’s spaces; however, consequences of racial inequality still remain in the group, as the results will further elaborate.

2) The “Asian Fetish” and its Discontents

Gay Asian men’s low desirability in sexual environments as a reflection of racial inequality in sexual spaces produces an indirect effect on those who desire them. Those who strictly desire Asians in general can be framed as having an Asian “fetish,” or as having “yellow fever.” Specifically, for gay men, those who are only sexually/romantically attracted to Asians are called “rice queens” (Chan 2008). So far, however, studies of this particular dynamic of racialized and interracial desire for gay Asian men have (1) only focused on gay Asian men’s perspectives and (2) only criticized how this desire further subordinates gay Asian men as exoticized, racialized objects. Poon & Ho, for example, through recruiting gay Asian subjects on a dating website, notes how these men reframe their rejections from other (particularly white) men on dating sites as a “personal taste” issue (2008: 254). Social studies of how interracial couples navigate their relationships have covered general trends in America (Holoien et al 2015, Buggs 2017, Gonlin and Campbell 2017), specifically on black-white heterosexual couples
(Steinbugler 2012), and Asian-white heterosexual couples (Nemoto 2009, Lemi and Kposowa 2017), but many of these works are limited to officially married couples and to heterosexual couples in general.

Studies on this specific kind of dynamic have been studied in the context of other peripheral groups—specifically fat women (Goode & Preissler 1982) and transgender people (Tompkins 2014, Twist 2017). For example, Goode & Preissler identify “fat admirers” as men who are explicitly attracted to overweight women. Fat admirers experience “stigma by association” (1982:177), where people who are associated with the stigmatized group—in this case, those who are attracted to and date fat women—are also stigmatized. The authors then identify different types of fat admirers based on exclusivity of desire (exclusive vs. preferential), public embrace of identity (closet vs. overt), and their preference for women’s sizes (mountain men vs. middle-of-the-roaders) (1982:180-186). What are these typologies doing sociologically? First, they work as a substantive response to shallow criticisms that these men’s desires are just “problematic” by mapping out a complex social world around fat admirers. Second, this sociological mapping still considers these typologies on macro-contexts of social inequalities—in this case, expectations of women’s beauty standards based on body size. Tompkins (2014) continues on this second mode of inquiry by denying the derogatory term “tranny chaser” as unproductive for a successful and complex sex-positive trans politics. In order for this kind of politics to emerge and be successfully practiced, it is not enough to simply call cisgendered people who desire trans people a “tranny chaser,” without further analysis of heteronormativity and gender norms in these dynamics of desire (2014:767-768).

This study of Asians & Friends Chicago continues using these stances that these studies of desire for fat women and trans people present, and at the same time extends toward a more
rigorous analytical mode of *desire* as it traverses racial lines. First, stopping at the “fetish/yellow fever” interpretive lens to understand one’s desire for gay Asian men continues to reiterate the same demeaning logics of discrimination toward gay Asian men: “yellow fever” implies a kind of disease, and a “fetish” implies that the object of desire is an abnormal and improper one—both stereotypical lenses push gay Asian men further toward the periphery, and further reduce their low desirability as I have articulated above. Second, refusing a simple “fetish/yellow fever” lens does not mean that one’s desire for gay Asian men is “off guard” and free from critique. Rather, the social interactions that entail “desire” (i.e. involving one’s attraction for another on a sexual, romantic, and/or intimate level) become spaces where constructions of identity (especially on power axes such as racial identity) are solidified, contested, and/or reframed between all parties. Specifically, by bringing both gay Asian men and gay white men together as comparative categories of analysis in a specific case study, I reveal how these two racial groups interact with each other and construct racial dynamics on a micro level (in their interactions with each other), and on a meso-level (in their articulations of group norms, rules, and patterns).

3) **How Sexual is AFC? Thinking through the Sexual Fields Framework**

A productive framework of analysis for sexual interactions in sociology has been the “sexual fields” framework, deployed by Adam Green. Building on Bourdieu’s theories of field and habitus, as well as Goffman’s theories of self-representation, Green deploys a “sexual field” framework to identify, describe, and explain socially structured, collective sexual spaces as a proper and established unit of analysis (Green 2008, 2011, 2014). This framework also takes on Bourdieu’s field logic in its study of the “field” versus the “actor:” the field has its logics and rules that extend beyond individual actors’ control and exert force on them; actors have specific perceptions of the field based on their specific positions in the field (determined by their field-
specific social capital). This logic allows for a productive sociological analysis that identifies both field logics on a social level, and interactions with the field on an individual level.

