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# The cultural politics of race in Chinese cinema: Nationalism and the changing representation of whiteness in *Big Shot's Funeral* and *Crazy Alien*

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## Abstract

Research on whiteness in Western cinema has effectively revealed how cinematic representation contributes to formulating, perpetuating, normalizing, and contesting white superiority in Western cultural discourses. However, little research considers how Chinese cinema imagines and negotiates whiteness. Using the visual-textual analysis method, this article examines the representations of white identities in *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001, dir. Feng Xiaogang) and *Crazy Alien* (2019, dir. Ning Hao). These are two well-received post-socialist Chinese dark comedy films depicting encounters between Chinese people and Westerners in contemporary China. Approaching racial identity as a form of social positioning, I analyze how various meanings are ascribed to white identities in the films, and how these meanings articulate Chineseness and Chinese nationalist sentiments. I show that white superiority is simultaneously reinforced and contested in the two films. While doing so, I will also highlight Western cultural theories' lack of analytical power in explaining how white superiority in cultural discourse transforms across different geographical locations.

## Keywords

Race, whiteness, identity, dark comedy, cinema, nationalism

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## Introduction

The correlation between racial hierarchies and media representations of race pinpoints an array of scholarly inquiries that center upon the intersection of white superiority and cinema. Starting with Middle Age European paintings through contemporary media culture, [Dyer \(1997\)](#) analyzes how cinema continues to work as one of the latest forms of representational media that reinforce whiteness as a pervasive yet largely invisible cultural construct in the West. [Shome \(1996, 2000\)](#) explores the rhetorical strategies through which white characters are presented and positioned as cultural norms in American mainstream cinema. To destabilize what she terms the “racial regime of looking,” [Seshadri-Crooks \(2000\)](#) examines films that denaturalize whiteness and encourage the audience to look differently. By studying how a series of white-looking characters in Western cinema reiterate white privilege, [Foster \(2003\)](#) points out cinema’s indispensable role in upkeeping and performing whiteness as a universal norm. While this scholarship has revealed film’s impact in formulating, perpetuating, and contesting white superiority, its gaze is rarely lifted beyond Euro-American cinema.

White representations in cinema have never been an exclusively Western phenomenon. However, far from merely imitating Western depictions, whiteness in cinema elsewhere is often differently articulated, appropriated, and challenged. For instance, [Gehlawat’s \(2011\)](#) research on the evolving images of white women in Indian cinema shows whiteness has been, in tandem with Bollywood’s shifting cultural politics, coded as a racial Other and an object of desire. Moreover, the conflation of whiteness and indigenusness in Mexican cinema between the 1930s and 1950s is read by [García Blizzard \(2022\)](#) as reconciling Mexico’s celebration of mestizaje and the colonial beauty standards in that period.

Since the Reform and Opening up, a handful of Chinese films featuring white-looking foreign characters have been produced. These films range in genre from war history films (e.g., *Red Cherry*, 1995; *Red River Valley*, 1999), melodrama (e.g., *Kissing Russia*, 1994), comedy (e.g., *Big Shot’s Funeral*, 2001; *Crazy Alien*, 2019), action (e.g., *Wolf Warrior 2*, 2017), to Si-Fi (e.g., *Wandering Earth*, 2019). In this article, I look into the cultural politics of racialized representations in the dark comedies *Big Shot’s Funeral* (2001) and *Crazy Alien* (2019). By bringing race and Chinese nationalism into the dialogue, this article shows how the portrayals of Americans in these two films are employed to articulate Chinese identities and nationalist sentiments.

## Whiteness in China

The term whiteness in the Western context carries a peculiar historical and social weight. Before the 1980s, race studies primarily focused on non-white people. But since the late 1980s, there has been increasing scholarship focused on how white people exclude and discriminate against racial Others ([Du Bois, 1994](#); [Hage, 2001](#)), the racial inclusion of working-class immigrants such as Jews, Irish and Eastern Europeans ([Roediger, 2005](#)), the multiplicities of white social positions and experiences ([Frankenberg, 1993](#)), and media representations of white superiority ([Bonnnett, 2000](#); [Dyer, 1997](#); [Gabriel, 1998](#)). Despite their diverse approaches, these studies are limited by their heavy reliance on Western-centric racial politics. The normative power of whiteness is transnational. Whiteness is set up as “normal human,” and non-white are therefore pressured to obtain some degree of whiteness to be “more human” ([Fujikawa, 2008](#), p. 7). However, white power is not always all-encompassing since race is always socially constructed and specific to different local historical, socio-political, and cultural conditions ([Kowner and Demel, 2015](#)).

