# Representation and performativity of whiteness in China

*The case of foreign digital entrepreneurs*

Kefala, C.

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# Representation and Performativity of Whiteness in China :

( Who was I

at that time? ___ )

## the Case of FOREIGN DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURS

( I felt like

I was l o ——————— s t

in translation, __

not only regarding ——— language

but

regarding

the_____ core _____of

my

own

identity . _

)

Kefala Christina

Representation and Performativity of Whiteness in China: The Case of Foreign Digital Entrepreneurs

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

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aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
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door Christina Kefala
geboren te THESSALONIKI

Christina Kefala

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Christina Kefala

*To my dreamy, youthful soul*

Christina Kefala

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Not for all the tea in China
Not if I could sing like a bird
Not for all North Carolina
Not for all my little words
Not if I could write for you
The sweetest song you ever heard
It doesn't matter what I'll do
Not for all my little words

*(All my little words, Magnetic Fields)*

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## Table of contents

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# *CHAPTER 1*

## Chapter 1:

## INTRODUCTION

### *Lost in translation*

This dissertation examines how foreign entrepreneurs navigate the Chinese business market, by looking at the intersections of race, gender, and digital entrepreneurship. The inspiration for this study comes from my own experiences prior to doing Ph.D. research. These pivotal experiences unfolded during my master's studies in sociology at Fudan University in Shanghai, China, and especially during my internship at a Chinese advertising and consulting company between 2017 and 2019.

I vividly recall my first day as an intern at the company, located at the French Concession area of Shanghai. It was late March, and the humidity of Shanghai was already setting in. The two-floor building housed fifteen Chinese employees, ranging from mid-20s to mid-30s, diligently working with their laptops in small groups at round wooden tables. Two large fans on the ceiling operated in perfect synchronization, circulating cool air. Above, a giant storefront poster adorned the space, featuring a blond, foreign woman advertising a bag from a renowned Italian fashion brand.

As an international student embarking on my first work experience in China, this internship was integral to my master's studies. When I first arrived at the company, and while anxious about the unfamiliar environment, I was distracting myself by focusing on the poster while waiting for my supervisor to explain my responsibilities. The distraction was short-lived however, as the poster suddenly fell to the floor. One employee glanced down and returned to

his work without missing a beat. I remained in my seat until my supervisor arrived, then casually picking up the fallen poster and tossing it into a bin near the exit door.

With a warm smile, she turned to me and said, “Let us work on something new. That poster was quite old; the advertisement lasted for almost two months. You are in China now! Time is money, and new businesses are on the way.” Confused about the short production of the ad, I shifted my gaze to the other posters around the room. They were all fresh drafts of commercial posters ready for printing, strategically designed to promote Western brands, either by famous Western companies or of products made by Western entrepreneurs living in China. Moreover, the posters predominantly featured foreign white models, and English was the language of choice for marketing the products.

During my time spent at the company, I observed notable transformations in the office dynamics, particularly in the shift of Western businesses’ advertising campaigns from physical stores to China’s digital platforms. In addition, advertisement production accelerated significantly, with posters being replaced by contemporary paintings.

However, the most impactful change occurred when I was asked to market a product of a French cosmetic brand. The company invited me to create a pilot to pitch the idea to our partners in France and in China in order to advertise it later to the public. My supervisor chose me, she said, because I was the only white Western woman with blue eyes in the company, and she believed I could effectively present the product to potential customers. My Chinese colleagues agreed, telling me I was the “perfect” marketing strategy for the product because my skin color was “catchy” on camera.

Several days later, I was wearing a short black dress, had pale makeup and shoulder length wavy hair. With my lipstick on, I awkwardly smiled in front of a camera. Meanwhile, my supervisor was explaining to our partners how the product would be distributed to China's e-commerce platforms by white Western models with blue eyes like mine.

After finishing the video, I returned to my student dorm and had a hot shower. I touched my face and looked at my hands. My fingers were covered in makeup and I remember looking closely at the rest of my body and thinking about my identity and skin color. Who was I at that time? I felt like I was lost in translation, not only regarding language but regarding the core of my own identity.

I never stopped wondering if it was just my physical appearance during my internship that influenced the success of a product for our colleagues instead of other factors, such as the quality of the product itself. A few months later, after finishing my Master's degree and internship, this introspective episode evolved into the foundational premise of my Ph.D. research.

I began to query whether foreign entrepreneurs used such approaches to advertise their products, with whiteness marked as a commodification practice for success. This curiosity led me to explore the representation of white bodies within China's business market, thereby propelling an inquiry into the business patterns of foreign entrepreneurs and the strategic construction of their own image to ensure business profit. The focal point of my research became examining how these entrepreneurs navigate the Chinese business market, through the prism of racialized performances. More specifically, while my internship afforded me insights into the metamorphosis of businesses adapting to the social media landscape in China, my

scholarly focus has been on a distinct cohort of digital entrepreneurs capitalizing on China's digital sphere, crafting racial digital narratives to attain success. For this group of people, the proliferation of social media and e-commerce platforms in China has become an avenue for entrepreneurial engagement.

In addition, the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2019, subsequently escalating globally, imposed travel lockdowns and travel restriction for more than three years, and consequently precluded my physical return to China for ethnographic research, compelling a transition to digital ethnography. The shift of my research to China's digital scape facilitated an understanding of my participants' online enterprises but also enabled me to conduct a nuanced analysis of the intricate dynamics of white racial formation within China's digital business landscape.

***Moonrise Kingdom***

Hello! Can you hear me? No? Let me try to reconnect.
Good morning! Is it okay now? Perfect. It is good to see you. The recording is on, and we can start. (I took a deep breath.) What time is it now in Shanghai?

On a cold February morning of 2020, at three o'clock in Amsterdam, I am boiling water to brew a soothing green tea. Earlier, I have organized my desk by placing my books on the bookshelves and have made some space to use my electronic devices comfortably. I have also arranged fresh flowers on the table behind my desk and have carefully adjusted the poster hanging on my wall – an art piece from a skateboard shop in Shanghai that I acquired when I lived there. Now, with everything set, I am prepared to sit on my chair and open my laptop to

meet my first research participant, a fashion designer in her early 30s from Antwerp, Belgium, who has been living in Shanghai for the last seven years and works as an entrepreneur.

Iris' face is on my screen. She looks at me through her laptop with a bright smile and waves her hand, sending a 'hello' from afar. She stands up and walks around her room with her laptop in hand. I do not need to ask anything; I follow her and observe her surroundings. She stops in the middle of the room, touches her laptop screen with her nose, and whispers, "
"Here, it is eleven o'clock in the morning. I bet it is midnight for you. Now that you are awake let me show you something you might be interested in." Iris moves a big velvet pink curtain hanging from the ceiling and enters a smaller room filled with fabrics, an adjustable dressmaker dummy, a sewing machine, tracing roll papers, scissors, and pens.

While she shows me her fashion designs, I notice a camera on a tripod behind her desk. Since I also use many different cameras, as photography is my hobby, I cannot resist asking her about her camera. Iris smiles and says, "It is not a travel camera; it is my working camera. Through it, I can sell my designs" (she pauses, sits at her desk, and looks at me more intensely). "I am also selling myself. Look at me. I am like you—blond, blue eyes. You know. My skin matters here in China. The camera's lenses reflect my skin online through social media or when I livestream my designs. First, it is me, and then it is my designs." I reply, "You mean your white skin?" Iris continues to smile. "Of course, my white skin. Here I am, not just Iris. Here I am, the white Iris. It took some time to get used to it, but now I can work with it. I am working both with my fabrics and my body." She continues. "This is my kingdom. This place is right here. I could not imagine a better place to become an entrepreneur like here in China."

Our conversation continued until early morning, and after I closed my laptop, I went to sleep since I had another interview the next day. Meanwhile, for Iris, her business in China was her kingdom, and I wanted to know more about those young foreign migrants in China. For me, the digital space was my kingdom. In my small studio in Amsterdam, I was waiting for the moonrise in order to talk online with my research participants in several Chinese cities and examine the reconfiguration of whiteness in China through the lenses of young foreign entrepreneurs: through their narratives, business profiles, blogs, and social media platforms.

***Research Question***

Since China is the world's second-largest economy, it has also witnessed a surge in the influx of migrants from Western countries seeking to capitalize on the country's economic expansion in search of employment and business opportunities (Farrer 2019). In the initial stages of the Reform era in the 1980s, white Westerners, constituted a significant portion of foreign migrants, with a notable presence among upper-class business circles (ibid). However, the country's economic expansion in the last three decades has diversified the migration flows from transnational elites to middle- and lower-class entrepreneurs with varying mobility trajectories (Camenisch 2019; Farrer 2019; Leonard and Lehman 2019; Pieke 2012). Existing scholarly literature has primarily focused on analyzing transnational elite business owners, positing that white skin confers a coveted qualification in the Asian job market (Farrer 2019; Leonard 2019). My study, in contrast, delves into the unexplored group of self-initiated young foreign migrants who actively engage with China's social media platforms and the platform economy to promote their businesses. This engagement involves the construction of digital images, both of themselves and their enterprises. This research illuminates the transformation of the foreign business population in China, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the concurrent rise of nationalism and xenophobia. Moreover, rather than solely

examining the privileges attached to white appearances, it seeks to unveil the contradictions and diverse manifestations of white racial formation in China.

I specifically explore the representation and performativity of whiteness by studying young foreign entrepreneurs predominantly engaged in online businesses. To conduct my research, I examine how young foreign migrants experienced the Covid-19 pandemic and how they have resorted to racialized branding to promote their business, while also analysing online advertisements by Western brands. I complement my analysis by examining my own positionality as a young, white, Western woman conducting digital ethnography through China's social media platforms.

This study aligns with the European Research Council (ERC) China-White project, led by Shanshan Lan, associate professor at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Amsterdam, which investigates "The Reconfiguration of Whiteness in China: Privileges, Precariousness, and Racialized Performances." The project identifies China as "a new frontier zone where the concept of whiteness is scrutinized, contested, reconstructed, and expressed in various social and personal contexts" (China White, 2019)[1].

Thus, the dissertation delves into how different expressions of whiteness are perceived, embraced, challenged, and demonstrated in everyday interactions involving white foreign migrants and a diverse set of institutional and social entities in China. Through a critical examination of the business field in China in contributing to the fragmentation and restructuring of global white privileges, I aim to highlight the persistence of white hegemony in various social and cultural contexts and examine the complex and often controversial

[1] https://www.china-white.org

processes through which this dominance remains relevant or fragmented. To this end, I answer the following research question:

"How is whiteness as a power structure produced, represented, and performed among white young foreign entrepreneurs in China, within the context of their business activities, social interactions, and the intersections of race, gender, and digital entrepreneurship?"

To address the central question, I focus on three specific issues:

1. The nuanced tensions that arise from the interplay of privileges and precariousness on the white racial formation within a transnational context (whiteness as capital).
2. The performativity of racialized white identity and its intersection with gender on business strategies (racialized branding).
3. Visual racialized practices on social media platforms (representation and digital racial formation).

In my dissertation, I initially analyze the experiences of two groups of Western entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining their personal stories of leaving China due to pandemic, the study uncovers the complex tensions of the social construction of whiteness in China's transnational entrepreneurial sector. Subsequently, I delve into the lives of young, foreign, entrepreneurs living in China who are involved in online businesses. The primary focus is on understanding how the intersection of race and gender influences their business strategies and contributes to their success stories. Finally, given the surge in digital marketing and advertising on China's social media platforms, I investigate how representations of whiteness are integrated into the discourse(s) of online advertising.

Each thematic concern lies with the application of an intersectional approach, which scrutinizes the interdependence of race with salient dimensions such as ethnicity, gender, class, and technological systems, most notably social media. This confluence of intersecting power relations serves to foreground the intricate construction of foreign entrepreneurs' racialized positions in China's business sector. Moreover, the study examines the ways race can be constructed as capital and can benefit the position of migrants in the labor market. Lan (2022: 3548) proposes "to view white capital as a dynamic construction that is re-assembled and reproduced through migrants' active engagements with multiple groups of institutional and social actors in China. Transnational white capital may function as a resource for Western migrants to sustain their white skin privilege in China, yet its dynamic and changing nature also betrays the precariousness of white skin privilege in a non-western context." Thus, the focus of each chapter of this dissertation is the examination of race as capital and the different forms it takes according to the participants' experiences as digital entrepreneurs.

In addition, rather than positing a static essence inherent in individuals across diverse situations, contemporary perspectives assert that racialization are inherently performative. Thus, the point of departure for this dissertation is that whiteness is a "racial designator" (Lund 2022: 3) it is not a singular and complete state of being but rather a process of becoming. Moreover, the concept of whiteness, as a marker of racial identity, is not a biological determinant but a social construct. Omi and Winant (2015:x) claim that "race operates in the space of intersections, at the crossroads where social structure and experience meet. It is socially constructed and historically fluid. It is continuingly being made and remade in everyday life. Race is continually in formation." Thus, racial formation fundamentally involves the process of "creating" or "constructing" people. Consequently, similar to any term employed to delineate a purported racial group, "whiteness" acquires significance within a social milieu

(Omid and Winant 2015). Its definition, interpretation, and classification unfold within the historical and cultural contexts that shape it (ibid).

Whiteness undergoes continuous creation and sustenance through various channels such as ethnicity, gender, language, legal frameworks, technology, policies, media representations, popular culture, and other conduits. Over time, it undergoes shaping and reshaping through alternative means of defining, interpreting, and categorizing individuals as white. Examining white racial formation in China necessitates a nuanced understanding of how race intersects with and influences individual experiences in contemporary China's specific cultural and social context.

***Overview of China's immigration policy on foreign businesses and entrepreneurs***

The image of China as a land of opportunities, and the notion that big cities like Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen have evolved into privileged places for living and conducting business activities, gained prominence during the post-Mao era. This was especially the case through the implementation of 'opening-up' policies in the late 1970s, designed to attract foreign entities, most notably Western businesses and entrepreneurs. The Chinese state could construe this surge of migration as a "deliberate state policy to utilize foreign technology and foreign investment to modernize China and to help the country establish a prominent position on the world stage" (Brandy 2000: 946). Despite the notable economic expansion in China during the Reform Era, the country has, over time, presented various regulatory challenges for foreign migrants and their businesses, including the frequent alteration of visa policies aimed to manage and oversee the presence of foreigners in the country.

The proliferation of *Waishi* (foreign affairs) activities, namely the Chinese government's attempt to control foreigners in terms of foreign culture and technology, have played a pivotal role in shaping the government's approach toward migrants, emphasizing the concept of "friendship with foreigners" and the involvement in political and economic pursuits such as foreign investment and trade (Brady 2003). This approach also aligns with "treating insiders and outsiders differently." The seemingly paradoxical nature of these actions by the Chinese state serves the dual purpose of forging new diplomatic relations with foreign individuals while concurrently asserting dominant foreign policies characterized by distinctive Chinese attributes (ibid).

In the early 1990s, there was a rise of foreign migrants to China, coming mainly from Western Countries, and looking to take advantage of China's economic growth. More specifically, after Deng Xiaoping's Southern tour in China in 1992, foreign investments increased as the era's slogan was 'expand opening up and bring foreign investment' (Brady 2000). The collective influence of the Chinese Government and the counsel of the World Bank created preferential treatments for foreign businesses, such as reducing or returning taxes (Jiang 1998). Leonard and Lehman (2019), analyzing the international migration to China, state that despite the special treatment that foreign migrants enjoyed during that period, many of their benefits were curtailed in relation to Chinese citizens. Due to the economic reforms, many Chinese citizens got the chance to enjoy a more privileged lifestyle and better working opportunities. Within this competitive working environment and the market-driven economic context, the Chinese public has started to admire and promote foreigners who invest and make their own money in China (Leonard and Lehman 2019). At the top of this process have been Western entrepreneurs who have started to do business in big cities like Shanghai (Stanley 2013). Since a significant portion of Westerners during this era relocated to China as part of corporate transfers, a

considerable number transitioned into entrepreneurship after working for several years for prominent Western corporations. This entrepreneurial shift manifested in enterprises such as English language schools, Western-style restaurants, and bars (Farrer 2019).