Below, I identify three terms from Green’s framework that I will engage with throughout my analysis in thinking through the AFC case. These terms are:

(1) **sexual field**: which emerges when “a subset of actors with potential romantic or sexual interest orient themselves toward one another… according to a logic of desirability imminent to their collective relations” (Green 2014:27).

(2) **structure of desire**: a collective system of valuation and judgment (Green 2014:28). This structure operates on an aggregate level, in the sense that it “exceeds the purview of a single actor,” but actors still have to consider this structure if they wish to ‘play the game.’

(3) **sexual capital**: a variable that confers advantage to those who possess it in a specific field (Green 2014:29).

While the sexual field framework is a useful categorical system of analysis to think through the AFC case, I do not think that AFC is strictly a sexual field, because sexual relations are not the only relations that exist in the group, and the group actively frames itself against being sexualized (“we are not a hook-up group,” as one member said). However, these concepts will prove throughout the paper to be useful in describing how desire operates in the group, and how members articulate their desire toward each other in the group.

**DATA COLLECTION & METHOD**

1) **Data collection**

This project draws on eight months (April-December 2018) of ethnographic research, interviews, and archival analysis of the gay friendship group Asians & Friends Chicago (AFC) and its members. This juxtaposition of qualitative data allows me to engage in a *triangulating*
process that clarifies and enriches multiples layers of reality in the group, extending toward the goal of methodological pluralism (Lamont and Swidler 2014).

In terms of ethnography, I joined AFC as a member, and conducted participant observation of their twice-monthly meetups (a dim sum lunch on the first Sunday of the month, and another dinner or official party at a member’s house). After my first dim sum meetup in June and my first few interviews where I established more rapport with members, I was then invited to informal meetups, parties, and social gatherings, adding up to approximately 50 hours of fieldwork. Because I wanted to blend in with the group to gain rapport from its members and also understand thoroughly day-to-day interactions between members, I spent most of my fieldwork hours chatting with members, helping board members prepare for events and parties, and I would write quick fieldnotes on my phone more discreetly, before writing more extensive fieldnotes after each field day. I dove more deeply into the field with the help of four key informants. These four members have been with the group for a long time (one has been with the group since 1984, the rest have been involved for at least 10 years), and they are familiar (if not friends) with almost every regular member of AFC, so they became the gatekeepers that helped with my snowballing process to find other members to interview.

My identity as a gay Asian man—the primary identity category of this group—calls for particular attention to my subjective experience in the field. Contemporary ethnographers have emphasized how subjective experience is intimately tied to the data produced, as opposed to a romanticized ideal of a “distant/objective” ethnographer watching people from afar (Emerson et al 2011:15). At the same time, subjective data must be kept in check carefully, so that this data is not self-indulgent or reflective of the researcher’s “projections” on the field. In my case, I paid close attention to how members interacted with me. In fact, I encountered the experience that
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Tey Meadow describes as “duo reflexivity,” where both the researcher and the researched engage in similar processes of agency and limitation (2013:467).

Throughout my time as an AFC member, I conducted 32 open-ended interviews with 24 AFC members, including 12 Asian men, 11 white men, and 1 Latino man. The extra 8 interviews include 5 follow-up interviews, and 3 interviews with couples (who I also interviewed individually). Each interview lasted from one to three hours, and they were held at coffee shops, restaurants, or bars. While each interview attempts to cover a set number of subjects (personal background, coming out stories, past relationships, involvement and opinions about AFC, involvement in Chicago gay life, interracial relationships and friendships, aging and sexuality), I frame the interview more as an informal conversation where I ask follow-up questions based on their previous answers. Because my questions are geared toward personal or private topics, I establish rapport with them by keeping the conversation informal, by equally sharing my own experiences as a gay Asian man in Chicago (while still maintaining focus on them as the interview subjects), and by follow-up interviews. I record my interviews (or write fieldnotes for unrecorded ones) with the subjects’ permission, and I confirm to them before the interview starts that their names will be anonymized, and that these recordings will be deleted once they are transcribed.

Finally, in terms of archival analysis, I sorted through, reorganized, and analyzed five boxes of 1984-2014 AFC Archives at Gerber/Hart LGBTQ Archives in Rogers Park, Chicago. I also went through the unofficial archives at some AFC board members’ homes and helped them reorganize the archives to be donated to Gerber/Hart. These archives allow me to situate my findings from my interview and ethnographic data in a historical context. Furthermore, through my conversations with board members as they interact with archive objects, I was able to note
their perceptions and opinions about the transformations and (in)consistencies of AFC’s 35-year-history.