As China emerged as a global economic power and an immigrant nation, more and more scholarly attention has been paid to the issue of race and racism in China. In examining the social constructions of different non-Chinese racial categories, such scholarship has primarily focused on blackness, by examining pre-modern Chinese perceptions of blackness (Wilensky, 2002), Sino-Africa relations (Castillo, 2021), the Chinese state's migration policy (Lan, 2015), popular media (Castillo, 2021; Cheng, 2011; Pfafman et al., 2015; Zhou, 2023), African migrants' experiences in China (Castillo, 2014, 2016; Lan, 2019; Mathews et al., 2017; Wilczek, 2018), and interracial romance and marriage (Zhou, 2023).

Compared to blackness, whiteness in the Chinese context remains a less explored field. The past two decades saw a limited number of studies spotlighting the multiplicity of whiteness through examining the experiences and positionalities of corporate elites (Camenisch and Suter, 2019; Farrer, 2019) and middling migrants such as those working for start-ups and English teachers (Kefala and Lan, 2022; Lan, 2021; Lehmann, 2014; Leonard, 2019) from major Western countries. These researchers demonstrate that, on the one hand, Western migrants' white identities often bring them material and symbolic advantages in China. On the other hand, whiteness can be conflated with foreignness and thus rendered into a marginalized, insecure minority identity. Furthermore, race is not a "distinct realm of social experience and locations" but exists with social categories such as gender, class, and nationality (McClintock, 1995, p. 5). Therefore, multiple cross-cutting hierarchies shape Western migrants' social positions, resulting in them experiencing both advantages and disadvantages in China. In addition, whiteness is historical and situational. Factors such as the Chinese state's increasingly tightening migration policy, the geopolitical tensions between China and the West, and rising Chinese popular nationalism have further contested white privilege in China in recent years (Lan, 2021; Sier, 2022; Litman, 2022; Kefala and Lan, 2022; Lan et al., 2022).

While this scholarship offers insightful analyses into the tension-fraught, multi-layered social construction of whiteness in China, few have considered the Chinese media's role in contributing to racial ideologies concerning whiteness. Hence, rather than researching the lived experiences of white migrants, this article investigates the cinematic representations of whiteness in China from the perspective of Chinese nationalism. More specifically, this article explores how Chinese identities and nationalist sentiments are expressed through the cinematic images of white foreigners.

## Articulating Chinese nationalism through the images of foreigners

By the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, the concepts of race and nation had been crystallized in Western Europe. Many scholars believe the two notions emerged in the same context of "internal European political and economic reorganization and external European expansion" (Demel and Kowner, 2015, p. 12). However, when theorists discuss nation and nationalism, many treat race as a secondary factor of nationalism (Demel and Kowner, 2015). In Foucault's tracing of race, he notices that modern race since the 19th century has become a "technology of power" or a "mechanism" for the state to use to manage the population, to allow biopower to work, and to exercise its sovereign power (Foucault, 1997, p. 258). Although his analysis is based on European histories, a similar logic can also be found in China's employment of race to articulate Chinese identity since the turn of the 20th century.

In pre-modern China, the Han people, the dominant ethnic group, primarily used the distinction between human and non-human to exclude and differentiate the outsiders. Cultural imaginations such as demonization and animalization were actively mobilized to hierarchize the superior, inferior, and unfamiliar (Chen, 2010). At the time, white was also a Chinese identity since it was associated with the elite class and was considered refined, civilized, and beautiful. Nevertheless, the

rise of exclusionary European racial whiteness has forced the Chinese into a yellow identity (Bonnett, 2000; Wyatt, 2012).

European racial taxonomies in China first appeared in Qing medical and geographic scholars' scripts and publications around the mid-19th century (Barth, 2015). From the late 19th century, China encountered struggles against both Japanese and Western imperialist powers. To respond to these challenges, nationalism and racial constructions worked hand in hand to lead to a political distinction of Self and Other. Scholars, reformers, and revolutionaries appropriated the concept of race to fit their nationalist agendas (Zhao, 2004). For instance, reformist thinker Kang Youwei (1859–1927) used the terms human breed, human race (人种), and breed, race (种族) to differentiate Westerners, Chinese, and Africans based on their physical attributes (Kang, 2016). The Chinese nationalist leader of the Republic of China (1912 – 1949), Sun Yat-Sen, used the term yellow race – as opposed to white and black – to articulate the modern Chinese identity in his *Three Principles of the People* (Sun, 1927). In the Mao Era (1950s – 1970s), the state initiated an anti-imperialist agenda by building national friendships with developing countries and staged racism as a purely Western phenomenon (Lan, 2017). While the previous Chinese reformers and scholars outspokenly placed whiteness and yellowness on top of blackness in the last era, the Chinese state in this era often differentiated the Chinese identity from whiteness through being non-racist and egalitarian.