Since China became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, and particularly during the global financial crisis in 2008, the volume of foreigners, including Westerners, migrating to China increased[2]. Pieke (2012) points out that during that period, China created through its market economy conditions for "autonomous immigration and settlement" (Pieke 2012: 44). Western foreigners therefore generally migrated to China to benefit from its economic rise and find paths to labor opportunities, either as corporate transfers or as self-employed entrepreneurs. In 2012, Chinese government also established a new Exit and Administration law for foreigners entering the country. One year later, the Chinese Government updated the visa categories, including visa category R, attracting high-level talent for labour opportunities. As Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle (2014) state in the latter visa and migration law adjustments, there were several substantial changes causing adverse effects on migrants. Their primary assertion is that despite the measures of Chinese law to manage, control, and decrease the undocumented foreign migrants, there was a new shift by the Government to attract and promote the entry of new migrants, the so-called foreign talent. Farrer, in his analysis of foreign talent to Shanghai, states that those who migrated to China

[2] It is significant to mention that the Chinese national census in 2010 reported the foreign population in the country for the first time, excluding residents from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao. 600,000 foreign nationals came to China in 2010, with the largest category coming from nearby Asian countries and the second largest being Westerners from the US, Canada, Germany, and France (Zhou and Elsinga, 2015). In 2016, the Chinese Government published new data about the foreign working population in the country, with the number rising to 900,000 persons (Huang and Yan, 2018). Preliminary data shows that in 2020, China was home to 1,430,695 immigrants, split between 584,998 residents originating from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, and 845,697 from the rest of the world (Bickenbach and Liu 2022). However, how many people left during the COVID-19 pandemic, or how many still live in the country since the pandemic is unknown. As of 2023, approximately 12,000 individuals from foreign countries have been officially granted permanent resident status in China (Zhang 2023).

during this period were not particularly highly skilled, but their 'race,' i.e., white features, was a significant component of what constituted a skill for the Chinese labor market (2019).

Considering the latest migration policies of the Chinese Government aimed at attracting a much younger, talented generation to work in China, Western graduate students of China's universities who turned into entrepreneurs are significantly visible in the total population of white foreign migrants. Since 2016, the government has authorized international graduates from numerous Chinese within the country to seek entrepreneurship visas within a one-year timeframe (Zhou 2019), while in 2018, the government implemented what is commonly known as the 'start-up visa'[3]. The program started as a pilot in Shanghai, while the launch of this type of visa was connected to the broader vision of the Chinese government to make the country a hub of technology and science in the near future. The Chinese government has also expanded its policies to attract international students to study at China's universities (Lu et. al 2019). Several scholarships from the Chinese Government and scholarships from individual cities, such as the Shanghai Scholarship for foreign students, attracted 'talented' foreigners. Universities in Shanghai are even training international students through workshops and entrepreneurial competitions to build their own companies in the city. Graduate students are in fact often willing to create innovative start-ups and e-commerce companies, competing with their Chinese colleagues who either graduated from China's universities or had returned from their overseas studies.

[3] This visa was implemented first in Shanghai in 2018 and is referred to as the Entrepreneurship Visa (residence permit for one year with extension possibility):

- International students who graduated from a higher education institution in China.
- Foreigners planning to become entrepreneurs.
- Talented overseas graduates either from leading Chinese universities or world-renowned universities. They must have graduated for no more than two years and prove their achievements in innovation.

This diverse array of foreign entrepreneurs in China suggests various motivations that precipitated their relocation to China, along with their individual preferences regarding the nature of the businesses they sought to establish and develop. However, the landscape shifted significantly with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent imposition of border restrictions in China, resulting in the suspension of the entry of foreign nationals for a duration of almost three years—from March 28, 2020, to January 8, 2023. During that period, numerous visas were suspended. The trajectory of future developments remains uncertain, particularly about the forthcoming prerequisites for foreigners to legally engage in entrepreneurial activities within the country. Moreover, the disruption of business activities due to pandemic led many young foreign entrepreneurs to get involved in China's social media platforms and remain especially engaged for the sake of their businesses.

The rapid development of digital technology infrastructure and the government's willingness for digital innovation have led to a growing interest for cultural producers, such as entrepreneurs, to digitize and distribute content on online platforms (Keane and Chen 2017). This convergence has manifested mainly over the last decade in the country, where technological innovation and cultural creativity have gained momentum (Flew et al. 2019; Keane 2016.) The Internet+ blueprint has been explicitly prioritized in China's recent 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), underscoring its centrality to the nation's digital economic development strategy. In this development, foreign entrepreneurs leverage social media platforms like WeChat, Douyin, Xiaohongshu, Pinduoduo, Bilibili, Sina Weibo and Taobao to promote their businesses, especially during the pandemic.

Notably, it is essential to analyze how foreign digital entrepreneurs actively incorporate racially representational practices to achieve successful branding efforts. The purpose is to shift the focus of anthropological studies towards a subject that has not yet received sufficient attention. This endeavor seeks to establish a scholarly domain for critically examining the construction of whiteness in China, mainly through the lens of this emerging group of migrants currently expanding in China's digital space.

***Researching Whiteness in China***

Critical Whiteness Studies, prominent in Western academia, constitute a multidisciplinary field encompassing diverse scholarly contributions from researchers worldwide, yet they predominantly focus on Western societies. Yet, a significant and emergent body of literature is exploring new geographical perspectives in whiteness studies (Ang et al. 2022; Bonnett 2000; Debnár 2016; Kelsky 2001; Nayak 2007; Wiegman 1999). Consequently, and relatedly, my research shifts the focus away from the usual Euro-American contexts to a context where the white body is not visibly dominant and racial whiteness constitutes a minority.

My dissertation highlights a divergence between white skin and the hegemonic implications of the power of whiteness. This phenomenon is intricately tied to the performativity and representation of corporeal whiteness, which undergoes a perceptible redefinition as a minority identity. Within this nuanced transformation, processes of racialization unfold in diverse and occasionally contradictory ways. In China, corporeal whiteness transcends mere institutional authority, regularly becoming intertwined with perceptions of ‘foreignness’ and facing critical scrutiny under Chinese gazes.

The definition of "foreigner" in China varies depending on political and social contexts. This term, associated with being non-Chinese, is implicitly linked with whiteness. However, while whiteness is visible, it remains an invisible norm within the "foreigner" category of migrants in the country (Lan 2022). White migrants are typically referred to as generic "foreigners" by the state and media rather than specifically as "white people" (bairen, in Chinese). In contrast, Asian migrants are often identified by their nationality (such as Koreans, Japanese, or Indians), while Black migrants are consistently referred to as "Black people" (heiren, in Chinese), highlighting a specific racialization of Blackness in China (Lan 2016).

The pervasive dominance of whiteness, functioning both as a hegemonic force and a universal norm, is mainly depicted in white bodies but is also articulated through frameworks such as modernity, globalization, international standards, and cosmopolitanism. This influence shapes the formulation of stereotypes across diverse segments of the Chinese population. To contextualize and lay theoretical foundations for each chapter of this dissertation, I highlight the multi-dimensional aspect of whiteness, examining its portrayal through bodies and its structuring through various indicators within China's digital entrepreneurial sector. These indicators, which include gender, ethnicity, and race-related representations on social media platforms, play a significant role in shaping and reinforcing the concept of white racial formation. In this context, I have grounded the theoretical framework of this study in relation to the literature that addresses those concerns. Here I illustrate three core bodies of literature analysis that guided me throughout my research:

*1. Becoming white in China*

The formation of white racial identity in China needs to be examined within the context of the country's historical and socio-cultural evolution. Whiteness has emerged as a significant "other" racial category in China since the country's interactions with Western countries especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, serving as a benchmark against which various expressions of Chinese identities have been conceptualized and cultivated (Zhao 2004).

In premodern China, the predominant ethnic group, the Han, engaged in the demonization or animalization of unfamiliar subjects, such as Western foreigners. This practice was rooted in a hierarchical framework aimed at distinguishing those who could be regarded as physically human or had attained full humanity (Chen 2010). In adherence to an ethnocentric cosmological perspective, which asserted China as the epicentre of human civilization, foreigners, regardless of their skin color, were classified as 'barbarians' or 'devils' (Fennel 2013; Ho 1985). According to Bonnet (1998), white identities did not rely on racialized notions in premodern China. However, they were symbolic, differentiating the lighter-skinned Chinese elite from the darker-skinned, lower social classes. Bonnet (1998) provides additional insight by explaining that the notion and differentiation of a yellow-and-white race, initially considered a distinctly European identity, became widely popularized in Western societies before being introduced into the discourse within China. Following China's engagement with the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the indigenous perception of whiteness was marginalized, leading to an increasing association of whiteness specifically with Europeans (Bonnett, 2000). In addition, during the late imperial era in China, "the notion of a yellow race was a positive symbol of imperial nobility actively mobilized by reformers who transformed it into a powerful and effective means of identification" (Dikötter 1994: 410).

With the Republic of China's establishment in 1911, Chinese intellectuals, notably Sun Yat-Sen, conceptualized the Chinese nation as an "ethnonational community of biologically descendant Han Chinese, a racial state" (Fennel 2013: 251). After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, discussions surrounding race from the 1950s and the 1970s, evolved in line with Mao's anti-imperialist and anti-racist political agenda, wherein China was characterized as the "leader(s) of the victimized 'colored' people in the historical struggle against white imperialism" (Dikötter 1994: 191-192). During that era, the argument emerged that racism was purely a Western phenomenon, and that in China there was no racism against black people (Lan 2017).

The portrayals of whiteness from the reform era onwards exhibited inherent contradictions. On the one hand, whiteness was linked to economic affluence, technological progress, and global beauty standards. On the other hand, it was simultaneously appropriated, amalgamated, or juxtaposed with indigenous values to align with the cultural preferences and nationalist sentiments of Chinese individuals. In Johansson's (1999) examination of Chinese beauty product advertisements in the 1990s, there emerged the contradictory representation of white sexuality, characterized both as alluring and perilous. While the idea of ample breasts resonated with Western concepts of freedom, modernity and naturalness, advertisements for skin-whitening products tended to underscore traditional Chinese female virtues like restraint and modesty.

Furthermore, with the rise of China as a global economic superpower and its integration into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the politics of race in the country became more publicly revealing. For example, Li's (2008) analysis of Chinese advertisements in the early

2020s sheds light on the ambivalent interplay between nationalism and transnationalism. The portrayal of ‘Chineseness’ utilizing Chinese history and cultural symbols, juxtaposed with the Western ‘other’ represented by white models, suggests a modern development akin to Western nationalism. Moreover, since the Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the slogan “Chinese Dream” in 2012 to underscore the country’s economic standing while echoing its American counterpart, the presence of foreigners working in China in various jobs lacking prestige or privilege, challenged the long-standing perception of white foreigners amid China’s economic progress (Lu 2012). This phenomenon intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic in which growing nationalism in China, together with the geopolitical tensions between China and the West, contributed to a 'precarious whiteness' and the reconfiguration of white privilege in the country (Lan et al. 2022).

The intricate nuances and ambivalent nature of these phenomena emphasize the importance of approaching the interpretation of white racial formation with caution. Fujikawa’s (2008) study on Japan distinguishes visible or somatic whiteness, signifying white bodies, and invisible whiteness, pertaining to whiteness as a hegemonic construct and a set of universal norms. Moreover, since whiteness is never stable or finished and is reproduced through a contingent so-called racial formation, the meaning attached to it is never singular; whiteness thus has a polysemic construction. In response to Fujikawa's call for a critical examination of these two dimensions of whiteness, this dissertation concentrates explicitly on how white, foreign, digital entrepreneurs perceive and respond to the representations of white bodies and cultural norms in China. The investigation delves into the portrayal of these aspects in their business strategies and their visibility on China's social media platforms.

*2. Digital Racial Representation*

In China's rapidly evolving digital sphere and amidst the widespread promotion of the "Chinese Dream," social media platforms are reshaping the job market, offering abundant new business opportunities. This trend is primarily driven by two key factors: the influx of venture capital and the government's efforts to pivot towards a more self-sufficient and innovation-driven economy (Sun and Chen 2021). Existing research on the platform economy and labour in China primarily focuses on Chinese nationals, often overlooking the experiences of foreign migrants. Furthermore, there exists a significant gap in understanding the racial representation of migrants engaged in the country's digital economy and the resulting implications for their businesses.

Hall's (2013) research suggests that representation acts as a practice that signifies the racialization of individuals. It involves the nuanced presentation of images and connotations about race and ethnicity in the media. As the platform economy enables individuals to explore new business avenues, it is imperative to scrutinize the portrayal of their racialized identities. As Lopez (2020: 20) states "the way media are created and what happens behind the scenes then affect the representations we end up seeing on-screen." While this dissertation does not delve into China's production of social media platforms, it examines the racial dynamics of foreign entrepreneurs on said platforms.

Meanwhile, as the population of foreign migrants diversifies, social media platforms become increasingly prevalent spaces for exploring the opportunities that the vlogging scene in China offers. Ma's (2022) study on white, Western, male vloggers in China examines their self-representation of white, male, identity during the Covid-19 pandemic. It explores how their identity was negotiated during this time, revealing the instability of the privilege associated

with whiteness and their diminishing position due to China's geopolitical tensions with the West. Therefore, her study initiates a dialogue to explore the precarious aspect of whiteness in China's social media platforms, shedding light on the potential loss of privileges linked to whiteness.

Inspired by Nakamura's theory on "digital racial formation" … "which would parse the ways that digital modes of cultural production and reception are complicit with this ongoing process" (2008: 14), I approach white racial formation as an ongoing process within social media. Through analysing foreign digital entrepreneurs and their online business activities, I demonstrate how the representation of race disrupts the social power and privileges associated with whiteness. This portrayal unveils that whiteness is not mono-dimensional or static but manifests in nuanced and context-dependent manners.

### *3. The formation of White Capital in China*

Each article of this dissertation is building on the experiences and aspirations of foreign entrepreneurs in China in order to analyze how race is contextualized as capital. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's ostensibly most known theoretical framework, which conceptualizes diverse forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social) as "objectified or embodied forms" (Bourdieu 1986: 241), this dissertation investigates the different kinds of capital of foreign entrepreneurs and their position within the field of the Chinese business landscape.

Building upon Bourdieu's capital concept, scholars have extended their analyses to encompass race and ethnicity as additional forms of cultural capital. Lundström's (2014) investigation into the migratory experiences of Swedish women emphasizes the construction of "white capital" through the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity. The body, she contends, becomes the

vessel wherein femininity, masculinity, and whiteness are embodied and wielded as capital. Lundström predominantly views white capital as a positive outcome through migrant experiences across diverse geographical contexts, highlighting the privileged lifestyles these women lead. Moran (2016) posits that ethnicity serves as a component of capital facilitating migrant integration into new political and social systems, while also portraying them as racial others. Camenisch and Suter (2019) explore the integration of European, migrant, professionals in China's labor market, asserting that ethnicity and race constitute crucial assets within the migrants' cultural and social capital during their quest for employment in China. P.C. Lan's (2011) examination of skilled migration from Western countries to Asia unveils how migrants negotiate their positions based on their skills, employing the concept of "flexible cultural conversion" to illustrate how the English language proficiency of Westerners can be converted into social, economic, and symbolic capital. Hof's study (2021) investigates young European professionals in Japan and Singapore. Her research shows that white migrants face difficulties in obtaining legal citizenship and adapting to the workforce. While whiteness can be a form of capital, its effectiveness in advancing one's career is limited in certain situations. In my dissertation I employ "white capital" as the tool to represent whiteness regarding foreign entrepreneurs in China.