2) Method

Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) serves as the foundation for my data analysis, as I code for themes across my data with little assumptions beforehand. Even though I use a combination of qualitative methods, I unify my field notes/memos, interview transcriptions, and archival notes into a hand-coding system (Saldana 2009), where I track various themes throughout the coded data. I find themes through abductive reasoning (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), where I let the data speak to me with limited preconceptions, for unexpected themes to emerge, while keeping in mind larger questions that propelled my project in the first place.

RESULTS

Taking into consideration the sexual fields framework’s dual engagement with structure and actor, I divide my analysis into two parts: Part 1 tracks AFC’s group practices and norms, the rationales behind these practices and norms (with the stakes of the fraught and unequal Asian-white relationship), and how these norms reflect a particular type of post-racial and platonic ideal that remain incomplete, as members find alternative ways to interact with each other on sexual/romantic levels. Part 2 compares how Asian men and white men enter AFC with different stakes on the racial hierarchy of the American dating market (categorized as “pre-group”), and how these two groups of members recalibrate their position and desirability after joining AFC (categorized as “post-group”).
1) AFC Norms & Practices

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<th>Group Reality</th>
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<td>Compartmentalizing Intimacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>“We don’t want to be seen as a hookup group”</td>
<td>“Our texts are flirtier online”</td>
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<td>White-Asian relationship under scrutiny</td>
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<tr>
<td>“We make sure creepy guys don’t prey on Asians”</td>
<td>“Apparently it’s weird to date other Asians”</td>
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Table 1: Paradoxes of AFC Group Practice

a) Monitoring vs. Compartmentalizing Sex

One strand of ideal-driven articulation in AFC through the language of friendship is the group’s distancing from “sex.” Many AFC members emphasize that the group is not a hookup group; rather, they emphasize that they are just “friends hanging out.” Bo, one of the younger Asian members of the group, half-jokingly elaborates on this note of denial: “We can just do all that hooking up and meeting people online.” Friendship in this case implies a platonic, non-sexual interaction between members; when members “hang out,” there should not be an expectation that “hanging out” should lead to a romantic or sexual result. Kyle, one of the Asian board members of the group who is married to a white member, offers this explanation:

If you haven’t noticed, there are a lot of couples in the group. Because the coupled members of the group would not be seeking out for a partner, I feel like the group gravitates toward the casual anyway. We go to dim sum. We have dinners. We do the Pride float. That’s it.

Kyle thinks that the “casual” of AFC is driven by the majority presence of monogamous couples in the group, who will not be looking for another partner, and thus will not support any group interaction that would lead toward any sexual or romantic result. Kyle foregrounds and limits the group’s meals and Pride Parade work as the typical “casual” AFC interactions, because they are not sexually charged.
AFC’s discursive distancing from sex extends to a ritualistic level, as board members of the group regulate interactions between members at social spaces with sexual potential such as parties, where alcohol is involved. George, a coupled Asian member, notes that “[AFC] doesn’t wanna be known as a hookup place, and people wanna feel that it’s a safe space.” Through a closer observation of the group members’ interactions at parties, I started to pick up on a group monitoring ritual that strives to articulate AFC as a “safe space.” Specifically, at the first AFC-organized party I attended, a white member of the group approached me and started chatting with me. He was clearly intoxicated based on his alcohol smell, and while I maintained distance, he became extremely flirty and started touching me inappropriately. It was a difficult situation because I was still a new member of the group, and I wanted to maintain my access with the group members without burning any bridges. Our conversation was then interrupted by Kyle, one of the coupled Asian members in the group: Kyle tapped on the member’s shoulder and started a conversation with him. At the time, I did not “read” much into Kyle’s interruption, but I soon found out that there is a routinized practice within the regular members to keep check on the creepy white guys who are “acting inappropriately,” especially to newer Asian members. When I interviewed Kyle the week after and asked him about how the group responds to “creepy” guys in the group, Kyle told me: “Actually, do you remember last week’s party? Didn’t that one guy try to hit on you? You looked really uncomfortable so I came in to pull him out.”