Since the 1980s, in response to capitalist globalization, the Chinese state has been forced to switch from strict communism to more flexible political forms. Zhao coins “state-led pragmatic nationalism” to describe Chinese nationalism in this period (2004). As an ideological means to distinguish Self and Other, racial thinking has been blended into nationalism in an increasingly complex way. This is particularly evident in the images of foreigners in Chinese visual culture. In discussing Western women who appear on the covers of Chinese magazines and advertisements in the 1990s, Johansson (1999) suggests that these women are often depicted as sexually attractive and confident. While these visual depictions project pleasure and power onto the white female body, it also reflects China's desire and fear of the West. Since China acceded to the WTO in 2001, China has made significant economic development and its rise as a global superpower has been mediating the cultural politics of race. By examining the prevalent Chinese advertisements produced in the early 2000s, Li observes that such advertisements sold nationalism and transnationalism simultaneously to Chinese consumers. While employing Western bodies to promote Chinese products is an aesthetic choice, such a choice aims to assert “a larger share” of Chinese products in the global capital market (Li, 2008, p. 1157). With an increased number of foreigners appearing on Chinese TV programs, Gorfinkel and Chubb (2013) analyze the televised Chinese language competitions for foreigners. Their analysis shows that these foreigners often wear traditional Chinese costumes, recite Chinese poetry, write Chinese calligraphy, and sing Chinese pop songs. The mixture of their foreignness and stereotypical Chineseness on Chinese TV works to foster the imagination of China being a proud, confident, and cosmopolitan country. Ever since the release of  *Beijingers in New York* (1993), an increased number of Chinese TV dramas featuring foreign casts have been made. Song (2013) examines the representations of romance between foreigners and the Chinese in the melodramas *A Modern Family* (2002) and *My Natasha* (2012). The author shows that both dramas work to articulate “an officially sanctioned discourse of taking pride in being Chinese in transnational relations” (Song, 2013, p. 114) However, while the earlier drama *A Modern Family* implies a gendered and sexualized desire to embrace the foreign, *My Natasha* shows a desire to conquer the foreign. This changing attitude is emblematic of China's shifting self-perception of its role on the world stage.

Along with the enunciation of Xi Jinping's political meta-discourse, the "Chinese dream," the Chinese state has been using various types of resources to imagine and realize China's great power status, dignity, and respect after the century of humiliation ([The Economist, 2013](#)). Shifting away from the previous perception that China needed to catch up with the West, many Chinese people have started to view Westerners, not as the superior racial Other but as the parasitic beneficiaries of China's economic development ([Preferential treatment, 2020](#)). Meanwhile, the cultural representations of Africans in China and Sino-African relations increasingly position China as the source of modernity for Africans. Here, China and the Chinese seem to replace whiteness and Western civilization ([Castillo, 2021](#)). Recently, China's nationalist sentiments have risen to a new high due to the US-China trade war and the global outbreak of COVID-19. With rising geopolitical tensions between China and the West, [Ma \(2022\)](#) shows that as the most popular and debated foreign group on Chinese social media, white male vloggers had to carefully portray themselves as ordinary, responsible, and China-loving men to appeal to their increasingly xenophobic Chinese followers.

## Researching whiteness in Chinese dark comedies

Employing the visual-textual analysis method, this article further explores the intricate interplays between Chinese nationalism and racism by examining the representations of whiteness in *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001) and *Crazy Alien* (2019), two Chinese dark comedies having American characters as part of their leading roles. Three major reasons motivate my choice of these two films.

First, Feng Xiaogang's *Big Shot's Funeral* was produced and released in the Chinese film industry's "corporative era" in the early 2000s when the Chinese government began to put the industrialization of Chinese cinema on its political agenda ([Zhang, 2008](#), p. 105). Coproduced by Columbia Pictures (the US), Huayi Brothers (China), and Taihe Media (China), *Big Shot's Funeral* was the box-office champion for 2001 in Chinese cinema. Ning Hao's *Crazy Alien*, produced by Chinese private firm Huanxi Media, is the final installment in his dark comedy trilogy *Crazy Series*. *Crazy Series* began in 2006 with *Crazy Stone* and continued with *Crazy Racer* in 2009. After the first two films' enormous commercial success in China, *Crazy Alien* was released in 2019 and ranked second at the Chinese box office that year. The box-office popularity allows us to see the films as vehicles for considering common depictions of white identities in Chinese media.

Second, during the 20 years between the two films' releases, several events in the Sino-West relationship occurred. These included China's accession to the World Trade Organization, the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and the US-China trade war starting in the mid-2010s. A comparative analysis of the two films adds a historical lens for exploring how the configuration of whiteness in Chinese cinema is informed by larger changes in geopolitical dynamics and China's shifting self-perception.