As a response and contribution to the studies above, this research scrutinizes the social position of foreign, digital entrepreneurs, unveiling the multi-faceted dimensions of white capital generated within business and entrepreneurship in China. Through an analysis of both the advantages and disadvantages encountered by foreign entrepreneurs, while encompassing their integration into Chinese society, this study interprets race as a dynamic process. This examination provides insights into how whiteness, formulated within the Chinese context, engenders both privileges and precariousness within the entrepreneurial landscape.

***Methodology: Digital Ethnographic Research***

The empirical foundation of this dissertation is derived through digital ethnographic study between February 2020 and July 2023. Initially grounded as onsite ethnographic research in Shanghai, where I pursued my undergraduate exchange studies and resided for two consecutive years as a master's student, my Ph.D. encountered an unforeseen challenge when four months into my research and plan for my upcoming ethnographic study, China became the focal point of the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in the closure of borders to foreign nationals and the enforcement of rigorous travel restrictions and lockdowns, which endured for three years. Despite the emotional and practical challenges in sustaining my research during this period, I effectively transitioned from an onsite ethnographic approach to a digital one. This adaptation involved active engagement with China's social media platforms to ensure continued research progress.

My approach to digital anthropological research developed both by how I was engaged with my research participants online and by how my participants engaged with me. The research process felt at first like I had a telescopic view of China but I soon experienced a dynamic outburst of personal encounters with people I wouldn't have met if it would have been offline. According to Miller (2018) "the digital is not an abstraction but rather the creation of a plethora of quite concrete forms and processes." China's social media platforms became my communication arena during a specific period where most of us communicated and interacted with people through phones and other digital devices. In addition, these events facilitated my specific focus on digital entrepreneurs and my analysis on how whiteness manifest itself on digital platforms.

I utilized various channels to access my research field and engage with potential participants. These channels included tapping into my personal network in Shanghai, participating in online groups of foreigners via Facebook, utilizing professional platforms like LinkedIn, and connecting with online communities of foreign entrepreneurs on WeChat, China's largest independent social media platform. Over a period of three years, I was in contact with 78 research participants.

The majority of participants are from the United States and various European countries; these participants identified as white. Ten of research participants are from African countries, such as Nigeria and Ghana and identified as black. All participants resided in China. Lastly, my dissertation also includes twelve Chinese participants. Participants' age ranges from 20 to 38 years old, with 60 identifying as women and 30 as men. All participants are actively involved in the creative industries sector, managing online businesses on China's social media platforms. They all hold either a bachelor's or a master's degree. Each chapter of my dissertation offers a thorough analysis of my methodological framework, detailing their business activities and addressing questions that arose during our interviews.

In addition, my digital ethnographic research is designed according to constructivist, ground theory (Charzman 2014) by first analyzing my data derived through my interviews, through the media analysis on participants' blogs and the advertisements on social media platforms, and later constructing my theoretical framework. Thus, my ethnography was a constant "open event" (Pink et. al. 2016), a process of being in contact with China's digital culture in which foreign entrepreneurs and I were a part of. Massey (2005) conceptualizes "place" as an open event that brings elements together, implying that this "openness" characterizes a designing process. Considering that, as Ingold argues, "designing is about imagining the future. But far

from seeking finality and closure, it is an imagining that is open-ended" (2012: 29). This procedural framework determines digital ethnography as inherently open, not confined to a defined research method or discrete activity. Instead, it is inherently processual (Pink et al. 2016).

Moreover, although there is a plethora of methodological discussions on digital ethnography, engaging with social media through an anthropological lens seems to necessitate some specific explanations and justifications (Hine 2013: 28). Abidin and de Seta state that "doing ethnographic research about, on, and through contemporary digital media is often a messy, personal, highly contextual enterprise fraught with anxieties and discomforts" (2020: 4). At the onset of my research, I encountered challenges in trying to mask my anxiety while conducting digital ethnography and communicating with people online. Especially because I felt as a disciplinary outsider due to conducting ethnography through social media rather than and onsite fieldwork. Throughout the years of my Ph.D., I was constantly learning to improve my research process through my mistakes and discomforts. Thus, this dissertation opens with a methodological article explaining my process and the challenges I faced on Chinese social media platforms.

***Chapters Outline***

This dissertation comprises four research papers. My study as a whole aim to recognize and address the gap in current academic literature on whiteness studies in contemporary China. Thus, I carefully chose three interrelated case studies, each contributing to a nuanced understanding of the subject matter.

I open the discussion with a methodological paper on my anthropological research titled: ***'I'm not an Alien. I am a Digital Ethnographer': Doing Online Research with China's Social Media.'*** This chapter explicitly analyzes my involvement as an anthropologist with China's social media platforms conducting digital ethnography. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital ethnography became an important methodological tool for researchers. In my case, I shifted my research from China to 'digital China', and I engaged with China's social media as my research field, asking the questions: What are the challenges for an ethnographer in conducting research into China's digital space and networks from afar? And how do China's social media platforms mediate the formation of relationships with potential participants? Based on two years of online research, integrated with literature on autoethnography, performativity and China's social media platforms, the first chapter describes China's digital domain and explains how social media platforms mediate ethnographic research. Autoethnography facilitated this research through the critical notion of digital China in which institutional regulation contributes to the transformation and production of digital ethnography[4].

Next, the article in Chapter 3 titled: ***'End of the China dream? Young Western entrepreneurs' trajectories of leaving China during Covid-19'***, co-authored with Professor Shanshan Lan, examines two groups of young, Western entrepreneurs' experiences of leaving China during the COVID-19 pandemic, either due to business failure or due to being stuck abroad when China closed its border to international travelers. Based on semi-structured, long-distance interviews with twenty, young, white entrepreneurs who had previously worked in different Chinese cities, this chapter highlights the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on their businesses,

[4] This paragraph is amended from the abstract of my published article "'I'm not an Alien. I am a Digital Ethnographer': Doing Online Research with China's Social Media" *in Brill, AsiaScape: Digital Asia*. See Kefala 2023

social status, and identities before and during the pandemic. In the chapter we identify two prominent themes in our respondents' highly emotional reflections on their involuntary return experiences: loss and victimhood. We argue that such narratives betray multi-layered tensions between privileges and precariousness in the social construction of whiteness in a transnational context[5].

The following article in Chapter 4 is titled: ***'Who runs the worlds? Gender performances and racialized branding among young foreign women digital entrepreneurs in China',*** and studies young, foreign, female entrepreneurs in China involved in online businesses, focusing on how the intersection of race and gender mediate their business strategies and success stories. Existing literature on foreign migrants in China describes the transnational corporate and entrepreneurial sector as male-oriented. While a few studies of foreign women in China examine their experiences as trailing spouses, little attention has been paid to young women, millennials, and Gen Z, pursuing an independent business career in China. This research is based on semi-structured, long-distance interviews with 27 foreign women in their early twenties to early thirties. The chapter addresses the recent transformations in China's business sector, where the number of young, foreign, female entrepreneurs is rising. I identify two main themes in my respondents' reflections on their entrepreneurial experiences: First, gender plays a role in how women negotiate doing business in China and escaping the so-called glass ceiling. Second, women strategically perform a racialized white identity, or generally endorse the desirable qualities associated with whiteness, to market their products. Such dynamics must be

[5] This paragraph is amended from the abstract of my published article "End of the China dream? Young Western entrepreneurs' trajectories of leaving China during Covid-19" *in Taylor and Francis, Asian Anthropology.* See Kefala and Lan 2022

understood in relation to recent migration flows to China, including the negotiations and challenges that women face while coping with running a business[6].

The last article, in Chapter 5, is titled: '***Beyond Barbie: Representations of Whiteness in China's Digital Advertising',*** examines how Western brands and white, Western entrepreneurs employ representations of whiteness in advertising their products on China's social media platforms. While research has effectively revealed the prevalence of white hegemony in adverting, few studies have addressed the representation of whiteness in non-Western contexts such as China. The analysis delves into how Western products resonate with China's Gen Z consumers, and how advertising campaigns respond to those consumers' preferences by incorporating nationalistic sentiments. This chapter examines the visual complexities through which whiteness is expressed in various campaigns on social media platforms, emphasizing the contested, reproduced, and performed nature of whiteness[7].

The **Conclusion** of this dissertation synthesizes the theoretical insights stemming from the empirical chapters and it revisits the initial question posed in the introduction on how white racial formation emerges in China through young foreign entrepreneurs. Consequently, it serves as the concluding segment of this doctoral research.

[6] This paragraph is amended from the abstract of my published article "Who runs the worlds? Gender performances and racialized branding among young foreign women digital entrepreneurs in China" *in Taylor and Francis, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.* See Kefala 2023

[7] This paragraph is amended from the abstract of my submitted (under review) article "Beyond Barbie: Representations of Whiteness in China's Digital Advertising".

# CHAPTER 2

## Chapter 2:

# 'I'M NOT AN ALIEN. I'M A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHER: DOING ONLINE RESEARCH WITH CHINA'S SOCIAL MEDIA[8]

### *Introduction: from In-Person Fieldwork to China's Digital Space*

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, I had planned to conduct ethnographic fieldwork on foreign entrepreneurs and businesses in Shanghai. After the pandemic began, China was the first country to close its borders to foreign nationals, so I was unwilling and unable to travel to my field site. Thanks to increasing global digitization, I could still conduct research from afar, so I reformulated my study – first, my methodology and, then, the content – using China's communications and digital technologies. To understand this new digitized environment, I approached China's social media as a mosaic of digital entanglements that inescapably relate to a specific locality and thus are interwoven with China's sociopolitical and cultural structure. Taking an auto- ethnographic approach, I reflected on my experience as a foreign researcher to create a corpus of data for analysis, which enabled me to address two interrelated research questions: What difficulties does an ethnographer encounter when interacting with China's digital space and networks from afar? And how is the formation of relationships with potential participants mediated by China's social media platforms?

The COVID-19 pandemic has created profound challenges and altered how social science researchers can conduct research, prompting the use of new methodological tools for remote fieldwork. The emergence of ethnographic research via social media platforms has transformed ethnographers' connection to the field, giving them the option to approach the lived experience

[8] This chapter is adapted from this article: Kefala, C. (2023). ''I'm Not an Alien. I'm a Digital Ethnographer': Doing Online Research with China's Social Media". *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, 10 pp. 24-52.

in digital contexts (Horst 2015). Several social scientists have advocated 'digital ethnography' using online platforms as field sites (Boellstroff 2015; Hine 2015; Pink et al. 2016a). Recent research emphasizes the implications of the pandemic, detailing how qualitative research projects could be adapted to the COVID-19 context (Lupton 2021; Rahman et al. 2021; Tremblay et al. 2021). Application-based methods (Kaufmann & Peil 2020), re-enactment videos (Pink & Leder 2016b), and social media platforms (Madianou 2015; Postill & Pink 2012) are also considered topics of inquiry. Indeed, digital technologies have become an integral aspect of researchers' engagement with potential research participants, prompting a reconsideration of what defines 'the field'. Recognizing the degree to which media platforms and their services are becoming more commonplace and more complex, it is urgent to develop new theoretical and empirical approaches that explicitly encompass them. Further, it might be useful to reflect upon the role of the researcher in a specific digital society, such as China, to see how digital devices, online platforms, and internet access can mediate interactions between the researcher and the field of study.

***Digital Presence in Chinese Social Media***

China's social media platforms are becoming power players in the global digital landscape (Keane et al. 2021). Chinese platforms connect Chinese culture and worldviews to communities all over the world, marking 'a new dawn of enhanced connectivity, which we will call "digital China"' (Keane and Chen 2017: 3). Chinese social media platforms have fuelled research opportunities, and scholars have focused on the internet's political consequences in China (Stockmann 2015; Yang 2014), the relationship between the Chinese platform economy and society (de Kloet et al. 2019; Zhao 2019), and user practices in Chinese social media (Poell et al. 2014; Qiu 2016). By regarding China as a case study in method (Chen 2010), I aim to expand this literature by reflecting critically on my experience of conducting research *using* –

rather than *about* – Chinese social media platforms. In that way, I can create a corpus for analysis in which a researcher interprets the cultural representation of self through China's digital environment.

Several scholars have discussed their engagement with Chinese digital technologies when they interact with informants (e.g., Qiu 2009; Wallis 2013; Wang 2013). However, these studies primarily explore China's digital domain in different segments of society, leaving unexamined the authors' critical reflection on their own positionality and the multiple forces that shape their presence there. Alternatively, scholars have focused their research exclusively on their own involvement in Chinese social media platforms and their impact on their research methods. Svensson (2017) examines her socialization and experience with Chinese social media, WeChat, and Sina Weibo, emphasizing that the 'digital leap' has been an equal or a more transformative experience for her than classic ethnographic research. She states that one of the advantages of a researcher using Chinese social media is that 'it allows you to gain a better understanding of how Chinese citizens integrate social media into their daily lives, resulting in a "thicker" understanding and more "embodied" experience of what it means to live in the Chinese (digital) society' (Svensson 2017: 99). Following her call for more systemic discussion of the opportunities and challenges of digital ethnography and digital methodologies in general, and social media in particular, in the context of China, this short article advances current literature on Chinese social media by describing the performative dimensions of conducting research there.

Studies on performative practices in our everyday lives have significantly increased in recent years. As a starting point, Goffman's (1959) well-known classic text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* employs a 'dramaturgical approach' to analyzing social interactions and performance in daily life. Turning the gaze to the presentation of self in social media, Hogan

(2010: 377) argues that 'self-presentation can be split into performances, which take place in synchronous "situations," and artefacts, which take place in asynchronous "exhibitions"'. This distinction between a synchronous and an asynchronous online environment can be coordinated across various digital platforms, on which users digitally perform a spatial self. Drawing on Goffman's and Butler's (1988) theoretical frameworks, Schwartz and Halegoua (2015: 1648) state that the spatial self can be understood as a practice of identity performance discreetly formed over time through 'a stylized repetition of acts' (Butler 1988: 519). Moreover, Leeker (2017: 21) describes her research on the interaction of users with digital technologies and concludes that 'the human reacts to the agency the technologies suggest and vice versa'. Thus, 'performativity' refers not only to a form of action but also to a complex amalgam in which users and digital technologies are intertwined. Understanding how users maintain and structure their presence across digital platforms enables conceptualization of the notion of digital intimacy.

***Method: Autoethnography***

Although the line between autoethnography and ethnography is not clear, Ellis (2004: 31–32) suggests that autoethnography, 'as a form of ethnography', is 'part auto or self and part ethno or culture' and 'something different from both of them, greater than its parts'. As a research method, autoethnography emphasizes the researcher's subjectivity, thereby embracing the autoethnographer's experience as the primary subject of the study (Chang 2008). Moreover, autoethnography sheds light on researchers' total interaction with the field as they document their personal thoughts and feelings to understand the social environment they are investigating. For Ellingson and Ellis (2008), autoethnography is a socially constructed effort that overcomes the polarities of the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others, art and science, and personal and political.

However, critics of autoethnography argue that evaluating their own experience causes researchers to become overly immersed in and partial about their research (Mitra 2010). There is also the risk that ethnographic studies will become subjective, based on the researcher's intimacy with the research (ibid.). This might be evident in the analysis of this article, reflecting my experience of being involved with social media away from my home region and normal daily use. As de Seta (2020) notes, based on his reflexive experience of researching digital media in China, as a research method, digital ethnography confronts several methodological illusions and tensions. He states that the notion of 'being there' in a field site is a misconception in digital ethnography as the researcher attempts to deal with the internet's messiness. Moreover, a researcher's reflective engagement with social media can shed light on knowledge production, raising essential questions about the effects of a research practice and a globalized notion of a specific field. Therefore, China's digital dynamics are worthy of investigation from an auto-ethnographic perspective.