A few other members in the group—all the regular ones—also identified this pattern. For example, Jack (Kyle’s husband) described to me a similar incident to mine where he had to ask the inappropriate member to leave a party: “If there were any predators in there, they’d generally get bounced out of the herd. They would get ‘hot-boxed;’ they would never be invited back again because they’d be dropped.” In order to demonstrate this group protective practice, Jack uses a
“predator/herd” metaphor here both to identify these “creepy” white guys as a predator, and to associate the entire group as a herd that protects each other from these predatory men. In subsequent AFC events I attended (especially the ones that involved alcohol), this protective practice became more apparent: in one case, two board members approached the two men (where one was flirting with the other, and the other seemed disinterested), and started engaging in conversation with both, while strategically standing in between the two men, so that the alleged harasser could not physically touch or stand too close to the harassed. In another case, I heard a white member berate another white member: “Hey, the group is not here for you to get someone in bed. It’s not a hookup joint!” Indeed, this practice is acknowledged and executed persistently throughout the group, but in this following case, Thanh (an Asian member) expresses his discontent at what this practice signifies on a larger scale, and how it reflects AFC’s persistent difficulty with recruiting Asian members:

So I’ve started to spot it a little bit more, and get a little bit more attuned to it. But it’s still frustrating that we have to keep an eye out, you know? I remember a couple of members who are so used to coming in and automatically touching someone who is a new person. And seeing the reaction on the new person and go: ‘All right…’ And already see a judgment made, and they’re never gonna come back to this group again. Because these guys are old and… whatever. So, now… even now, a couple of our current members even still have that in them to do.

Thanh’s comment here is a useful point to think through analytically what this practice means for AFC, and how AFC struggles to situate itself against the Asian-white relationship. First, this practice as a social practice is quite real as an AFC-specific group phenomenon; even though members may not be talking to each other explicitly about it, they still note the pattern, and repeat this act. Second, this practice is a repeated response against a repeated pattern: that of white men who harass Asian men in the group. Third, this practice and the image that it responds to (the white man preying on the Asian man) reveals a specific kind of racial construction that
the group acknowledges and resists to an extent: that of the weak, feminized Asian man being harassed by the creepy white man. The group indeed responds to this specific racial construction, but its response does not eradicate the construction completely: (1) some Asian members still leave the group based on this discomfort as a result of this unequal construction, and (2) the implication on the axis of racialized masculinity is that the Asian man is still weak and feminized. Another way to interpret this strand of practice is the way that the group keeps check of sexual dynamics between gay white men and gay Asian men in the group. The implied threat in interracial sexual or sexual-driven interactions (when members flirt with each other, etc.) is that the white member will act in an overly assertive, creepy, and non-consensual manner toward the Asian member. In a sense, the white-Asian sexual relationship is under heavy scrutiny.

While this threat becomes a driving force for long-term members to keep check of sexual interactions between members, consensual interactions on a sexual register still persist. Members are still flirting with each other, hooking up with each other, asking each other out on dates, etc. As Bo, a younger Asian member describes the group’s place on the platonic-sexual spectrum:

> First, to say that the group is strictly platonic is to miss a crucial point of the group’s existence. Of course, we’re not Grindr, right? So thinking of that extreme—when people come into our group, they secretly hope that there is some kind of sexual result.

> Bo, along with a few more members, affirm that the group does have a sexual element, partially contrary to the surveillance that members enact. However, these consensual interactions between members still have to respond to the group’s heightened surveillance and scrutiny. Consider this ethnographic example: at an AFC “informal party” that was held by a pseudo-member who has a very big house in Andersonville, at one point I was following Bobby, one of my key informants and a long-involved white member of AFC. He recently shared to me that there is a new Asian member in the group he wanted to pursue. I stepped away as he and the
Asian member were chatting with each other at the party. They talked for around 15 minutes, and I stood at a corner watching them subtly while also chatting with someone else. From a distant observation, they kept a distance from each other and did not show any clear physical sign that they were flirting—they were not touching each other in any way, and there were a few laughs here and there. After a while, a board member came up to the Asian member and interrupted their conversation by pulling the Asian member away, and Bobby walked back towards me. As he was walking back, he pulled out his phone, and I noticed that he had Grindr (a location-based gay dating/hookup app) on. I checked in with him and asked how that conversation went, and he said that it was okay. He then told me that they have been “texting to each other on Grindr, and it’s a bit steamy but I’m not sure if it’s going anywhere.” I was confused as to why they were not being as flirty in regular conversation, and Bobby said (rephrased below):

I don’t know. I feel a bit weird being more flirty at AFC events, knowing that everyone should be friends. And I wanna be friends with this guy too. I don’t know, at the last party was the first time I did this, but I would go on Grindr while we’re at the party and he would be within proximity, and suddenly on there the guy is much more flirty with me. Out here he’s so so shy. I’m still not sure if he is into me though.

The white member who was chatting with me before then proceeded to make a joke to Bobby, that gay Asians are shy in conversation so that “you guys” (white men) have to work to pursue us. “We’re shy at parties but wild in bed,” Andrew said, and everyone laughed.