Furthermore, thematically and aesthetically, the two films offer a unique meeting ground to attend to the complexity of racial identities depicted and promoted in China's ideologically sanctioned media landscape. Generally, dark comedy begins with the same assumption as the literature of existentialism: the world is absurd ([Pratt, 1993](#), p. xxi). Regarding narrative, dark comedy is often articulated through an anti-novelistic structure, persuading viewers to identify with its antiheroic characters ([Liu, 2018](#), p. 159). Likewise, the worlds presented in *Big Shot's Funeral* and *Crazy Alien* are illogical and absurd. In both films, the Chinese protagonists are established as economically and socially powerless Chinese men in contemporary Chinese society. Through their absurd encounters with white Americans and the series of events that follow, the lives of these Chinese protagonists change drastically. Downplaying logical order, the characters' intentions, actions, as well as their consequences are often dislocated. Meanwhile, *Big Shot's Funeral* and



*Crazy Alien* remain dark comedies with “Chinese characteristics”, in the sense that both films maintain a subtle balance between the Chinese state-imposed nationalist ideology, commercial imperative, and social critique (Liu, 2018, p. 161). On the one hand, the two films do not shy away from revealing the underbelly of contemporary China’s rapid social transformation. In doing so, they hold a cynical, if not critical, stance towards China’s socioeconomic reform since the 1980s and its various social consequences. On the other hand, to coalesce with China’s top-down state-led ideology and the capitalist film market (Fung, 2016), these critical elements tend to be quickly undermined by the films’ excessive use of commercial cultural references and the rhetorical elements such as irony and exaggeration. Like in most Chinese films and TV dramas, the foreign characters are primarily stereotyped and objectified to articulate various Chinese characters’ “subject positions” (Hall, 1997, p. 8). However, the two films differ from many mainstream representations, especially those representing China’s revolution history (e.g., *Red River Valley*, 1999), in which the images of Chinese and foreigners often immediately run into the binary of moral subjects and foreign devils. Due to the two films’ ambivalent stance, neither *Big Shot’s Funeral* nor *Crazy Alien* straightforwardly demonize whiteness while glorifying Chineseness. Instead, the images of whiteness in both films are mediated by the interplay between pride of and cynicism towards Chineseness.

Much research on the stereotypical treatments of racial minorities has focused on the social plausibility and mimetic accuracy of such treatment. It is crucial to highlight false representations that harm already marginalized groups. However, such a “corrective approach,” as Shohat and Stam call it, runs the risk of essentializing race since it assumes a “self-evident” racial category based on which false representations can be easily discerned (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 178). To avoid the trap of essentializing racial identities, they propose that we do not solely focus on the “mimetic adequacy and the sociological or historical truth”. Instead, we should also reflect on how different aspects of a film, such as its “image, sound, discourse, and perspective, interplay with each other and formulate a personalized, authorial, and often conflicting voice regarding a given racial identity” (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 214). In response to their call, this article moves away from criticizing how foreign characters are inaccurately depicted. Instead, I focus on how these characters are employed as the means to enunciate multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings of being Chinese and how Chinese nationalist sentiments are embedded in these meanings.

### Big Shot’s Funeral (2001)

Being the first Sino-American production released after China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, *Big Shot’s Funeral* tells a story full of wild speculation and twists about transnational film production. A world-renowned American filmmaker Tyler (*Donald Sutherland*), together with his Chinese-American assistant Lucy (*Rosamund Kwan*), go to Beijing to film “The Last Dynasty” as the sequel to Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci’s Oscar-winning film *The Last Emperor* (1987). Upon their arrival in Beijing, Tyler’s assistant Lucy hires a local cameraman Yoyo (*You Ge*) to document Tyler’s filmmaking process. During the shooting, Tyler becomes increasingly unsatisfied with Bertolucci’s representation of China in *The Last Emperor*; yet runs out of inspiration to film a “real China.” Faced with a highly commercialized contemporary China in which Western products and Chinese copies of them are ubiquitous in every aspect of life, Tyler is confused and stressed. Through Lucy’s translation, Tyler turns to Yoyo by learning Yoyo’s “Chinese views” on life and death. Later, when Tyler quarrels with his profit-driven American production team, he suddenly experiences a heart attack and is sent to the hospital. Having jokingly promised Tyler to hold a Chinese “comedy funeral” (喜丧) when he passes away, Yoyo decides to fulfill his promise.