To this end, for more than two years I maintained an account on several Chinese social media platforms – including WeChat, Sina Weibo, Douyin, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu – creating a profile and connecting to informants through my personal network in Shanghai. More specifically, members of my personal network added me to certain WeChat groups consisting of entrepreneurs, and then I followed a snowball method to identify potential research participants. This research experience enabled me not only to shared my sentiments with my informants, as I was also a co-producer of China's expansive internet network, but to deterritorialize myself as a researcher who performs a particular digital self. Thus, I dislocated myself, performing my role as an ethnographer in several places in the field and, most important, 'in China'. As Papacharissi (2011: 307) notes, through social media, an individual 'gains access to a variety of multimedia tools that enable the possibility for more controlled and more imaginative performances of identity online'. With this understanding of my

performative experience through Chinese social media, I consider myself a 'networked, digital, and spatial self', basing my research on my online identity performance.

***The Visual beyond Social Media***

Before my involvement with Chinese social media, my first impulse was to send messages to my former colleagues and friends in Shanghai through WeChat, a multipurpose mobile application (or superapp) in China. In order to gather information and find potential research participants during the pandemic, I opened accounts on several different Chinese social media platforms in the hope of connecting with and expanding my network. First, I added a profile picture in which I am wearing casual clothes and yellow sunglasses, standing on a sunny beach in California, in an attempt to create a hipster-ish and attractive appearance. I also used my real name and not a pseudonym, which I saw as employing transparency as a foreign woman who uses those media. Soon, I was fascinated by participating in social media that I had never used before, and I began to incorporate my use of them into daily life.

My main challenge a few days later, after I had started to connect with Chinese interlocutors, was getting them to reply to my messages. Although my introductory message to them had stated the purpose of my interest in conducting online interviews, I received either negative replies or no responses. In the message I posted on WeChat, I said that the focus of my research was foreign entrepreneurs and businesses. More specifically, I explained that I was studying the reconfiguration of whiteness in China through investigating foreign migrant entrepreneurs, the core idea in my PhD studies. In addition, I asked potential interlocutors to share their perceptions of foreign businesses in China and the struggles or benefits that foreigners might encounter in China's business environment, explaining that I would have other research questions, following a grounded theory method, to analyze the racialization of whiteness in China.

After a few weeks, I received a notification that one of the people whom I had contacted before had sent me a message, in English, on WeChat: an alien face emoji. The subsequent discussion went as follows:

> Me: Hello! Btw nice to meet you! What do you mean by this emoji? Sender: Oh, I thought it was a trap! Nice to meet you! Never thought you would reply to me back!
> Me: I'm not an alien; I am a digital ethnographer! Why does my message make you think I'm a scam, trap, or alien?
> Sender: Primarily because of your profile picture! You are a random foreign woman looking for Chinese you've never met before. You are wearing glasses; I couldn't see your face! What can I think?
> Me: Any idea to gain your trust or other people's trust?
> Sender: Change your photo, make it more professional, write your messages in Chinese and, most importantly, don't discuss sensitive issues here!

I reviewed my initial message to him to ensure that I had not reference any topics that are politically or socially sensitive in China, only writing that I was trying to study foreign migrants and businesses in China. I received several similar responses in the first months of my outreach, and many simply assumed that I was perpetrating some kind of scam. For example, among the most common replies I received were: 'very suspicious research!', 'pls don't contact me', or 'It's a scam!'

To avoid this, I strategically performed another version of myself, a digital self within Chinese digital space. Svensson (2017: 99) writes: 'In the case of an authoritarian society such as China, the possibility of surveillance on social media platforms, even when you do not engage in sensitive research, is a risk you need to be aware of and try to minimize'. To this I would add that researchers must reflectively curate their own position, image, and statement of their

research agenda, especially if they are foreigners and have never used these social media platforms before.

I replaced the profile picture that had created confusion for my potential participants with my passport picture, which clearly shows my facial characteristics. In doing so, I relied on my own interpretation of other users and their communications. Furthermore, the absence of paralinguistic cues, gestures, and body language makes the presentation of self and interactions challenging on social media, which largely depend on text and pictures (Menchik & Tian 2008). I also began to translate my messages into Chinese. As a result, I reflected on the role of my performativity in this process of digitization and the significance of blurring the boundaries between the digital and the non-digital, divorced from and tied to the physical world, respectively, to achieve digital intimacy. Moreover, I removed a statement about my research focus from my notes, which was hypothetical and a sensitive topic for some potential research participants.

A few months after adjusting my digital presence, I engaged in conversations with several people, some of whom later became vital research participants. Whereas before, I received many negative replies, now I had positive answers such as: 'yes, I'm interested in talking to you', or 'we can set up a meeting soon'. However, I could not overcome the hesitation about my research topic, which many WeChat users still viewed with suspicion. Several people advised me that it was not the right time to discuss foreigners in China online, especially during the pandemic. More specifically, my study, conducted from January 2020 to January 2022, took place during a turbulent period in Chinese society, when xenophobic sentiments started to be expressed against foreigners (Wang & Qin 2020) and foreign businesses. As a result, my messages also highlighted my willingness to study China as a launchpad for foreign business migrants, the country's economic rise, and thus the participation of foreign investment. In that

way, I had hoped to arouse the curiosity of Chinese people and diminish any xenophobia. Thus, by paying attention to my ethical deliberations when describing my research, I adapted my project and gave it another dimension that I had not considered before. At the same time, intimacy became a theme that enabled me to be more digitally present with my interlocutors.

Hence, I approached Chinese social media platforms as digital constructs of Chinese authorities, in which users must perform a particular self that fits into government discourses. As Schneider (2018: 225) writes, in digital China, authorities have adopted 'a model that restricts direct control over meanings to sensitive political issues and otherwise promotes collaboration and participation in processes of meaning-making'. In this model, he continues, 'party and state agents limit themselves to the role of public opinion "guides", setting the parameters of discourse but allowing diverse actors to negotiate the exact meanings' (ibid.). In line with these statements and my autoethnographic experience, my interactions with potential research participants on Chinese social media confirm that the authorities are setting discursive parameters, often in collaboration with corporations and users. These limits, however, generate further interventions. In my case study, I collaborated with my research participants, who were concerned about my positionality as a foreign researcher, and with the state's digital framework for online political communication. My need to respond to both of them shaped my performativity and positionality within China's digital infrastructure.

Furthermore, confronted with a bewildering variety of methodological nuances, for a new generation of ethnographers like me, familiarity with social media does not necessarily guarantee a flawless experience in the digital environment. As Abidin and de Seta (2020: 3) argue, with 'interactional proficiency and insider positioning, digital ethnographers can encounter deadlocks, rejections, and failure'. Yet the effectiveness of my proposed

methodology accords with the ethnographer's performativity in a particular digital space, in this case, China, highlighting uncertainty and tentativeness.

***Conclusion***

The questions raised here were formulated during my introduction to Chinese social media platforms. The evolution of my research and my presence on social media offer a glimpse of how an ethnographic study can be embedded in digital China. The complexity of establishing a terminological and theoretical turn through my ethnographic immersion with those media led me to pursue critically engaged autoethnographic research. Following van Dijck et al. (2018: 4), I now approach Chinese digital platform society as a 'contested concept'. In this case, my research is increasingly channelled not only by my presence and interaction with other users but overwhelmingly by China's authoritarian system and thus constructed as an assemblage in a network governed by Chinese mechanisms.

In my experience as a foreign researcher, I gradually adapted my study to Chinese social media, which led me to assimilate a certain performativity, which differed from my typical daily interaction with social media. Understandings of performativity and performative practices need to be re-examined according to the field of study and the particular context of that study. In my case, conducting research on foreigners at a time when the threat of COVID-19 increased xenophobia in China, made it extraordinarily difficult to carry out my original fieldwork plan. It also caused me to rethink how I should present myself and my research to potential participants.

Conducting research using Chinese social media is not a unidirectional process. Rather, it is composed of social, cultural, and political dynamics that constantly change, and we need to be

aware of and attuned to them. I hope that my insights will raise further questions about digital ethnography and cross-disciplinary approaches.

# *CHAPTER 3*

## Chapter 3:

# END OF THE CHINA DREAM? YOUNG WESTERN ENTREPRENEURS' TRAJECTORIES OF LEAVING CHINA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC[9]

### *Introduction*

Due to the outbreak of Covid-19 in January 2020 in China, Lucas, a 32-year-old American entrepreneur, decided to permanently close his consulting business in Shanghai and relocate to Paris with his French girlfriend. Lucas reported losing many Chinese clients due to their fear of investing money in a foreign business during a global health crisis. His Chinese employees also terminated their working contracts with his company as they returned to their hometowns before local lockdowns and restrictions were imposed in almost all Chinese administrative divisions. In early March of 2020, Lucas packed his bags and moved to Europe. Three months later, he said to the first author,

> When I was in California, I was a dreamy boy who wanted to conquer the world with my creative business ideas. In China, after two years of hard work, I became a hero. My Chinese Dream came true and I was finally powerful. Working as a white foreigner in China, I gained a lot of attention, and my customer base increased as people thought of me as an adept American with so-called "know-how" in doing a successful business. However, due to the pandemic, I lost my power and became unskilled! Now I've lost

[9] This chapter is adapted from this article: Kefala, C. and Lan, S. (2022). "'End of the China dream? Young Western entrepreneurs' trajectories of leaving China during Covid-19". *Asian Anthropology*, 21 (3), pp. 197-210.

everything. I have to re-build my identity, find out who I am and start a completely new business from scratch![10]

Lucas' case is one of many examples of young Western migrants who decided to leave China during the pandemic, as the virus disrupted the transnational business and entrepreneurship sector. The transformation of Lucas from a superhero in China to a powerless youth in Europe highlights the changing value of white capital in different geographical and sociocultural contexts (P.C. Lan 2011; Lundström 2014). His strong sense of loss also reflects the structural precarity and feelings of vulnerability of Western migrants in a crisis moment of the Covid-19 global pandemic. [11]

In the wake of Covid-19, restrictive policies towards human mobility were established around the world to contain the spread of the virus. While the new virus was first reported in late December 2019 by Wuhan Municipal Health Commission and the World Health Organization, it was not until January 23, 2020, that the Chinese government imposed a lockdown in Wuhan. Lockdown measures and travel restrictions were soon implemented in other Chinese cities to prevent the outbreak of the virus. Two months later, on March 28, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Immigration Administration decided to temporarily suspend visa and residence permits to foreign nationals while thousands of business executives – among them many Western young entrepreneurs – were trapped abroad (Moss 2020; The European Union

[10] Although Lucas uses the term "Chinese Dream," it is very different from the official Chinese discourse of the "Chinese Dream," which contains a strong dose of racial nationalism and is generally not shared by foreign migrants. In the rest of the article, we use the term "China Dream" to show our participant's romanticization of China as a land of opportunity for white Westerners, a place to learn a new language and to gain new cultural experiences.

[11] Although not all Western youth are white, in the Chinese context, there is often a conflation of whiteness and Westernness. See Bonnett (2004) for a larger view of this.

Chamber of Commerce in China 2020). The spread of the pandemic, the lockdown measures, and the disruptions of people's mobility resulted in negative effects on foreign businesses in China. Growing xenophobia in Chinese society, business failure, and immobility are the three main challenges that young Western entrepreneurs like Lucas encountered during the pandemic. Although some of the challenges experienced by these youth are also common to other foreign migrants in China, as noted by Willy Sier's article in this special issue, not all foreign migrants had the same opportunities or privileges to leave China after the outbreak of Covid-19.

Existing literature identifies China as a new frontier for international migration and labor opportunities (Camenisch and Suter 2019, Camenisch 2019, Leonard and Lehman 2019, Pieke 2012). However, these writings mainly focus on the lived experiences of foreign migrants within China. While within previous anthropological studies, return migration has long been discussed concerning migration cycle and "the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to resettle" (Gmelch 1980), no attention has been paid specifically to China as a field of study and the phenomenon of return migration of foreign migrants from the East to the West. This research fills this knowledge gap by examining the return migration of young white middle-class entrepreneurs back to Europe and the United States due to the outbreak of Covid-19 in China. In contrast to current literature that concentrates on well-established expatriates in Asia (Beaverstock 2002; Farrer 2019; Yeoh and Willis 2005), we focus on the precarious transnational (im)mobility experiences of a group of self-initiated young Western entrepreneurs during a crisis moment, when their white skin and Western looks could not guarantee privileged treatment in China.[12] These young white migrants either moved to China as students prior to

[12] China's Covid-19 containment policy is the most stringent in the world, and this may constitute a shock to some participants who had previously seldom experienced significant barriers to transnational mobility.

their entrepreneurial careers or migrated to China as employees in foreign companies and then established their own businesses. While they had envisioned a successful career in China as self-made entrepreneurs, their China dream was dashed by the Covid-19 pandemic. This article examines Western youth's narratives of leaving China and returning to Europe and the United States, and how they frame their stories with binary oppositions such as success and failure, victims and victimizer, dreams and disillusions, often with intense emotional ramifications. This is not to suggest that their entire China experience is viewed in such binary terms, but to highlight the dramatic changes brought by the outbreak of the pan- demic to their business and personal life. We argue that such narratives betray multi-layered tensions between privileges and precariousness in the social construction of whiteness in a transnational context.

***White capital, skilled migration, and neoliberal aspirations***

Lundström (2014) in her study of Swedish women's migration experiences in the United States, Singapore, and Spain, defines white capital as an embodied form of cultural capital that can be "interlinked with and upheld by (transnational) institutions, citizenships, a 'white (Western) habitus' and other resources that are transferrable (but mediated differently) cross-nationally" (14). However, Lundström (2014) mainly approaches white capital as a positive asset for migrants' experiences in different geographical contexts, highlighting the privileged lifestyle they acquire. Alternatively, scholars also note the limitations of white capital's convertibility to other types of capital in a cross-cultural context. P.C. Lan (2011) examines the "cultural ghettoization" of Western English-teachers in Taiwan, emphasizing the difficulty for them to move to job categories unrelated to their English proficiency and cultural background. She argues that the territorially-bounded and field-specific nature of white capital offers grim job prospects for these Western migrants upon their return to the Global North. Based on

ethnographic research among foreign English teachers in China, S. Lan (2022) argues that the privilege enjoyed by white migrants in China is no longer based on structural domination, but mainly on their white skin and Western looks. She coined the term "white skin privilege" to reflect the changing meanings of whiteness in the Chinese context.

Hof's (2021) research on young European professionals in Japan and Singapore criticizes a monolithic understanding of white cultural capital as a positive aspect to migrant's experiences. Instead, she develops the concept of passive whiteness to show the limitations and constraints faced by these European youth in obtaining legal citizenship in Singapore and in integrating into workplace culture in Japan. Hof argues that when whiteness becomes reduced to tokenism, it stops functioning as an actionable capital and thus becomes passive in nature. This article furthers P.C. Lan's and Hof's research by examining the changing value of white capital in the transnational migration trajectories of Western youth before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. We examine when their white cultural capital becomes actionable and valuable in facilitating business success in China and when it becomes passive and stops bringing these youth symbolic and material benefits.