So what happened in this scenario? First, the group monitoring procedure gets reiterated when the board member comes in and breaks the two away. Second, this procedure did not stop them from communicating in a sexual level, as they switch to their phones for a more discreet mode of communication. This online mode of communication, while quite common between gay men in recent years, bears an extra layer of meaning in the AFC “sexual field,” especially through Bobby’s subsequent explanation: any flirty/sexual-driven interaction between a white
man and an Asian man in this field will be immediately read as a problematic and non-consensual one on the Asian man’s side, so white-Asian members who want to engage in this type of interaction have to do so discreetly.

b) The Paradox of the White-Asian Relationship: Scrutinized but Normal?

The previous section draws out AFC’s particular aversion against public sexual interaction between white men and Asian men, in fear that the skewed racial dynamic between the two gets dramatically repeated: fetishizing, creepy white men preying on shy Asian men. AFC’s implied fear and organizational response (through group members’ monitoring at parties).

A particular moment where this norm of the gay white – gay Asian couple becomes prevalent is in a “negative case” (Katz 2015), where a clear aberration and deviation from the norm puts the social group’s norms to the front. In this case, it is in the position of Harry and Peter’s romantic relationship, where both are Asian men, and how their relationship is stigmatized in the group. Andy, the group president, was the first among many to mention their relationship, and in a particularly deriding tone: “I mean… We just felt… they wouldn’t date each other! Sticky rice, you know.” “Sticky rice” is a derogatory term for Asians who date other Asians. Here, the fact that their relationship is classified under this stereotype highlights their abnormal and stigmatized position in the group.

In my interview with Harry, he expressed vocal discontent about the group’s response to the organization:

I didn’t put this out when we first started dating, but from what I know, they were gossiping because Peter used to date some other white guy from AFC. Somehow they are talking behind us instead of asking us directly if we are dating.

He then recounted a notable moment at a party when the couple decided to publicize their relationship:
I remembered telling Fred that Peter and I are dating now. Fred’s first response was: “No, you guys are just lying. You’re just pretending.” But like, why? What would be the point in that? Why would we be pretending? It genuinely felt like we were coming out all over again. So then, I just came over and kissed Peter, and Fred was gaping! I still don’t get it though. You should be appreciative if two members get together! You should celebrate!

Every element of their Asian-Asian relationship became charged in the organization’s expectations of what a relationship should be—one between a white member and an Asian member. The fact that Peter used to date “some other white guy” becomes a defense point for the seemingly abnormal relationship. Fred’s initial response to the couple’s announcement was that they were lying, and Harry’s befuddlement as to why they would be faking their relationship was so intense that he compared it to an identity-shifting event such as “coming out.” And when the couple kissed in front of the group, they activated and legitimized a their Asian-Asian relationship, while confronting a rarely spoken but deeply embedded norm of the interracial white-Asian couple within the group.

2) Individual Members’ Navigations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation for joining group (pre-group)</th>
<th>Gay Asian men</th>
<th>Gay white men</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low desirability</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- I am deemed as less attractive in other spaces</td>
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<tr>
<td>- I want to establish friendships and find solidarity with other gay Asians</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Rationalizing Racialized Attraction</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>- I have a preference for Asian men, and I have rationalizations for why my desire is legitimate</td>
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<tr>
<th>How AFC recalibrates their identity/desirability (post-group)</th>
<th>Increased desirability, with a cost:</th>
<th>Romantic but Platonizing</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Acceptance &amp; negotiation work</td>
<td>- I have to do work to prove that (1) I am not creepy, and (2) my desire for you is legitimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Legitimacy work</td>
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Table 2: Individual Perceptions of Racialized Desire (pre-group) and Recalibrations (post-group)

a) Pre-Group: Entering the Field with Contrasting Stakes
White members—Rationalizing Narratives

White members articulate their reason for joining the group based on their affinity/preference for Asian men, and they frame this racial preference as a discovery, or they justify their connection. For example, Carey, a 43-year old white member, describes his preference for Asian men as a “discovery” from a chance encounter at a bar:

I didn’t date Asian guys when I first came out. I was uh… I was in my 20s. I was at a bar that’s no longer here in Chicago. Had a few drinks, and this Thai guy shows up, and he goes hi, and I said hi, and he said “oh you’re cute,” and I realized, “Huh. He isn’t bad either.” So he asked me for my number. That didn’t lead to anything serious, but I discovered then that I was really attracted to Asian guys.