Since the Americans offer no funeral budget for Yoyo, Yoyo uses Tyler's fame to auction and sell off advertising spots on the funeral to raise money. After the ferocious competition, many brands receive the right to advertise at the funeral. However, when everything is ready, Tyler miraculously recovers, jeopardizing Yoyo's deals with the advertisers. Yoyo is faced with tremendous debt and put into an insane asylum full of lunatic investors. To save Yoyo, who is faking his madness to evade his creditors, Tyler resumes his position as the director of Yoyo's "comedy funeral."

Starred by renowned Chinese comedian actor You Ge, Yoyo is an early middle-aged Chinese man who is somewhat cynical yet kind at heart. As a freelance cameraman, he hovers between different temporary jobs, and working for Tyler is one of them. Like many ordinary urban Chinese who worked outside government organizations in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he is financially unstable and always looking for opportunities. Living on his wits, Yoyo and his Chinese friend are much more flexible and better at playing business games than the Americans. When there is no money to hold a funeral for Tyler, they sell Tyler's fame and reputation to the advertisers. When they need to impress foreign investors, they pass themselves off as a big transnational corporation. To mock the frenzy of consumerism in Chinese society, the Chinese like Yoyo in *Big Shot's Funeral* are absurd: they are clever, cunning, and able to play capitalism better than the Americans but barely survive in their own cut-throat Chinese society. To a degree, the portrayals of the Chinese are self-insulting.

However, the portrayal of the American white man Tyler, and the Chinese American woman Lucy, have made the representations of the Chinese and China lovable. Growing at a rate of 10% each year, China's transition from a state-controlled to a market economy in the 1990s created a huge market potential for the West and attracted many multinational companies to invest in China. China's economic boom has made China "more nationalist at home and more vocal abroad, especially in its dealing with the West," and the belief that "the West needs China" has become increasingly prevalent (Xu, 2001, p. 160). Such enthusiasm about China's rise is reflected in the film's portrayal of the middle-aged white male American director Tyler.

The first scene of Tyler features him sitting in the palace of the Forbidden City, where his American production team has hired hundreds of Chinese actors in costumes ready for his command. In the scene, he wears a traditional Chinese suit-inspired vest (唐装) and holds an anxious look. Despite having a big budget to rent the palace and hire the people, Tyler is unhappy: contemporary China is far too different from Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* and the sequel he is making. And the representation of the highly "contaminated" Chinese cultures in the film explains it all: far from being a culturally pure, unified nation, contemporary China is where the Chinese boy, who stars the last emperor Puyi in Tyler's film, rests at the Dragon Throne, relaxingly drinking "Laughable Cola" – the Chinese copycat version of CocaCola. Moreover, it is also the place where mad Chinese investors chat about hiring a British doorman with an "authentic British accent" to make their European-style housing properties look expensive. These social phenomena resulting from the economic success of reform China go far beyond Tyler's expectations and have made his filmmaking about the last Chinese emperor irrelevant.

Rather than simply positioning Tyler as an ignorant cultural outsider, the film sets up a number of scenes in which Tyler interacts with Yoyo and later imparts his wisdom. This can be exemplified in a scene where Tyler discusses *The Last Emperor* with his Chinese American assistant Lucy. While pondering the discrepancy between his film and contemporary China, he tells her in English that *The Last Emperor* is a Western canonized work that simply turns the life of the last Chinese emperor Puyi into the story of "a man's liberation" that purposefully "appeals to Western audiences." When he asks Yoyo's opinion about it, Yoyo says, "Puyi's life is not sad at all. He had a lot of beautiful women surrounding him, and it was financed by the Qing [dynasty] government. I only had one



woman, and she has already divorced me.” Indeed, busy with making a living, why would ordinary Chinese care about themselves less than the tragedy of the last Chinese emperor from some 200 years ago? As the interactions between Tyler and Yoyo further proceed, the character of Tyler learns, evolves, and eventually becomes someone who understands and appreciates Yoyo and the society he is in.

The depiction of foreigners who are attracted to China has precedence. Since the 1980s, there have been many foreigners expressing through performance how they love China and Chinese culture on Chinese state-regulated media. In doing so, these performances give the Chinese audience a sense of patriotic joy for China’s reemergence as a confident nation at the center of the world stage (Gorfinel and Chubb, 2013). The image of Tyler is similar to the previous China-loving-foreigner images in the sense that he is also fascinated by China. However, whereas the representations of China and the Chinese by other China-loving-foreigners tend to be objectified, essentialized, and often imbued with a self-Orientalist mentality, the kind of China and the Chinese presented through Tyler’s perspective are more contradictory: they are mundane and problematic, yet also vivid and fun.