Various scholars have noted that skills can be socially and culturally constructed, and geographic mobility can also formulate the acquisition of new skills (Liu-Farrer, Yeoh, and Baas 2020). Farrer (2019) and Leonard (2019) suggest that whiteness can be an essential attribute that different Western migrants bring to China's job market. Hof and Tseng (2020), in their study of foreign workers in Japanese firms, shows the difficulties and struggles that white European migrants encountered when integrating into the Japanese labor market in which employers expected them to act like local workers. Farrer (2014) also indicated that the relevant "skills" that migrants try to develop are partially constructed around ethnicity, and cultural and national stereotypes, and are field-specific resources. This article finds that the skills young

Western migrants brought to China's labor market are inseparable from their white skin and Western educational and cultural background. However, they also face the pressure to develop new skills such as Chinese language proficiency, local cultural knowledge, and social networking. It is the combination of white skin, Western education, and these new skills developed in China that leads to their initial business success in Chinese cities.

Anagnost (2013), in her research on neoliberalism and "life-making" in East Asia, points out that neoliberal subjecthood happened when there is investment in the self and where governments encourage their citizens to acquire responsibility for their fates. Camenisch (2019) finds that for Swiss professionals, China is a new frontier for developing their ideas of neoliberal self-realization through entrepreneurial activities. Differing from the more established Swiss entrepreneurs in Camenisch's research, the self-initiated young Western entrepreneurs in this study are in the early stage of their business ventures. Under the Chinese state's neoliberal logic of recruiting foreign talent to contribute to China's knowledge economy and business innovation, these young Western professionals are deemed as desirable recipients of seed money from the Chinese state due to their potential to bring economic benefits to China (Song 2007). However, self-initiated entrepreneurship is also a highly risky venture, since in times of crisis such as Covid-19, when nation-states are prioritizing support for their own citizens, these young transnational entrepreneurs are not receiving support from either their home country or the Chinese government. In that case, neoliberalism as a transnational governance contributes to feelings of vulnerability among young Western entrepreneurs who had to leave China during the Covid-19 pandemic.

***Methodology***

This research is based on the first author's eight-month online research (February 2020–September 2020, during the early stage of the Covid-19 pandemic). The data was acquired from

semi-structured online interviews with twenty young Western entrepreneurs. They had lived in China for up to three years and returned either to their home countries or other cities in Europe or in the US. The first author used the job portal LinkedIn and her social network in Shanghai to identify initial contacts, then followed snowball sampling methods to reach out to more participants. She mainly targeted self-initiated young Western entrepreneurs who used to live and work in China before the breakout of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this way, she excluded well-established migrant professionals who already had a stable career in China. The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to two hours. The first author also met with the research participants multiple times online to investigate their ongoing mobility trajectories between China and Western countries. The data analysis included close readings of interview notes and identifying recurring themes in the narratives of different respondents. In addition, we also analyzed Chinese and English language newspaper articles related to China's Covid-19 containment policies.

Our research participants have lived mainly in Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, and Chengdu. The majority was born and grew up either in the US or in several European Union countries such as Greece, France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. One of them is from Russia. Whiteness was not a criterion for recruiting participants, but it turned out to be a prominent theme in participant's narratives. All participants hold a university degree (Bachelor's or Master's). They migrated to China either as employees in foreign companies or as Master's or language students in several Chinese universities. Only seven of the twenty respondents are women, which reflects the predominance of males in China's transnational entrepreneurship sector. They were between the ages of 2428 when they migrated to China and currently are mostly in their late twenties and early thirties. They established their businesses in different fields such as consulting companies, e-commerce, tech startups, a gallery, a graphic

design office, project managing, a vegan restaurant, and translation services. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, eleven of the participants decided to leave before China's nationwide lockdown measures, while the other nine were trapped abroad after China closed its borders to contain the spread of the virus.

***Becoming a foreign entrepreneur in China***

Hof (2019) notes that young Europeans migrate to Asia for distinction and alternative life paths because their language skills and Western educational background position them more favorably in labor markets in Asia than in Europe. Many of our participants came to China with a similar desire for distinction, knowing that their white skin and Western education could become valuable capital in the Chinese labor market. Like Lucas, several participants reported that they had expected to "make it big" in China because it is supposed to be easier to achieve success in China as a skilled white migrant (in contrast to blacks and other migrants of color). This romanticization of the China Dream is also partly encouraged by recent developments in China's visa policy, which encourage highly skilled foreign migrants to engage in high tech business innovations. Since 2016 foreign students from several universities in China have been allowed to apply for an entrepreneurship visa within one year of graduation (Zhou 2019). In 2018 the Chinese government introduced the so-called "start-up visa." First implemented in Shanghai, this type of visa was connected to the city's vision to become a global hub of technology and science by 2030. The majority of our participants used to work in the corporate sector but were unsatisfied with the local wage and modest benefit package they received. They entered the entrepreneurial sector partly motivated by a desire for autonomy, individualism, and self-development, and partly trying to take advantage of China's favorable policies towards foreign entrepreneurs. Moving to the transnational entrepreneurship sector also represents their

efforts to escape passive whiteness in the corporate sector (Hof 2021) and to re-activate their white capital in the neoliberal Chinese consumer market.

Although the threshold for becoming a self-initiated foreign entrepreneur seemed to be relatively low, the difficulties of navigating the Chinese legal system posed various constraints to our participants' entrepreneurial dreams. Andrea is a 25-year-old computer technician from Spain. Taking advantage of the pilot program of the entrepreneurship visa, he established a tech startup in Shenzhen immediately after completing his Master's studies in Suzhou. However, Andrea decided to give up his entrepreneurship visa one year later. He was frustrated by the Chinese government's demand for constant reporting and considered it a nuisance. He complained that it was very difficult for young self-initiated foreign entrepreneurs to renew their startup visa after the first year if their company was not making a good profit. Andrea ended up hiring a Chinese consultant who helped him obtain a work visa. Basically, he hired himself as an employee for his startup e-company. Like Andrea, all our participants held a Z visa (work visa) before they left China during Covid-19. They first established their businesses as wholly foreign-owned enterprises (WFOE), then hired themselves as employees.

WFOE is actually the most popular type of company for foreigners who want to establish a business in China. It is a limited-liability company that is wholly owned by one or more foreign investors. Since the liabilities of shareholders are limited, the owner's personal assets remain protected from the liabilities incurred by the company. Most of our research participants were reluctant to share details about their visa application procedures and obstacles they encountered in establishing a business in China. Due to their unfamiliarity with the Chinese bureaucratic system and their limited Chinese language proficiency, many have relied on consulting companies to handle the legal issues. Although the Chinese state advertises the entrepreneurship visa through pilot programs for specific categories of migrants such as fresh

graduate students and those who wish to start innovative businesses in Shanghai and other cities, it is in reality very difficult to obtain an entrepreneurship visa, even for white Westerners. Like Andrea, the choice to hire oneself as an employee for a WFOE is an improvised strategy for many of our participants, whose whiteness did not grant them advantages in terms of navigating the Chinese legal system.

Our participants' business ventures generally fall into three types: ethnic food, fashion, and art and cultural products; high-tech startups in the field of sustainability; and consulting companies. These types of businesses are financed with foreign funds without a Chinese partner's involvement. Some participants used their own savings, while others received support from their parents when starting their own business in China. Since most of them operated their businesses via online platforms, they rented offices or co-working spaces to reduce the cost of maintaining a physical company in China's big cities. Due to limited financial resources, such flexible business models are heavily dependent on the Chinese consumer market. Many participants reported that they had achieved initial success based on the "uniqueness" of their service or products, which involved a certain degree of cultural stereotyping and ethnic branding. Amelie, a 31-year-old fashion designer from France, who used to operate an E-fashion store in Beijing, was known by her Chinese clients as "that white girl from Paris." George, a 30-year-old German importing sustainable products from Europe to China, attributed his success to his European background and transnational business networks. While our participants' white Western identities were an indispensable factor for the take-off of their businesses, such success could ultimately also be temporary and fragile, especially when rising nationalism and xenophobia during the Covid-19 crisis transformed whiteness and foreignness into a liability rather than an asset.

***Reasons for leaving China***

The outbreak of Covid-19 in January 2020 caused a general standstill or slowdown of China's economy. It also negatively impacted many of our research participants' business activities. This section examines how and why self-initiated young Western entrepreneurs left China voluntarily or involuntarily during the Covid-19 pandemic and how they make sense of this troubled journey of returning to Europe and the United States. Our research participants reported three reasons that pushed them to leave China since the start of the pandemic in China in January 2020: the rising sentiment of xenophobia, business failure, and immobility due to travel restrictions.

The rise of imported Covid-19 cases from overseas travelers and China's strict policies against foreigners entering the country has led to anti-foreign sentiment among the Chinese public (Wang and Qin 2020). Although most of the imported cases were brought in by overseas Chinese, it was foreigners who do not look like Chinese who bore the stigmatization as "virus carriers" and "foreign trash."[13] While white skin and Western looks had earlier enhanced our participants' status as highly welcomed foreign talents, they were disappointed to find that the same physical feature worked against them during the pandemic. One participant, Emma, told us, "we are not foreign trash. We invested our money, our dreams, and hopes in China. Even after years of living there, we were still called foreigners!" Olivia, a 26-year-old woman from France, who was running a small business importing handicrafts from Europe to Beijing, reported that many Chinese started to avoid her when she went out for grocery shopping. A few weeks later, she noticed that her Chinese clients significantly decreased. She said, "it hurt

[13] See the introduction of this special issue for more details on these points.

my feelings because my business used to be a brand name before the pandemic. Now it became no-name since I lost most of my Chinese clients."

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in China caused business failure to eleven of our participants, who experienced the pandemic as an unprecedented challenge to their transnational business activities. George used to run a small-scale business importing environmentally sustainable products from Europe to Beijing. He reflected,

> Before the pandemic I had many Chinese clients. They were enthusiastic about adopting a European lifestyle. But with the pandemic, there were delays in the deliveries and the orders from Chinese clients also decreased. It was a big shock for me. I had a panic attack because I did not know how to pay the suppliers in Europe and deal with all the delays. In mid-March, I decide to leave Beijing and return to Germany.

Suffering from the negative consequences of the pandemic, most of our respondents struggled with financial difficulties and the fear of not having enough money to cover their expenses for business and personal life in China. Being financially fragile in a foreign country was one of the major reasons for their decision to leave China.

When China closed its border to international travelers in March 2020, nine of our participants were stranded abroad, unable for several months and many until now to return to their businesses. These entrepreneurs repeatedly blamed the Chinese state for creating a mobility and identity crisis for them. All of them associated China's new international travel policies with the stigmatization of foreigners as virus carriers. Leda, a 28-year-old woman from Greece who used to run a graphic design startup in Beijing, was on vacation in Southeast Asia when China closed its border to foreigners in March 2020. Stranded outside China, she eventually

decided to return to Athens. As she explained, “Going home was a big surprise for me. I left everything behind, my dreams, my business and my friends. It wasn’t my choice to leave. China chose to keep me outside its door.” For Leda and other respondents, their “desertion” by the Chinese state during the pandemic contrasted with their preferential treatment by the same government before the pandemic as skilled migrants and foreign talents. When hopes for special treatment collapsed in the face of China’s lockdown policy, they were overwhelmed by feelings of vulnerability and disappointment. Some chose to close their business in China, while others struggled to manage their business from a distance. Most respondents found it hard to process their negative feelings against the Chinese state and its border control policies.

***Feelings of loss and victimhood***

Echoing Lucas’s feelings of loss expressed in the beginning of this article, many participants talked about China as a lost paradise. China in the pre-pandemic period was often romanticized as a place where, according to Lucas, "dreams and normal life existed together." Like Lucas, many of our respondents made a contrast between their efforts at business success and self-development before the pandemic and their business failure during the pandemic. The binary between success and failure not only indicates financial and material loss, but a loss of their privileged status as white Westerners during the pandemic. This is supported by the fact that many participants attributed their business success in China partly to their white capital, e.g. their white skin and Western looks, English language skills, Western educational and cultural background, and transnational networks. Lucas admitted,

> As a white foreigner, I had more opportunities than others, especially in workshops and conferences. I particularly remember the look on their faces when I spoke English with an American accent. Maybe it wasn’t just my appearance but my American education

> as well. I had a client who came to me because I am American and, as he said, I am well educated.

Leda, the Greek woman, also recalled the many privileges she enjoyed as a white woman in China. As she said,

> Honestly, I was flattered when I was walking in the streets and people looked at me. I am white with blue eyes and that made me different. In China you have to know how to present yourself, such as having a British accent. There was one time in one of these workshops where I was at the same table with a woman from Pakistan. I stood up and talked about my qualifications with confidence. Most of the Chinese in the room looked at me, and in the end, I had two new clients.

Leda's narrative points to the existence of a racial hierarchy in China's transnational business sector. Skilled migrants with a white phenotype like Leda are positioned higher in that hierarchy than non-white migrants such as the woman from Pakistan. However, Leda's performance of a British accent also betrays an internal hierarchy within the white migrant community, with native English speakers ranked higher than non-native English speakers in the eyes of Chinese clients.

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the growing sentiment of xenophobia in China, the positive value of white capital seemed to decline significantly for our respondents, who started to experience structural constraints due to their status as foreign migrants in China and various international travel restrictions. For respondents who became stranded outside China, a strong sense of being victimized by China's lockdown measures pervades their narratives. Mark is a 27-year-old entrepreneur from Belgium, who used to run a web-design startup in Chengdu. When the lockdown measures were imposed, Mark was in Brussels visiting

his family. He said, “I am a victim of the Chinese immigration system. I can’t follow their logic not to allow me to be back to my start-up. We invested our money in China and helped Chinese clients develop innovative projects, but suddenly they threw us away.” Amelie, the fashion designer from France who found her way back to Paris, said, "The big question that is running in my mind these months is why did China leave us behind? We were not tourists. We had our businesses in China. We invested money there, but one day, I became an outsider, literally and metaphorically. I feel like a victim.” Instead of blaming the pandemic for ruining their business and life in China, they blamed the Chinese government. Through such narratives of victimhood, the image of China was transformed from a land of dreams and opportunities to a land that mistreats or victimizes foreigners during the pandemic.

***Life after returning to Europe and the United States***

The Covid-19 pandemic substantially changed participants’ trajectories from China to Europe and the United States as they returned to their home countries or relocated to other places in Europe and the US. Both group of entrepreneurs, those who voluntarily left and those who were stuck abroad, faced similar challenges in readjusting their lives back in the West. We identify three trajectories among our respondents: difficulties in finding a new job; transition to a new career path based on knowledge and experiences acquired in China; and returning to China.

Most of our research participants could not find a new job several months after returning to Europe and the United States. This happened not only because they had to struggle to find a new career direction, but also due to the lockdown measures in Western countries, which made it difficult to search for new working opportunities. Amelie reported that her return to Paris was not a pleasant experience since she could not find a job. She said,

> When I returned, I felt lost. I am still struggling with what kind of job to search for or how to do a successful and creative business as a French girl in Paris. In China, people were mesmerized by my French accent or how I presented myself and my company. I got used to being called the Parisian white girl in English or 外国女孩 in Chinese. Now I am no longer unique anymore!

Frank, a 30-year-old American, recalled,

> In February 2020, a period when the pandemic was gaining momentum, I returned to Chicago, trying to establish a new business, but I am still struggling with this process. In Shenzhen, I experienced the Chinese Dream as an American entrepreneur. My business had the so-called foreign-brand name. Now I am invisible. I am one among many other Americans.

Return migrants like Amelie and Frank seemed to experience a de-skilling process in the West, since their somatic whiteness stopped functioning as a valuable resource that could be readily converted to economic and social capital. This de-skilling process seemed particularly frustrating when they recalled their "successful" time in pre-pandemic China. Another reason for this changing value of white capital is their move from a developing country to a developed country, where white skin and Western knowledge no longer stand out as unique and desirable, but rather are commonplace.

Although negotiating and readjusting to a new work and life environment in the West can be challenging, not all participants experienced disappointment and failure. Leda, who is from Greece, managed to find a new job two months after returning to Athens, thanks to her working experiences in China. As she said,

> The key for my aspiration now is all the qualifications I gained in China, including learning to do business as a self-initiated entrepreneur and speaking Chinese fluently. If it wasn't for China, I might be unemployed at the moment. China provided me with working experiences, how to present myself, compete with other entrepreneurs, and establish myself as a woman in the business world.