This narrative of discovery is repeated with three other members in the group. One of them, Theo (a white member who has been with the group since his late 20s), told me how his side job as a freelance photographer helped him discover AFC, and subsequently his attraction toward Asians:

So the owner of Gay Chicago [a gay publication he was working for as a photographer] called me, and told me to come take photos for this East-West conference coming to Chicago organized by this group called Asians & Friends. I never met any Asian guys before, and they were very cute and welcoming, so I just stayed with the group since.

In this example, Dwight explains his preference toward Asian men through both his sense of connection with Asian culture (particularly in the realm of family relationships), and his explicit attraction with physical associations stereotypically attributed to Asian men:

I do find a… similar culture where… I was raised to respect my mom and dad. You take care of your mom and dad. And I see that in Asian families. That, they are running a traditional family, where they are taking care of each other. I know that sometimes they go a little bit overboard, but… you can’t move out until you get married and all that crap, and you gotta take care of mom and dad and have them move in with you, and all that jazz. Well, I never had to do it that way, but I still thought that the culture was very cool. Very “me.” And I was also physically attracted to Asian guys. So… I’m attracted to skinny, flat-tummied, non-hairy guys.
In both of his rationales for why he prefers dating and being with Asian guys, Dwight relies on general, stereotypical claims about Asian culture (where Asian people respect their parents) and Asian male bodies (“skinny, flat-tummied, non-hairy”). In both of these frames of justification for desire—discovery and cultural connection based on stereotypical/sweeping claims—they still serve as justifications. Dwight is authentically attracted to Asian men, but because gay Asian bodies are devalued in broader society (Han 2015), Dwight feels compelled to justify his attraction. He cashes in on stereotypes to make his justification legible to others.

*Asian members*—*Foregrounding Low Desirability*

The Asian men in the group, however, never talked explicitly about a specific racial preference when it comes to their experiences before joining AFC and outside of AFC. Instead, a major driving narrative that many members shared is a sense that they are not desired in other spaces. Alexander recalled his experiences going to bars and feeling jealous that “guys wouldn’t even check [him] out,” and that “even the mediocre-looking white guys got more attention.” Many Asian members highlight a stark contrast in their desirability in AFC as opposed to other gay spaces such as gay bars in Boystown. Or, Jiacheng, a graduate student who just moved to the US from China two years ago, described the feeling of being on gay dating apps such as Grindr and Jack’d and experiencing Asian exclusion in those spaces:

I saw this guy’s profile once, and it said: “Asians no reply.” Or when I redownloaded the app and my photo wasn’t approved yet, this guy asked for my pic and when I sent it to him, he stopped talking to me. Sometimes I don’t know if it’s because I’m from China, or because of something else. I work out and I am pretty fit.

In his first example, the profile Jiacheng saw was explicitly racist as it states bluntly that Asians should not text that person. His second example showed Jiacheng’s ambivalence when another guy did not respond after he sent a photo, but he could not help but think that it was because of his race—as it is shown in his photo—that he was ignored. Jiacheng points out two
forms of sexual capital—his body type (fit) and his race (Asian)—and even though his bodily capital could increase his desirability, his race still trumps and diminishes his attractiveness. Alexander and Jiacheng’s perception of their low desirability is manifested on multiple sexual fields (Chicago bars, on dating apps), and even when they are unsure about who grounded the racial claim is (in Jiacheng’s case of the man ignoring his text after he sent his photo), the narrative that their racial identity is less/not desired maintains a strong foothold as a driving force for their identity.

b) Post-Group: Navigating Desire and Friendship within AFC

Asian Men—Increased Desirability with a Cost

On one level, there is a clear switch in sexual capital, where Asian men do experience a higher level of desirability in this group; in other words, they are more desired, seen as good-looking, and worth pursuing sexually/romantically. This higher level of desirability, however, comes with a cost: race has a threat of becoming an all-encompassing factor in white men’s desire for Asian men. As a result, Asian men either accept/negotiate around this desire, or they find evidence to legitimize these white men’s desire that go beyond racial preference. For example, I noted that in the beginning of my fieldwork, it was particularly easy for me to approach white members of the group to request interviews, while it was much more difficult to approach Asian members. In fact, white members would actively approach me at the first and second dim sum meets, and it became quite clear to me that these men were pursuing me. When I asked these members their contact information for interviews, they read my requests as my attempt to try to pursue them. Andy, a board member and one of my key informants, laughed when I told him of this recurring experience:
Of course, dear, that the rice queens will be hunting for you! If there’s one maybe nice thing about this group, it’s that gay Asians get a lot more attention. Sometimes that attention isn’t pleasant though.