While the film idealizes a senior white male as an open, curious, and friendly foreigner, it does not extend the same level of gentleness to the image of Lucy. Lucy is portrayed as a young, good-looking, well-educated Chinese-looking American woman who embodies white American cultural norms. In the film, she speaks highly of Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor* but knows very little about the so-called Chinese cultures: in the film, Yoyo often has to explain to her Chinese common-sense notions, such as the notion of “the Buddhist realms” (境界). This aspect of her character is also portrayed through Tyler’s comments of her being someone who is “not quite Chinese” and “brought up in an American sensibility.” Besides, at the film’s beginning, Lucy is also depicted as a middle-class American suspicious of the Chinese. While Tyler is kind to Yoyo from the start, the film creates scenes portraying Lucy’s arrogance and distrust towards Yoyo. She frequently quarrels with Yoyo over trivial issues and questions his motivations for being sweet to her and Tyler. However, throughout filmmaking and funeral planning, Lucy gradually realizes how lovable this Chinese man is: he might be odd and different from her American peers, but he is humorous, spontaneous, and responsible. Such realizations eventually lead her to fall in love with Yoyo. To highlight the bliss of their romance, *Big Shot’s Funeral* ends with a romantic scene in which Yoyo and Lucy, after all the farces and drama, kiss each other.

The desirability of Chinese masculinity for non-Chinese women is a frequently used trope to articulate racial dynamics in Chinese media<sup>1</sup>. In Castillo’s analysis of racialized and gendered representations of Africans in China, he points out that African women are often staged as wanting to marry Chinese men to “escape the traditions” at home and “enter modernity” (Castillo, 2021, p. 429). This image boosts the nationalist imagination of China and the Chinese as being advanced, open, and therefore implicitly superior to African countries and people. The persona of Lucy, a Chinese American woman who later finds true love in China, also evokes a sense of pride in being Chinese. However, in this case, nationalist sentiments derive from the interplay of the Chinese inferiority complex towards whiteness and the West. In Chow’s reflection on the cultural politics of ethnicity, she suggests that the mainland Chinese often emit a sense of hostility towards the Chinese who “happen to have access to the West” and “[are] validated by the West” (Chow, 2002, p. 189). Coined by her as a “postcolonial *ressentiment*,” this emotion results from the collective Chinese memory of their unequal and humiliating contact with the white world. While the Chinese are angry at the Western Other, the hostility can be redirected to ethnic Chinese who have “made it” to the world of this powerful Other since the anger entails “a conscious and unconscious longing for the postcolonial ethnic community” (Chow, 2002, p. 190). Following her line of reasoning, one can say

that the image of Lucy in the film, on the contrary, fulfills a Chinese postcolonial longing for ethnic unification. As someone who has made her way to Hollywood and has become socio-economically well-established in the white-dominated West, Lucy eventually returns to China. She is transformed into a “proper” Chinese person through the charm of a Chinese man. By celebrating the Chinese American women’s racial sameness while downplaying the socioeconomic and cultural differences from Chinese man Yoyo, the film evokes a sense of racialized and gendered joy found in the Chinese being equal to racial whiteness.

In Ahmed’s writing on the cultural politics of love concerning nationalism and multiculturalism, she notes that “the idea of a world where we all love each other is a humanist fantasy (...) those who do not love, those who do not get closer, become the source of injury and disturbance” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 140). After all, it is “out of love that a group seeks to defend the nation against others, whose presence then becomes defined as the origin of hate” (Ahmed, 2015, pp. 122–123). Her conceptualization of love may be particularly suitable to understand the politics of white identity represented in *Big Shot’s Funeral*. Through Tyler and Lucy’s changing attitudes towards China and the Chinese, whiteness slowly becomes close to the Chinese. Under this condition, whiteness becomes lovable, transforming a seemingly once passive, bitter, fractioned Chinese identity into something enchanting, charming, unified, and, most importantly, enjoyable.

### Crazy Alien (2019)

Directed by Ning Hao, *Crazy Alien*<sup>2</sup> was released in 2019 when the US and China transitioned from a largely positive relationship to an increasingly antagonistic, mutually destructive set of relations (Swaine, 2019). Domestically, China’s political environment had become less open to social criticism. Such a socio-political environment is discernable in *Crazy Alien*. The film narrates a bizarre story of the alien, the American superhero, and the grassroots Chinese. The story starts with the American government discovering another planet where aliens live. To establish a diplomatic relationship, the aliens demand a sample of a human gene from the Americans. After careful selection, the Americans obtain the gene from a white male bodybuilder with an IQ of 180. They claim that this is the gene coming from “one of us” (white American men), who is from the “most advanced nation on planet Earth” and “who can represent the human race.” Later, the American government sends an astronaut to outer space to deliver the gene. However, whilst they almost accomplish the mission, the white American astronaut Andrew’s (*Matthew Morrison*) silly behavior – using the Chinese app Tiktok to take a selfie with the alien – accidentally disorients the alien and causes it to crash land on Earth. The alien lands at a circus in a park in China, where Chinese monkey trainer Geng Hao (*Bo Huang*) lives and works. Geng and his wine trader friend Dafei (*Teng Shen*) pick up the alien. The two Chinese men have no idea as to what the alien is. They mistakenly take the alien as a rare species of monkey. Because of an injury to his monkey, Geng devises a plan to train the alien, who he believes is a monkey, to perform in his monkey-trick show. After a long intensive search using various modern technologies, the American team, led by white male John (*Tom Pelphrey*), finally finds the alien in the park. They come to the park with sophisticated devices to recapture the alien. Nevertheless, the alien resists cooperating with them. Instead, the alien decides to build a diplomatic relationship with Geng and Dafei since he has grown a taste for the Chinese wine they offer throughout the alien’s stay with them.