Bryan, who is 28 years old and from the U.K., also found a well-paid job as an intrapreneur in a big company. He said, "My manager hired me because I had the knowledge of doing business in China. With my Chinese language skills, I can easily work with Chinese clients in Europe." Leda and Bryan's stories point to a re-skilling process, when their China experiences became valuable additions to their white capital toolkit in the Western job market.

Three of our respondents managed to return to China. Instead of continuing their business activities, they found a job in a foreign company through their personal network. John, a 30-year-old American, reported, "I am relieved that I am back. I am not eager to continue my business or to establish a new one. It's not the time to take risks, but at least I have a new job and I'm back with my Chinese friends." The other two participants returned to China because one has a Chinese girlfriend and the other wants to start his business again in order to keep his China Dream alive. It is not clear what the future might be for those who chose to return to China. But the lure of the China Dream still looms large in some participants' imagination for business success and career development. While our participants' stories of leaving China invite critical reflections on the limitation of white capital and white skin privilege in a moment of crisis (S. Lan 2022), there is the possibility that white skin and Western looks will resume their privileged status in China once the pandemic crisis is over. Are our participants' feelings of vulnerability and precariousness the result of a temporary disruption of their white skin privilege in China, or will they lead to a growing trend of the decline of white skin privilege in

the global context? We do not have an answer to this question yet, but we have identified an interesting moment when young Western entrepreneurs are no longer so sure about their preferential treatment in China, and the fear and anxiety associated with this revelation could represent signs of fissures and cracks forming in white hegemony on a global scale.

***Discussion and conclusion***

How can we make sense of our respondents' highly emotional interpretations of their plight of involuntarily leaving China and returning to Europe and the United States? We offer four possible interpretations here. First, the business failure and blocked mobility of our participants reflect the fragile nature of their business success in China, which was partly based on their white capital. As young self-initiated foreign entrepreneurs, they did not have robust starting capital and local networks to sustain their businesses in a time of crisis. Although some of them benefitted from China's favorable policy for foreign startups during the initial stage of starting a business, there was no specific aid program targeting foreign entrepreneurs during the pandemic. Second, the Chinese state's priority to take care of its own citizens and the stigmatization of foreigners as virus carriers during the pandemic also transformed the social context in which their white capital was evaluated. Instead of enhancing social privilege and business success for young Westerners seeking business opportunities, whiteness became a passive capital that they could no longer activate. To a certain extent, it became a liability in China. The growing nationalism in China and geopolitical tensions between China and Western countries have also contributed to the precarious nature of whiteness in Chinese society.

Third, our respondents' feelings of loss and victimhood betrayed their implicit sense of white entitlement in China. Having the expectation that white foreigners can easily succeed in China, as many well-established expats have already done, our respondents often failed to take into account their vulnerable status as new-entry entrepreneurs with limited resources. Many of

them selectively focused on their glorious time before the pandemic during the interview, when they received preferable treatment from both the Chinese state and the Chinese public. When this taken-for-granted sense of white entitlement was suddenly challenged by China's Covid-19 containment policy, many participants felt betrayed by the Chinese state and Chinese people. Viewed from a transnational perspective, we think that this blaming-China narrative may also reflect, to a certain extent, Western media's critique of China's authoritarian state and its Covid-19-related border control policies. Fourth, our participants' experiences of leaving China and returning to the West highlight the shifting meanings of whiteness in the context of a global pandemic. From highly skilled migrants in pre-Covid time to suspicious foreigners who are potential virus carriers during the Covid-19 crisis, to invisible white bodies back in Europe and the United States, the meanings of whiteness are highly malleable and context-dependent, yet always filled with contradictions. In other words, somatic whiteness in China can be both a status symbol and a reason for social stigmatization and exclusion. White skin and Western looks plus working experiences in China may lead to new job opportunities in many Western countries for some participants, yet they may also lead to frustration and disappointment for others, whose white capital may have become devalued in a Western context.

Western entrepreneurs' stories of leaving China during the Covid-19 pandemic also reflect the important connection between age and migration (Hopkins and Pain 2007). Their youthful China Dream is imbued with neoliberal aspirations for self-realization and self-development, but also with a racialized understanding of their relatively favorable position in the Asian business field. The gap between these youths' high expectations of China as a launching pad for their future careers and the less flattering reality they experienced during the Covid-19 crisis points to the fragile nature of white privilege on a transnational scale. We are aware that some Westerners' depictions of business success in the pre-pandemic period were selective and even

perhaps exaggerated, making it easier to blame their business failure on xenophobia and China's Covid-19 containment policy. The first author noticed that some participants were reluctant to discuss challenges or business failures during the pre-Covid period. In any case, the binary oppositions in our participants' narratives have explicitly shown the transformative and disruptive dimension of the pandemic on their business trajectories in and outside China. The feelings of loss and victimhood expressed by these Westerners point to the disillusionment of their China Dream and the transformation of China from a land of promise to a land of disappointment and frustration. They also show that these young entrepreneurs are less ready to critically reflect on the limitations of their white skin privilege in a transnational context and their vulnerable structural position in the global neoliberal economy.

# CHAPTER 4

## Chapter 4:

# WHO RUNS THE WORLD? GENDER PERFORMANCES AND RACIALIZED BRANDING AMONG YOUNG FOREIGN WOMEN DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURS[14]

### *Introduction*

Fleur, a 28-year-old fashion designer from Paris, came to Shanghai four years ago to work as a junior consultant in an international trade company with luxury fashion brands. During her first six months in China as an employee, she experienced an unequal and persistent pay gap compared with her male colleagues. Opting out of climbing the career ladder in the corporate sector, she decided to take advantage of her bachelor's degree in design and fashion to establish her own online business. Motivated by China's entrepreneurial spirit, the flourishing of e-commerce, and the power of social media platforms, Fleur created a clothing brand selling her garments exclusively online. In a few months, she had attracted many foreign and Chinese clients looking to purchase, according to her, a piece of clothing from a Western, youthful, and feminine brand. Fleur's success, she declared, didn't come without barriers. She learned that the best marketing solution was to 'craft your brand strategy as a white Western woman,' as she put it, when running an online business in China.

Studies on female digital entrepreneurs challenge the notion that the internet is a neutral platform for entrepreneurship; they show, instead, that online business activities produce and reproduce offline inequalities, considering social categories such as gender and race (Dy, Marlow, and Martin 2017). While the normative entrepreneur is usually portrayed as a white, middle-class man (Ogbor 2000), women around the world engage in a variety of

[14] This chapter is adapted from this article: Kefala, C. (2023). "Who runs the world? Gender performances and racialized branding among young foreign women digital entrepreneurs in China". *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50 (6), pp. 1336-1354.

entrepreneurial activities, using various agentic strategies to gather and navigate complex barriers. These efforts may entail minimising their gender identity, commercialising their ethnicity, and crafting performances of their gender and race (Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013; Essers, Benschop, and Doorewaard 2010; Forson 2013). Lukács's (2020) ethnographic study on young Japanese women digital entrepreneurs who aspire to lucrative careers shows that digital technologies still maintain Japan's gender-hierarchical workplace logic. Thus, their labour is often invisible. The production of cuteness as feminised labour online is a way to expand their practices and attract customers. Moreover, current research on female online entrepreneurs remains under-explored in terms of the ways in which entrepreneurship is gendered and racialized (Forson and Özbilgin 2003; Jome, Donahue, and Siegel 2006). According to research within cyberfeminist and critical race studies, there is a strong connection between online and offline worlds; indicators of gender (Sassen 2002; Wajcman 2010) and race are prevalent in both (Daniels 2009; 2013; Nakamura 2008). Fleur's story points to the central theme of this study: the branding strategies associated with gender performances and racialisation used by white foreigners to succeed in China. Exploring how young foreign women racialize themselves in branding their online businesses in China. 'I argue that online entrepreneurship is a new venue for the intersection of gender and race. By critically examining these women's roles in China's digital entrepreneurship, this research sheds light on the intricate ways that these foreigners perform their gender and whiteness through their business activities, albeit in fragmentary manners in different business situations, cultural contexts, and as part of their business branding. The study relocates intersectionality as a critical lens to examine white racial formation in a non-western society like China. It also highlights a new venue for analysing intersectionality: China's online entrepreneurial field. Moreover, through their narratives, the participants of this study show that whiteness negotiated and performed aligned with gender to adapt in the business market as independent women entrepreneurs'.

With China's economic rise the last three decades, it also emerged, before the Covid- 19 pandemic, as a destination for foreign migrants, looking for career and working opportunities (Haugen and Speelman 2022). Moreover, both the quantity and diversity of migrants have increased, with new opportunities for students, middle-class business- people, Chinese returnees, cross-border migrants, and 'fortune seekers' (Pieke 2012). In 2016, 900,000 foreigners worked in China (Huang and Yan 2018), while in 2019, 1,030,871 international migrants from various geographical origins were living in the country (United Nations Population Division 2019). According to Qian and Elsinga (2015), most foreigners in China are from Asian countries, but Westerners, mainly from the US and Europe, constitute another significant group of migrants. In addition, tomorrow's expats in China are expected to be younger and more adventurous, with more initiating their own migration and fewer company transfers than previous international expats (Powell 2015).

Current literature on foreign professionals in China has shown the overrepresentation of male migrants (Farrer 2019; 2014; Lehman 2014; Stanley 2012). These studies argue that skilled labour migration is a strongly gendered process, producing different experiences for the men and women involved. Moreover, a body of research focuses mainly on elite women migrants in Asia (Willis and Yeoh 2002; Yeoh and Willis 2005), with only limited attention to the experiences of independent women business owners. Those studies, conducted primarily in the early 2000s, represent a perspective from a different time in which elite migration was imbued with patriarchal perceptions of women's roles as spouses and housewives, within transnational flows.

In addition, in recent years, the international mobility of a younger generation, mainly from Western countries to Asia, for labour opportunities has received scholarly attention; these studies highlight migrants' desire for individualisation, distinction, and aspiration for a

cosmopolitan lifestyle (Collins 2014; Hof 2019). Still, current scholarship lacks attention to young women, millennials, and Gen Z, as a distinctive group of migrants that differs from previous generations of foreign women. The present study takes place in the context of China in the 2020s, with its boom in entrepreneurship and digital businesses, focusing on a generation of scarcely studied young, independent foreign female business owners to show how participants navigate China's current business field.

According to the Chinese cabinet's white paper on gender equality and women's development in China, the number of women entrepreneurs keeps growing, accounting for one-quarter of the total number of entrepreneurs on the mainland (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2015). An increasing number of these entrepreneurs are young, educated women who want to pursue their own start-up businesses (Springer 2018; Tse and Tai 2018). Thus, I designed my study on young female 'Millennials,' meaning those born between 1981 and 1996 and members of 'Gen Z,' those born after 1997 (Dimock 2019). These two generations are an interesting combination of individuals because of their acumen as 'digital natives' lean towards in today's entrepreneurial digital world rather that getting involved in the corporate one (Liu et al. 2019; Shah 2022).

Furthermore, there is little attention in the literature on skilled foreign migrant professionals in China to their performative strategies that shape their presence in China's online business field. This research lacuna has hindered our understanding of the role that race, and gender play for these young foreign female migrants, in adapting to the online entrepreneurial field, distinguishing themselves from transnational elites, and gaining recognition in the male-dominated business world.

***Foreign female entrepreneurs: seising their chances in China's entrepreneurial age***

Over the past three decades, a series of events in China's entrepreneurial sector has converged with the dynamic presence of foreign entrepreneurs. This changing socio-economic context has produced a shift in how foreign migrants thrive in business activities. In the last few years, foreign women in China have become increasingly active in entrepreneurial activities, trying to insert themselves into the country's androcentric business field. Enterprising young foreign migrant women who start a business today in China tend to be motivated by the emergence of online entrepreneurship as the most lucrative business model.

Starting with China's economic growth in the early 1990s, due to foreign trade and investments, the term 'entrepreneur' (qiye jia) started to appear in public discourse. A growing number of migrants, mainly men from Western countries, such as corporate executives, investors, and economically privileged individual entrepreneurs, started to be involved with businesses. Farrer (2019) finds that intra-corporate expatriation was also mainly a gendered phenomenon. Men mainly migrated to build their careers, and women usually joined them as trailing spouses. Studies of transnational migrants in Asia report that white migrants are predominantly men who continue to dominate the elite transnational managerial field (Beaverstock 2005; Leonard 2008; Yeoh and Willis 2005).

The most significant and profound changes in China's transnational business sector appeared with China's entry into World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and the global financial crisis in 2008. As the country became increasingly involved in globalisation and the economy grew, China gained first-hand experience in attracting educated and skilled talent that would support the country's social and economic development. China started to promote innovation-driven development and entrepreneurship, opening new positions for foreigners. The Chinese government also encouraged high-skilled foreign workers to become entrepreneurs through

visa policies like the entrepreneurial visa (创业签证), piloted in 2018 in several cities such as Shanghai and Shenzhen for international students and foreign talent.

The government's efforts to promote entrepreneurship and innovation in recent years has had a direct impact on employment and has encouraged college students and migrants to do business (The State Council, The People's Republic of China 2021). Thus, while China's economy has expanded, the profile of foreign migrants has diversified in terms of their educational background and employment (Pieke 2012). Middle-class businesspeople and self-initiated entrepreneurs, including women and students who became entrepreneurs (Camenisch 2019; Farrer 2019; Leonard and Lehman 2019; Pieke 2012), were part of a 'new wave' of migrants (Leonard and Lehman 2019: 2) that has been incorporated into China's entrepreneurial and business sector.

Obtaining accurate figures on the number and the background of foreign migrant female entrepreneurs in China is very difficult for a couple of reasons. Among them is the high mobility of foreigners in China, most of whom stay temporarily in China for a couple of years and then migrate to other destinations. Because of this lack of good data, I have relied on estimates from my research participants who have been living and working in China for a couple of years, social media posts, and online articles. Those resources suggest that young women have been started to involve more actively with China's digital economy and entrepreneurship in recent years. Specifically, women were attracted to this sector mainly because they wished to avoid the male-dominated corporate sector and its traditional model of businesses. Rather than opening physical stores and companies, the participants of this study found places within China's booming online business sector what China calls the 'new industries, new business forms and new business models' (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2020). Whether migrating as students, corporate transfers, or business investors,

entrepreneurial activities open up new opportunities for women to gain professional experience, which builds self-confidence and allows them to gain knowledge and skills that are advantageous to both their final destination and their home countries. Additionally, the impact of the coronavirus outbreak worldwide inevitably spurred entrepreneurs and thus these women migrants to boost their digital presence and pivot their businesses into online platforms and digitalisation, something that also happened in China (Meunier, Coste, and Maia 2022; UNCTAD 2021; Wong 2020).

In recent years, China has vigorously promoted women's role in the digital economy by generating new opportunities to boost employment and entrepreneurship (Shiyue 2022; Wang 2022). According to the Ali Research Institute (2022), China's digital economy has provided 57 million female job prospects in industries such as digital trade, e-commerce, and live broadcasting. Moreover, China's millennials and Gen Zs are increasingly aware that women can start enterprises and enhance their own lives (Sun and Huifeng 2022). Entrepreneurship is thus a gendered phenomenon, occurring within socially constructed systems, which affect female entrepreneurs' motivations and the types of challenges they face (Henry, Foss, and Ahl 2016; Jennings and Brush 2013). In the data and analysis sections, I present how entrepreneurship for these foreign female migrants is connected to gender and race for business success.