This notion of “getting more attention” signifies a switch in social capital for gay Asian men in this field: in this case, they are placed higher in AFC’s hierarchical structure of desire. At the same time, this increase in social capital becomes quite fraught, as the increase in desirability does not necessitate an increase in “respectability” that gay Asian men should be receiving. Rather, they have to keep check of how “creepy” these guys are. One way that Asian members respond to this switch in sexual capital is through “acceptance and negotiation work”; specifically, they frame this desire as an experience that feels good.

So yes, on the one hand, I would agree that I don’t want to be looked at just for my race. But, I do wanna be desired. So if I want both of those things, why would I be… why would I look down on someone and say ‘this guy is a rice queen; it’s a fetish for gay Asians?’ Well, in a part I would be like… ‘that’s one thing that I don’t have to worry about! At least he finds me attractive!’

Even though Andy acknowledges the problem of men who are attracted to him “just for [his] race,” he negotiates around the situation by isolating the attractiveness factor from the race factor. In other words, as long as he desires the member (even though his Asian race plays a factor), that is enough.

A different way that Asian men approach their new but fraught increase in desirability is through “legitimacy work,” as a way to filter out and legitimize white men’s desire for them in this group. For example, Connor’s articulation bridges these two ways: “As long as the white guy sees me for who I am, that’s fine.” By “who I am” here—Connor is implying other parts of his body and identity that do not have to involve his race. Or in my joint interview with Jiacheng (Asian member, graduate student) and Fred (white member) who are dating each other, Jiacheng described Fred’s pursuit of him as such:
I was so nervous that Fred only sees me as another pretty Asian boy, and that nothing else about me matters. Some guys in AFC are like that—they only like Asian boys like us for our skin. But Fred is different: he is smart, he cares about my studies, he’s really genuine about my country. It took me the first few months to really warm up to Fred though.

In Jiacheng’s process of legitimizing Fred’s romantic desire for him, he differentiates Fred from other members of AFC: while “others” (other white men) are the ones who only like “pretty Asian boys,” his boyfriend Fred is concerned with post-racial aspects: he is interested in what Jiacheng studies, and he wants to understand his boyfriend’s culture further. These elements beyond Jiacheng’s race serve as evidence that legitimizes his boyfriend’s desire.

White men—Legitimizing Attraction, Social Distancing

Unlike Asian men who experience a substantial increase in sexual capital, white men’s sexual capital in AFC gets qualitatively transformed: white men are still desirable in the group by Asian men, but white men have to prove and legitimize themselves according to standards of the group (mutual friendship, no “creepiness”) in order to be considered both a legitimate member and a viable sexual/romantic partner.

First, the figure of the “creepy white guy” is a recurring shorthand that all members use, but white members specifically identify this figure as a way to distance themselves from it—"I am legitimate because I am not a creepy white guy.” Jiacheng called them “leeches,” while Tuan, a 38-year-old Asian member described them as such: “You say hi to them and they’re nice and sometimes, maybe after one or two drinks, they start whipping you.” These categorizations allude to a type of old, white member who joins the group to “prey” on and seduce younger gay Asian men. Fred, the 50-year-old white member uses the term “rice queen”—a derogatory term to describe white men who is attracted to only Asian men, and proceeds to vent to me about these men:
The only reason they are interested in Asian guys is that they are subservient. They’ll see a new Asian guy like you—a young, college guy who just joined the group—and these queens lose all their self-esteem, and they will get all the attention they can get that these little guys will give them. Oh, especially the international ones who just arrived here and might not have enough experience too…

Note here how Fred uses my own status as a new Asian AFC member to describe the appearance and function of these men as predators for new members. An implication in this statement, however, is in a specific stereotypical construction of a white-Asian interracial relationship that is repeated: the older, creepy white man that preys on young Asian men without “enough experience.” This repetition of a stereotype enunciated outside the group, especially from the white men who would be stigmatized as the “predators,” serves a strategic function. These white members distance themselves from these “rice queens,” legitimizing themselves and their relationships with desires toward Asian men as legitimate and unproblematic, while pointing their stigmatizing fingers at these vilified, animalistic men whose desires are deemed predatory.