Appropriating the images of American superhero Sci-fi films, the Americans and the US in *Crazy Alien* always look refined, sleek, and futuristic. The people’s faces are spotless. Always dressed in neat suits at work, they talk confidently, move firmly, and strongly believe they work in the service of righteousness and peace. Similarly, the nation of America in the film is clean, prosperous, and

technologically advanced. By contrast, the Chinese Geng and Dafei lack these refinements. One can also always see the sweat, dirt, and other marks on their faces. They dress casually, talk and eat loudly, and act rashly. Geng lives and works in a world park, where many Chinese can visit foreign landmarks without leaving China. Surrounded by the replicas of the Eiffel Tower, the Great Pyramids, the World Trade Center, and the Moscow Kremlin, Geng's monkey circus is a shabby square full of dust and cheap furniture. His friend Dafei's shop, located on a chaotic street full of electro-mobiles and broken signboards, shares a similar atmosphere.

Although the film portrays the US as an economically and technologically advanced nation, the Americans, who are predominantly white in the film, are frequently mocked. Generally, the film employs the rhetoric of irony to contrast the Americans' powerfulness and ambition with the Chinese protagonists' powerlessness and casualness, particularly regarding their attitudes toward the alien. In the scene where the American team sends Andrew into outer space to connect with the alien, the film appropriates the aesthetics of Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). While the futuristic visual effects and sublime music give this mission a sense of greatness and graciousness, the mission is eventually disrupted by their astronaut's obsession with selfies. By contrast, Geng accidentally finds the alien in his shabby storage room, where he tries to rescue his monkey who had gotten stuck in the messy furniture. Geng first only sees only the alien's foot and, out of curiosity, pulls the alien out from the dusty mess, showing a confused and surprised look. Unlike the white Americans, the film treats Geng's encounter with the alien as entirely random and unexpected.

Later, the film's portrayal of the interaction between Geng and the alien further enhances this irony. Unlike the Americans, Geng and his friend misidentify the alien as a rare monkey. While Geng wants to train the alien to perform more complicated tricks and popularize the already outdated "Chinese monkey-trainer culture" (耍猴), Dafei, the small businessman, wants to sell the alien to the curious rich. The alien is stubborn. Both Chinese protagonists frequently physically punish and verbally abuse the alien to tame him. However, when Geng and Dafei are on peaceful terms with the alien, they watch TV, eat hotpot, drink, joke, and play together. These mundane daily interactions seem to give the viewer the impression that, despite the Chinese protagonists not treating the alien with more respect than their American counterparts, their relationship with the alien is more authentic and sincere. Conversely, the Americans' approach to the alien is more inhumane, insofar as the alien is not so much seen as a living, emotional being, but as a tool to solidify the nation's power.

In Western cultural representations, Asian stereotypes are often connected with a dystopian future, termed techno-Orientalism (Roh et al., 2015). Asia as a place, especially metropolises like Tokyo, Hongkong, and Shanghai, is often portrayed as a technologically advanced, futuristic space. Meanwhile, Asian bodies – very often young Asian female bodies – are often racialized as sexually attractive, yet emotionless robots or robot-like humans who need to be saved or educated by real humans from the West. *Crazy Alien* seems to subvert such a techno-Orientalist depiction of Asianness by inserting an Occidentalist portrayal of a technologically advanced yet robotic and destructive America. In doing so, the film evokes a chuckle of delight deriving from a sense of Chinese superiority: "we" Chinese are far from perfect, but "they" Americans are worse.