***Entrepreneurial aspirations: skills, whiteness, gender***

Understanding the concept of 'skill' as a socially and culturally constructed category, scholars have noted that geographic mobility can be a component of skill acquisition (Liu-Farrer, Yeoh, and Baas 2020). Farrer's (2019) work on international migrants in Shanghai argues that race and nationality are never absent in defining what constitutes a skilled expatriate migrant. Studies of skilled foreign migrants in Asia tend to spotlight white Western migrants and

approach ‘skills’ through the lens of the racialisation of whiteness. In this regard, discussions of whiteness as a form of capital for migrants has been crucial.

‘Whiteness’, as defined by Lundström (2014: 14) in her ethnographic research on female Swedish migrants in the US, Singapore, and Spain, ‘works as a form of privilege’, where ‘white capital’ is “interlinked with and upheld by (transnational) institutions, citizenships, and a ‘white (Western) habitus and other resources that are transferrable (but mediated differently) cross-nationally”. As Leonardo (2002: 31) points out, there is a crucial contrast between ‘whiteness’ as a power regime and white people: ‘Although whiteness represents a racial discourse, the category of white people reflects a socially constructed identity usually based on skin colour’. As a result, it is not always the case that white individuals reinforce whiteness. Turning the gaze on skilled English-speaking Westerners in Taiwan, Lan (2011) shows the double-edge image of these migrants and their status associated with whiteness. Drawing from Bourdieu’s (1984) conception of ‘linguistic capital’ as one form of cultural capital, Lan uses the concept of ‘flexible cultural capital conversion’ emphasising how these migrants are able to transform their linguistic capital into economic, social, and status privilege in specific locations. However, she also argues that white capital is a territorially bounded, emphasising the ‘cultural ghettoisation’ of Western English teachers in Taiwan and the difficulties they face navigating the job market that are unrelated to their English language use and cultural background. Hof’s (2021) recent study of young European professionals in Japan and Singapore examines the changing meaning of whiteness through the constructed category of ‘skilled migrant’. Her research shows that migrants face constraints in obtaining legal citizenship or integrating into the workplace; whiteness as capital provides varying or ambiguous value in the host countries, in certain sub-fields, such as the labour market. However, white capital’s value for career progression is limited in certain situation. Focusing on young foreign female entrepreneurs in China, this study captures another dynamic between structures of whiteness and skilled female

migrants. I introduce the theoretical concept of 'racialized branding' in the data section, showing how these women strategically use representations of whiteness to succeed as online entrepreneurs. I suggest examining white capital as a dynamic construction that is constantly being reassembled and reproduced.

However, looking at race alone without its intersection with gender would provide a fragmented analysis. Intersectionality is a useful theoretical framework for analysing entrepreneurship (Dy, Marlow, and Martin 2017; Essers, Benschop, and Doorewaard 2010). Studies of female entrepreneurs have highlighted intersectionality within the field of entrepreneurship to further post-structuralist feminist debates (Ahl and Marlow 2012; 2021; Dy, Marlow, and Martin 2017). In these studies, the lens of intersectionality reveals the complexity of several factors, including gender (Ahl and Marlow 2012; Bourne and Calás 2013). In the case of Asia, Hof (2018) claims that intersections of race and gender shape migrants' inclusion in the host country. Gender, as she states, is an 'essential factor that determines how whites assess experiences in predominantly non- white societies', as men and women engage in different migration trajectories (Hof 2018, 60). Although female professionals are included in a few studies in the Chinese context (Camenisch 2019; Farrer 2019; Hof 2018; Leonard 2010), they do not examine the subtleties of how these women operate their businesses or how their gender and race intersect. In the present research, the focus on young women engaged in online entrepreneurship shows that their commodification of whiteness as a racial brand powerfully resonates with their emphasis on their gender in China's business field.

Specifically, studies of China's entrepreneurial masculinities (Zheng 2012) and Chinese businessmen (Osburg 2013) have found that male entrepreneurs' forms of entertainment and leisure, such as drinking, smoking, singing karaoke, and receiving massages, are essential in

business deals. Examining gender from a performative perspective can be methodologically traced back to Garfinkel's 'Agnes' case (1967) and Goffman's 'Gender display' (1967), both of which have been widely cited and have influenced the 'performing gender' literature (Butler 1990; Gherardi 1995; Kessler and Wendy 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987). Gender, as a social practice rather than a biological trait, has been investigated in everyday encounters and assessed in a variety of broad sectors, including entrepreneurship (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio 2004). Hierarchy, 'old-boys' networks, and directive power have all been identified as characteristics of entrepreneurship (Orhan and Scott 2001). Building on these studies, as I discuss further below, I show how research participants are aware of how their performances of whiteness and gender helped them find a niche in the labour market and overcome gender bias.

***Methodology***

The Covid-19 pandemic fundamentally altered how ethnographic research was conducted. Field studies involving immersive in-person contact became nearly impossible due to local, national, or international border restrictions. As the epicentre of the current pandemic, China was the first country, on March 28, 2020, to implement travel restrictions for foreign nationals, which lasted nearly three years. Since I faced impediments to entering China, I approached my field through digitally mediated practices from April to December 2021. I conducted online interviews and digital content analysis on research participants' business websites and blogs.

I accessed my field using various resources, such as my network in Shanghai, Facebook, job portals like LinkedIn, and online communities and groups run by foreign female entrepreneurs, mainly on China's largest standalone mobile app WeChat. After obtaining admins' permission, I joined seven different groups on WeChat with foreign female entrepreneurs and posted an introduction to myself and my research to find potential participants. My informants used these

groups to create virtual networks with other foreign women, and their success in doing so encouraged me to focus my research exclusively on foreign female migrants. I was looking for non-married, recently graduated, or early-stage foreign female entrepreneurs holding working, student, or entrepreneurial visas. This criterion excluded well-established female entrepreneurs with an expanding business network and women who migrated to China via a spouse visa. Thus, the sample is intentionally non-representational. However, it reveals these women's motivation to move to China and independently establish their businesses early in their career.

The data on which this paper is based consists of 27 semi-structured interviews in English with foreign women living in Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen. Participants at the time of the research were between 20 and 32 years old and were single or in a relationship with no kids. Twenty-five held university degrees from Western universities, while two were students at a Sino-US research university in Shanghai. Twenty participants speak Chinese fluently, while the rest have an elementary knowledge of the Chinese language. Five participants are from the United States, and the rest are from the United Kingdom, Canada, Greece, Netherlands, Portugal, Germany, Spain, Belgium, France, Italy, Ghana, and Nigeria. The African participants self-identify as black, while the rest identify as white. Their time working in China ranged from five months to four years. The total residency period was often considerably longer, however, due to previous work in corporate jobs or study experiences. The participants' online businesses were situated in different domains, ranging from creative enterprises, tech start-ups, and consulting to e-commerce.

I crafted my research design following constructivist grounded theory (Charzman 2014), collecting and analysing my data and then constructing a comprehensive theoretical framework necessary for understanding migrant women's experiences and business strategies. Interview questions were initially quite broad and explored various issues around their education,

aspirations to migrate to China, working, and entrepreneurial actions to brand their businesses. I did not initially ask questions about racialisation and the meanings of whiteness, but my participants brought these themes up by themselves, and I subsequently integrated them into my study.

Regarding my data, I audio-recorded all the interviews, obtaining participants' oral consent, transcribing them, and analysing and categorising them thematically. To ensure anonymity, all interviewees were given pseudonyms. To lessen the possibility of re-identification, their demographic data, precise job descriptions, and business names were also partially altered to some extent. I studied participants' blogs and websites, as these offer an opportunity to examine how gender is performed and racial knowledge is produced and contested. I analysed the content of those websites using thematic analysis, focusing first on a semantic level, examining how participants presented themselves in their bios, their business names, their services, the clients' work, and website design. As I analysed the collected data, I theorised underlying ideas and conceptualizations based on the semantic content (Braun and Clarke 2006, 84.)

Moreover, giving attention to the notion of reflexivity as a white Western woman who had lived, studied, and worked in China for a few years, was also a crucial aspect of adapting to this field of research. Race, gender, and place were intersecting dimensions shaping my interactions in the data-collecting process. In the context of digital ethnography, Pink and colleagues (2016) state that reflexivity does not necessarily take a different form than any other ethnographic process. However, some of the ways that I was aware of my position during my ethnographic research was this new form of interaction with participants online. As Abidin and de Seta (2020: 3) acknowledge, 'New generations of ethnographers are often as familiar with digital media as their research participants, and yet this familiarity does not necessarily grant smooth entrées, flawless interactions, effortless participation, and clean-cut conclusions.

Rather, despite their interactional proficiency and insider positioning, digital ethnographers can encounter deadlocks, rejections, and failures'. This certainly happened, as I received numerous rejections from female entrepreneurs who were unwilling to meet with me online for an interview, seeing me as an outsider. Thus, in the current digital era, ethnographic research not only has the potential to delve deeper into interpersonal relationships mediated by technology as well as socio-technical interactions between people and technologies (Horst and Miller 2012; Pink et al. 2016), it can also create new difficulties and misconceptions within digitally mediated communication.

***Avoiding the glass ceiling***

One Sunday morning in spring 2021, I received an invitation from a friend in Shanghai to attend an online business event exclusively for foreign female entrepreneurs who run online businesses in China. The event, named 'Who Runs the World? Women Entrepreneurs!', attracted around 100 foreign women from various geographical locations interested in entrepreneurship in China. The first keynote speaker, Denise, a 25-year-old Belgian entrepreneur who was running a tech start-up in Shenzhen, opened the panel with the command: 'Think, research, plan, organise, and go digital. That's the key to success in China!' In her speech, she emphasised how important it was for aspiring young female entrepreneurs to benefit from China's booming online business sector. Similarly, Kelly, a presenter from Portugal now living in Shanghai and running an online shop that sold her pottery, said: 'China allowed me to imagine myself as self-dependent. The rise of e-commerce, the digital world that exists here, and my own creativity that I brought from Europe synthesised my idea to become an entrepreneur.' In the keynote speech, one of the organisers, Leah, sought to inspire us with these words: 'as Beyoncé said in her famous song, "Who runs the world? Girls!", today, we are saying from China: "Who runs the world? Women Entrepreneurs!" The panels continued for

almost two hours, and the speeches were filled with phrases like ‘Being creative means being digital creative in China,’ ‘If you want to succeed, be unique,’ and ‘You can be the leader you imagine.’

This event is an example of a common kind of gathering among these young foreign women who are engaged with online businesses, in order to exchange ideas about marketing strategies and branding. This kind of interaction also takes place within the WeChat groups too, as everyone in this virtual space can read, comment, and vigorously participate in a community. These spaces serve as a kind of comfort zone, helping women to gain confidence in doing business while living in China as foreigners.

This role of community among those women also appeared when I met online Leah, the organiser of the event. At the time, Leah was a 21-year-old Canadian student and entrepreneur in Shanghai. Growing up in Hong Kong, Leah had gotten involved with her father’s business marketing as a teenager. When she turned 18, she moved to Shanghai to study business and management. While continuing her studies, she began running an online consulting company for young entrepreneurs in China, created a weekly podcast about China’s youth culture, and was the administrator of two groups of foreign female entrepreneurs on WeChat. When I asked her whether she was finding her experience in China useful for her future career, she answered with confidence:

> Of course, it is. If you can make it in China, you can make it anywhere. For many young women like me, China is the place where we can express our businesses’ creativity and get involved with entrepreneurship. This gives us the value to enrich our biographies with our experience in China’s business field, and that matters a lot for our future careers, whether we decide to stay here or move to another country.

Leah spoke with enthusiasm about her involvement with entrepreneurship in China. However, when our discussion turned to the 'Who Runs the World' event she had organised, she said,

> There are times that I caught myself, as a young woman in business, to fight gender bias in the entrepreneurial field. I want to lift up our [women's] experiences and mark our femininity when doing business to break the 'glass ceiling effect.' This event was the chance to gather all young women together, sharing our thoughts, future innovations, and struggles. We manage to create a friendly virtual room and sit together to talk about these issues. Slowly we are starting to show our presence in China.

Another interviewee, Elena, a 24-year-old graphic designer in Beijing, originally from Germany, expressed that China's business industry does not really accept women. Elena had also attended the online event, in order to learn about online marketing and how to better navigate China's social media. She said she was glad that she could sell products online without being in touch with clients who didn't value her work due to her gender:

> My business is my personal reflection. I want to work with clients who appreciate who I am. Unfortunately, while I can achieve my entrepreneurial dream here in China, I have to deal with the fact that businesses are mainly male-oriented. Also, many Chinese men prefer not to work with women. So, it is better to find access to promote my business online, and through that, my clients can just focus on my designs and my talent rather than my gender.

Leah's and Elena's cases exemplify the precarious nature of entrepreneurship as it is shaped by gender issues. Many research participants did not prefer to conduct business through direct contact with a client. If they must have direct contact, they take care about their physical appearance, choosing clothes that do not convey a 'girly' attitude that would stigmatise them

as foolish or outfits that might suggest they are sexually liberated women. Nadine, a 29-year-old Dutch designer involved with e-commerce, had different dress codes based on the clients she had to interact with. She described her style as between hipster and androgynous when she met young or middle-aged clients. But she also said that she prefers to be 'herself' and wear anything she likes. In this regard, many women meticulously craft their self-presentation when they meet potential clients based on the self they want to convey. Working online, these women attract middle-class foreign and Chinese clients, with whom they can communicate in English, and who are familiar who China's e-commerce platforms.

Moreover, some participants discovered that their home countries or ethnic backgrounds presented further obstacles, causing them to be taken less seriously by male clients. The case of Oksana clearly shows this dynamic. Oksana, a 26-year-old Romanian artist and marketing consultant in Shanghai, decided to establish her business exclusively online so she could avoid, she said, the general mentality of Chinese business culture. She was not interested in drinking alcohol and smoking with Chinese clients while making business deals, so she communicated with them either by email or phone calls. Furthermore, by pretending that she is from western Europe, she's made good profits, as she explained:

> With my Chinese clients, many times, I lie. I am saying that I am from Western Europe. I have a great accent in English, and I am always saying that I'm an expert on social media, which counts a lot if you are from western European countries. If I said that I'm from Romania, people would think that I'm not able to do good business and deals. Western women from rich countries have more opportunities than the real me. That sucks, but it's true. ... My appearance, of course, matters a lot. I look white, and that's why I sometimes have clients. On the other hand, I struggle a lot, especially with Chinese men clients. They don't respect foreign women, thinking that we are weak and

> not very knowledgeable doing businesses. I prefer to have women clients who can appreciate my creativity and my ideas. I prefer to have my values instead of money.

Oksana's narrative points to the performative nature of whiteness in China. Her strategic performance as a well-educated, Western European, and white woman reveals her agency in manipulating their Chinese clients for her own benefit, thus resisting her racialisation as a weak and less capable businesswoman from Romania. As she confessed in our interview, she purposely mentioned her performative agency with her Chinese clients and not with other foreign clients. Oksana emphasises how whiteness in association with Westernness, and not Eastern Europeanness, reinforces the profitable nature that might be needed to succeed in China's business sector. This overlapping of whiteness and Westernness shows not only the structural marginalisation of non-western foreigners in China but also how white privilege capitalises on western looks and certain racial stereotypes. Moreover, her strategy of presenting herself as a wealthy white woman from the West highlights the reproduction of ideas of cultural superiority of whiteness, and that the figure of a skilled white woman from the West is more desirable to make business deals in the eyes of the Chinese clients.

Compared to Oksana, Ali, a white 23-year-old, tech entrepreneur from the United States, declared: 'As a young foreign woman in China, I feel unstoppable. The world is my oyster. I want to conquer the entrepreneurial world, and China is the place to do so.'