Second, as a direct response to Asian members’ legitimacy check work on white members that I have discussed above, white members have to subsequently prove that they are pursuing Asian members of the group with genuine intent, and without a racialized drive that would be read as “fetishistic.” Theo, a white member, recounted that on a date with an Asian member, he was asked about his dating history, and when he said that the previous two people he had dated were Asian men, the date raised his eyebrows in judgment. He explained to me his process of legitimizing himself as such:

I had to explain to the guy that I’m not a rice queen. Yes, I think Asian men are the most attractive, but I love men of all races! I had to explain to him that I have dated non-Asians before too. He’s a new guy too, so he doesn’t yet know that I’ve been with AFC for a long time. I’m legit. I don’t creep on Asian guys. Everyone in the group knows that!
Theo deploys tactics I have discussed previously that white men use, such as foregrounding his attraction for other races, and even his dating history with non-Asians. He also gathers his legitimacy further by highlighting his long tenure in the group, and that other members would affirm that he is a decent person (rather than a creepy white predator).

**DISCUSSION**

This paper investigates racial inequality between gay Asian men and gay white men in interpersonal relationships of desire, intimacy, and friendship; and ways that racial inequality is resisted and reinstated from personal to organizational levels—through a qualitative (ethnographic, interview-based, and archive-based) case study of a gay friendship group called Asians & Friends Chicago (AFC). Findings as highlighted in this paper are two-fold:

First, AFC generates group logics and practices—such as collective monitoring of flirty and potentially sexual interactions—as an organizational response to negative associations toward sexual/romantic relationships between gay white and gay Asian men. These logics and practices serve as incomplete resistance attempts, as skewed dynamics between the two groups (the creepy, preying white men attacking innocent, feminized Asian men) are still implied, and members still find alternative ways to engage with each other on a sexual/romantic level.

Second, reiterations and contestations of racial inequality also emerge on an individual level between members of the group, as they recalibrate their identities and perceptions according to group norms and practices. On the one hand, *Asian members* experience an increase in sexual capital in AFC, but this increase in desirability comes at a cost: they first enter this sexual field with the context of their low desirability in other fields; they are deemed as more attractive, but they run the risk of white men’s attraction to them solely for their race; they subsequently have to confirm that this attraction is legitimate, i.e. these white men like them for
“who they are.” On the other hand, white members enter the AFC sexual field stating their explicit attraction for Asian men while providing rationalizations for their attraction (such as narratives of “discovering” Asians or generalizing statements of attraction with other races), and their presence at AFC requires them to legitimize their proper attraction toward members even further. They conduct this legitimacy work by distancing themselves from other “creepy white men” and reaffirming their membership as “friends.”

These findings reveal intricate and complex emergences and articulations of racial inequality, especially in relationships under the umbrella of intimacy, such as friendships, sexual relationships, and romantic connections. These intimate relationships carry a burden of transcending politically charged relations, such as racial and sexual dynamics between gay white men and gay Asian men. Thus, these relationships become fertile ground for a further understanding of racial construction and interracial relations, and of individual agency against these structural forces of race. Specifically, it would be insufficient to describe gay Asian members of AFC as victims of discrimination on the American dating market; they find ways to make sense and meaning of their friendships and relationships with each other and with white members in the group. It would also be insufficient to interpret gay white members’ desire for Asians as fetishistic.

This case study has uncovered the subtle logics of racial inequality between gay Asian men and gay white men in an idealized friendship group, but there are still other analytical elements—both within the case study and beyond—to be productively explored further. First, AFC’s age demographics hover around the 40s to 60s, and cultural conceptions and stereotypes of white-Asian relationships also have an age element (i.e. the white man is usually much older, and the Asian man much younger). How does the group’s older demographic relate to these
stereotypes? What do those stereotypes of aging mean for a further understanding of racial inequality between Asian men and white men? And what does this demographic tell us about this type of friendship group itself, which seems to be particularly prevalent for this generation, but less so for younger generations? Second, AFC is not the only gay Asian social group in Chicago: groups such as Trikone (an LGBT South Asian group) and Invisible 2 Invincible: Asian Pacific Islander Pride of Chicago (an activist-focused LGBT Asian group) provide fertile ground for comparative analysis within the same urban framework, on topics such as Asian representation within the city, political stances on racial inequality and the “Asian” umbrella term, and generational identity.

AFC’s group logics and norms, under the umbrella of friendship, strive for the ideal vision of homosexuality that Michel Foucault provides in an oft-quoted interview, “Friendship as a Way of Life:” a “historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities” (1997:138). These men, and the social group that emerges from these men, do strive for friendships and relationships that transcend issues of racial inequality. At the same time, these visions that AFC have delineated are incomplete in execution, and tracking the group’s contradictions and differentiated stakes between Asian members and white members reveals to us the intricacies of racial inequality that still persist within an idealized friendship project.
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BIBLIOGRAPHY