Apart from the general depiction of the Americans as a group, the film also focuses at length on the American team leader, John. In the film, John is a conventionally attractive white male appointed to lead the Americans to catch the alien in China. Compared with Tyler and Lucy in *Big Shot's Funeral*, whose characters develop along with the plot, the figure of John is one-dimensional and does not develop. Generally, he is portrayed as selfish, silly, and racist. Before the US government appoints John to catch the alien, he is in alcohol rehab. In the scene when people in the rehab get

together to chat about their experiences, he frequently interrupts an Asian American man and later pulls out his gun to threaten him. After John returns to work, the film also uses a few seconds to portray how he makes fun of his black American colleague. Later, when John and his team ride massive submarines to Brazil to look for the alien, he, again, aggressively interrogates the dark-skin locals and mocks them for their lack of ambitions. This portrayal of the racist white male seems to criticize white supremacy in and outside the US. However, such an anti-racist stance remains dubious. While the white Americans' racist perceptions towards the non-whites is purposefully highlighted, the issues concerning racism against Africans and other racial minorities in China remain untouched in the film. The high visibility of criticism against white supremacy along with the invisibility of the reflection on racial issues in contemporary China are thus complicit with the official Chinese and popular nationalist narratives that racist problems only exist in the West.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have analyzed the representations of white identities in the Chinese dark comedy films *Big Shot's Funeral* and *Crazy Alien* through the prism of Chinese nationalism.

In *Big Shot's Funeral*, white American filmmaker Tyler and Chinese American assistant Lucy are portrayed as ignorant cultural outsiders who later transform into lovable foreigners who "truly" appreciate and understand China and the Chinese. In *Crazy Alien*, white Americans are depicted as ambitious and socio-economically superior, yet clumsy and arrogant. At first sight, the films' display of the Chinese protagonists' failures, limitations, and flaws seem to give the audience the impression that Chineseness is not much better than whiteness. However, as the uniqueness of Chineseness vis-à-vis whiteness is slowly articulated as the plot develops, both films evoke a sense of pride and joy in being Chinese. It is worth noting that, unlike many official Chinese films and TV shows that straightforwardly demonize whiteness while glorifying China and its people, the kind of Chinese nationalism articulated in both films is covert and coded within their self-mockeries.

In addition, the two films' different depictions of white identities demonstrate that, far from a static entity, whiteness in Chinese cinema is multiple. Meanwhile, it changes along with China's shifting status on the world stage. When *Big Shot's Funeral* was released in the early 2000s, China was experiencing rapid economic growth and was becoming an indispensable part of the world economy. Informed by this emerging status in the global capitalist market, the portrayals of the relationship between Yoyo, Tyler, and Lucy imply a yearning for the West's understanding and recognition. Differently, *Crazy Alien* was produced when China's rise as a global superpower had become widely discussed, and when the relationship between China and the US was increasingly articulated in terms of conflict and competition. Mirroring the geopolitical climate, the relationship between Geng, Fafei, and the Americans is framed in terms of rivalry. The two versions of white representation are, therefore, symptomatic of the prevailing nationalist sentiments at the time.

In mainstream Western cinema, whiteness has often worked as a hegemonic, invisible norm in relation to other racial identities (Dyer, 1997). In comparison, the representations of whiteness in the two Chinese films simultaneously reproduce and contest such power dynamics. Like in the Western cinema, whiteness in the two films is associated with economic power and technological advance. Nevertheless, whiteness is transformed into a highly visible minority identity and is blended and contrasted with local norms and values to accommodate the Chinese audience's nationalist feelings. In this vein, white superiority is both reinforced and questioned.

In Castillo's analysis of black representations in China, he describes "the replacement of whiteness" as "a discursive effort to replace white bodies with Asian/Chinese bodies in a geopolitical scheme." (Castillo, 2021, p. 436). In the case of blackness, Chinese media is increasingly

adopting tropes and rhetorics such as “Chinese men saving African women”, to articulate a hegemonic Chineseness superior to other racial identities. However, globally, whiteness still holds incomparably more privilege than emerging hegemonic Chineseness. Thus, such a “replacement of whiteness” is understood by him as an “emerging pattern” (Castillo, 2021, p. 436). From *Big Shot's Funeral* and *Crazy Alien*, we can also clearly see the attempt to replace whiteness with Chineseness. Employing black humor rhetoric, both films seek to compete, subvert, and overcome white superiority. Nevertheless, these cinematic efforts to draw attention to whiteness instead of other non-Chinese racial identities implicitly confirm that white identity remains an identity of power. As such, while the white hegemony is contested and consequently in the process of changing, it remains pervasive as an “unfinished history” (Ahmed, 2007) in Chinese media.

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### Notes

1. Due to China's patriarchal tradition, the Chinese cultural discourse concerning inter-racial desires and relationships tends to celebrate the relations between Chinese men and foreign women. In these instances, foreign women's attraction to Chinese masculinity is often linked to the greatness of the Chinese nation.
2. *Crazy Alien* is loosely adapted from Chinese writer Liu Cixin's sci-fi fiction *A Village Teacher* (2012).

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