Ali's English accent and white appearance were also elements of her success, she recognised:

> I am a student, I am intelligent, I have skills, and most of all, I am a woman. I am here to show my generation that, at my age, as a young girl, you can achieve your goals, even in a male-dominated environment like China. ... Of course, being white matters, and honestly, I enjoy it. I love the attention that makes me unique when I have clients.

> Especially Western businesswomen and men feel more comfortable working with a foreigner. At the same time, potential young Chinese clients also want to learn how entrepreneurship works in the West, so I am happy working with both sides.

Oksana's and Ali's narratives illustrate how gender and race affect their entrepreneurial identity and potential value. They also, of course, show the discriminatory hierarchy of Western Europe/America versus Eastern Europe. In this context, these women use racialized branding to overcome gender discrimination. These entrepreneurs are marked by femininity, which they sometimes foreground – as in the motivational quotes at the business event I attended – and sometimes hide, by avoiding direct interactions with male clients. Moreover, all of the above narratives show the nuanced strategies that many female entrepreneurs utilise in order to adapt to businesses in China and how they negotiate gender bias in China's business sector. This finding fits with Lehman's (2014) work, which argues that structural visibility can lead to reconsidering and reconstructing complex and sometimes conflicting local power relations. Let us now take a look at how these women strategically utilise their gender and whiteness to overcome obstacles and establish a successful entrepreneurial career.

***The business of racialized branding***

To understand women's strategies to be successful in China's business field, I posed some additional questions about their businesses and products. I wanted to know what kind of marketing strategies they followed to craft a brand in China, and how they presented their business through their online presence.

Anna, a 27-year-old entrepreneur from Spain, whom I met through a WeChat group of foreign female entrepreneurs, told me that branding a foreign business in China is 'associated with the qualification that women can bring from Western countries.' When we spoke, Anna had been

living in Shenzhen for five years. After earning a bachelor's degree in Web Communication Design in the UK, she followed her dream to move to China and become an entrepreneur. Inspired by the relentless technological development and the entrepreneurial ecosystem of China's Silicon Valley, she had moved to Shenzhen to work as an intern in a tech company. During her first six months as an employee, she also explored China's business environment. She proceeded with all the legal steps to establish a start-up and work independently, providing digital content services to Chinese and foreign clients through her business. Anna wanted to create a unique brand name and chose to use a name by a famous Spanish artist that clients would recognise easily. In that way, as she declares, she could draw clients' attention and create something innovative and fresh:

> In that way, clients can recognize that I am Spanish, I am from Europe, I am qualified enough to sell them my artistic and creative business spirit.

Anna shared with me her business website, so I could see how she promotes her services. Navigating her website, I noticed that she created a unique artistic template inspired by the artist's symbolic and poetic nature, using similar bright colours, shapes, and motifs. Anna's website offers an instructive example of business marketing and branding, as many of my research participants used semiotic practices to advertise their nationality, education, English language skills, business services, and products to attract more clients in China and distinguish themselves in the market. Interestingly, Anna uses the English language exclusively for her website's content despite her knowledge of Chinese. As she told me, by using English she can achieve a more extensive range of clients, both foreigners and Chinese, who are looking for a Western expert. Additionally, Anna provides additional information about her identity, as her bio is accompanied by a profile picture featuring her wearing a pink hat and a big smile in front

of Shenzhen's skyscrapers. The caption at the bottom of the image reads: 'the female entrepreneurial spirit in China.'

Anna's website exemplifies what I call 'racialized branding.' The association of the brand name with her nationality, and her self-presentation as a qualified entrepreneur from Europe both reflect the value of whiteness as capital. Moreover, whiteness is instrumentalized as a practice through branding, not as a property or possession but rather as a realm of culture in China they need to operate to succeed. To further examine the branding aesthetic of my participants, I analysed all of their online websites, and identified six recurring patterns of content:

- English language as the primary language
- Colourful templates to attract clients' attention, creating a youthful impression. Some participants said this was a way to differentiate themselves from classic business websites, which use dark colours.
- Short biographies mentioning their nationality and their studies in Western universities. Usually, such bios are accompanied by a photo of them in front of buildings in China.
- In their profile pictures, participants wear colourful, modern clothes, conveying a more hipster-ish lifestyle than usual business photos in which people wear suits.
- At the bottom of their websites, they list previous clients, mostly from Western countries.
- Their business names are either a word from their country of origin, like Anna's, or a word that gives a sense that they know the Chinese market, such as 'bridge,' which casts them as cultural ambassadors.

Notably, participants from African countries creatively diverged from the above patterns, especially during their early stages of launching their businesses in China. Ami from Ghana shared with me her thoughts on why she didn't have success when she first in the launched her business, attributing it to her profile picture on her website:

> I arrived in Beijing after my studies in London in interior design. In the first months of promoting my business with clients, I didn't have the success I wanted. I didn't manage to have a client for the first six months after moving here. Maybe because I'm black! My friends suggested creating a website with my portfolio and bio, pointing to my Western educational background but leaving off the template profile picture. Surprisingly in a few weeks, I managed to have some investors who needed my designs. So, I created an online brand with no face, only my skills. After a few months, I managed to have a good portfolio and secure some clients, so [then] I posted my photo.

Ami's story points to how foreign black women are differently racialized in China and how the commodification of whiteness plays a significant role on China's transnational business field. In addition, it shows the comparably lower place non-white migrants are located in the 'racial hierarchy' of foreigners in China (Lan 2016). Online businesses in China may be directly associated with the racialisation of whiteness, as the experiences of these female entrepreneurs show. Nakamura (2008, 14) argues that the Internet is a place for 'digital racial formation' as an 'ongoing process.' For Ami and other black female entrepreneurs, their online businesses act as a space for re-embodiment along the axes of race and gender, both virtual and real.

Corporeal whiteness, usually conveyed through profile pictures or client lists, is associated with business success. Whiteness can also be implied: all of the participants mentioned their Western educational background, English language skills, and Western clients. These

associations were enough to bring in clients. As Henry (2020) mentions in his studies on English-language schools in China, the symbolic meaning of whiteness in advertisements, urban architecture, images, and contents shows how white foreigners and the English language are indexes of modernisation and globalisation. In this case of foreign female entrepreneurs, the indexing of whiteness creates new discourses of distinction, independence, and self-expression.

In addition, black female entrepreneurs also struggled to brand products that were not perceived as white or Western for Chinese clients but found a market for them among Western clients. Janelle, a jeweller, and fashion designer in Shanghai, originally from Cameroon, said:

> I have a few Chinese clients, but mainly work with Westerners. All my products are colorful, with patterns inspired by Cameroon and Africa. While for many Western clients, my products have an 'exotic taste,' for Chinese they have no taste at all, they are invisible. Many of my European friends here helped me to promote my work through their online social media. After that I managed to have my first clients.

Moreover, all of my participants used the English language on their websites for marketing purposes highlighting how their creativity is connected with their studies or work experience in Western countries. I concur with Henry (2013, 217) who writes that 'English, in both visual and aural forms, has become ubiquitous in China's urban spaces as the language increasingly becomes a requirement for higher education and professional employment.' I would add that the use of English is one of the primary aspects of my participants' entrepreneurial success. These foreign female entrepreneurs' branding and marketing show that whiteness can be valuable capital in the new business context of China's entrepreneurial environment. In this way, my research supports Lan's (2022, 14) statement that 'the reconfiguration of whiteness in

China is mediated not only by skin colour, but by diverse factors such as citizenship, class, gender, age, field of employment, English and Chinese language proficiency, and professional qualifications.' We see this as well for the African participants, who projected whiteness by showing they had acquired skills from Western countries. In addition, the case of Oksana from Romania shows how performing whiteness can create valuable capital to overcome gender bias. This performance of whiteness poses a challenge for non-white and non-Western women, and this can diminish their autonomy and individuality since they may need to rely on white women to promote their work. Thus, for these foreign women, whiteness is commodified as a branding tactic for success.

***Discussion and conclusion***

In this research, I used an intersectional theoretical approach on gender and race, supported by empirical evidence, to analyse the business strategies of a new group of foreign female migrant entrepreneurs in China's thriving online business field. Drawing upon literature on skills, whiteness, and gender performativity, I examined how race and gender intersect and women thus perform, negotiate, and contrast their identities. These women's involvement with entrepreneurship derives from China's efforts to attract foreign talent as well as their desire to succeed independently, outside of male-dominated business practices. Their success in online ventures is primarily a result of the combination of China's promising entrepreneurial field, the use of digital technology, and their own creativity. These women act as pioneers in creating a new space online to do business as foreigners, strategically using gender and race to integrate and succeed in China.

Their reading of the business field has two key elements, as evidenced in their narratives. First, the participants saw the role of gender, and stereotypical expected behaviours and performances, as a primary reason for the imbalanced power dynamics between them and

potential clients. Online entrepreneurship allows them to overcome those norms by dealing with clients at a distance, even if gender bias still exists in personal encounters. Emphasising their physical appearance and dress, in presenting themselves as young, confident, and intelligent women, they avoid misogynist comments from their male clients. As in Oksana's case, ideas about nationality also affect women from Eastern European countries. Performing her English accent allowed her to present herself as a wealthy woman from Western Europe, which shows how skills are associated with Western education and a default construction of whiteness based on nationality and qualifications.

Moreover, women from Western Europe associate a professional self with the construction of whiteness based on skin colour, the acquisition of skills, and education in Western countries, all of which potential clients may admire. This hierarchy of women from Western Europe and the US and those from Eastern Europe reflects women's vulnerable status as entrepreneurs, further revealing the role of whiteness in advancing a foreign business in China.

Secondly, these women adopted what this paper called 'racialized branding' strategies to perform themselves and to market their products online. Based on a content analysis of their business websites and narratives, I argue that women claimed whiteness to distinguish themselves in the market; white capital helped them convey an image of skill and competence in Western business. These women reinforced their racialisation as skilled foreigners by highlighting their nationality, English-language skills, Western education, and Western clients. In the case of African women, removing their images to hide their identity as women of colour, highlighting their skills acquired from Western countries, and foregrounding their business collaborations with white women shows how precarious entrepreneurship can be and why they might work to imply whiteness to establish a client base.

In this research on how foreign women navigate China's online business sector, we find a complex interplay of gendered and racialized performances in the entrepreneurial field. The continued existence of transnational migration for working and business opportunities suggests that these elements be considered in future studies, especially for the new digital field and post-pandemic period. Understanding these women's goals and strategies in the context of China, the paper contributes to a broader literature on gender, racialisation, and transnational migration in Asia.

# *CHAPTER 5*

## Chapter 5:

# BEYOND BARBIE: REPRESENTATIONS OF WHITENESS IN CHINA'S DIGITAL ADVERTISING[15]

### *Introduction*

When I started my anthropological research on Western businesses and entrepreneurs in China, memories of my work for a Shanghai advertising company flooded my mind. Over the course of two years, from 2017 to 2019, I was a graduate student intern responsible for identifying niches for Western brands and entrepreneurs to thrive in China. This entailed conducting interviews with Chinese consumers and subsequently crafting images and visual interpretations for our clients' advertising campaigns on China's social media platforms. During those two years at the company, I observed distinct differences in how Western brands demanded their advertising content.

One pivotal project that marked the inception of my broader research was an advertising campaign for a lipstick by a renowned French cosmetic brand in late 2018. A week before the product's launch into the Chinese market, the company's manager invited me to participate in an online event, a pilot campaign, specifying that I should wear clothes with touches of the color pink. Sensing my confusion, as this was my first official business event, the manager leaned in, lowered her voice, and said: "We want you to carry the product and smile. You can do the Barbie. That's all we need." Still perplexed, I sought clarification on the Barbie reference, only to be told, "You are the only Western employee we have here at the company—white with blue eyes, the perfect marketing for the products. You showcase it, and we, as

[15] This chapter is adapted from the article: Kefala, C. (under review). "Beyond Barbie: Representation of Whiteness in China's Digital Advertisement".

Chinese, can sell it to our clients." I vividly recall delicately presenting the lipstick and offering an awkward smile on camera while my manager marketed the product. A week later the product gained approval and the company hired a well-known white model from France for the advertising campaign on various Chinese e-commerce platforms.

This approach to advertising in China reflected a common strategy where the white body was commodified to promote products. However, the lipstick did not achieve the anticipated success, particularly among young Chinese consumers. Online comments suggested that the advertisement lacked a deep understanding of China and criticized the repetitive use of white Western models instead of Chinese ones. Many called on Western brands to adopt a more nationalistic approach to branding, urging the incorporation of traditional Chinese elements, symbols, and designs into both the products and marketing campaigns.

While Turrow and McAllister (2009: 4) write that advertising is heavily involved in shaping consumer culture, which refers to the symbols and messages that people are exposed to regarding the goods and services they use, purchase, or consume, my research shows that consumers also shape advertising. An online article published recently by Bloomberg (2022), titled "China's Gen Z Has the Power to Make or Break Western Brands," focuses on that generation's swelling sense of nationalism, their preference for local brands, and their extra scrutiny of Western firms advertising products in China. The same year that the French lipstick campaign failed, China's advertising industry also began promoting Chinese cultural identity through brands eloquently translated as *guócháo* (国潮; meaning national wave or national trend in Mandarin). Its popularity then intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic when China closed its borders to foreign nationals. Chinese fashion brands in the last few years have embraced the *guócháo* movement, designing products that celebrate and promote Chinese

cultural identity. This shift includes replacing white models with Chinese ones and using the Chinese language exclusively, as opposed to English, for online product promotion. Subsequently, Western brands started to shift their online advertising campaigns towards China's Gen Z, who eschewed Western aesthetics in advertising.

This case study identifies multiple and contradictory structures of white racial formation and traces its representation by white Western people and companies through China's mainstream social media platforms. Delving into the representation of whiteness beyond big corporate campaigns, I focus on online ads for Western products created not only by famous western brands but also by white Western entrepreneurs who live and work in China. These entrepreneurs are promoting their products through their personal accounts on China's social media platforms mostly by using whiteness as a façade for successful branding. Although Dyer (1997: 37-8) states that the white subject is "a subject without properties," it still has a dominant position and serves as a mechanism for distinction. However, the ideal of whiteness portrayed in mainstream American advertising, which long acted as a vehicle of white supremacy (Shankar, 2019), is notably different than in China. In addition, while whiteness can remain largely invisible in white-dominated societies, it is very evident in places where non-white people predominate (Fechter 2005; Lan 2011; Leonard 2008, 2010b; López 2012; Lundström 2014). As such, and given the recent *guócháo* movement, this article offers new ways of conceptualizing Western brands' advertising campaigns in China, where media representations of whiteness are contested, reproduced, and performed.

Inspired by Nakamura's (2008: 14) theory of "digital racial formation," which aims to "parse the way that digital modes of cultural production and reception are complicit with" racial formation as an "ongoing process," this study investigates the visual practices used by Western

brands and entrepreneurs and their relation to whiteness. This paper opens up China's advertising landscape, where a rapidly changing consumer culture meets Western brands and entrepreneurs advertising their products within existing mass-mediated representations of whiteness. Thus, this study asks two interrelated research questions: How do Western brands and entrepreneurs adapt their advertising strategies in China to effectively reach and engage with Gen Z consumers? And in what ways are representations of whiteness integrated into the discourse(s) of online advertising?

In order to evaluate advertising campaigns on China's social media platforms, it is necessary to establish a dialogue between producers, such as entrepreneurs and advertising companies, China's branding scene, and racialization in the marketing realm. Rather than simplistically judging Western products and advertising campaigns as positive or negative, this study highlights the junctures through which Western brands demonstrate the significance of visual racialized practices on social media platforms as they evolve to align with the perspectives of China's Generation Z.

***Gen Z, Nationalism, and Whiteness***

China is a significant case for investigating the relationship between advertising campaigns and consumerist culture, mainly Gen Z (in Chinese, Z 世代 [Z shìdài] or 00 后 [00hòu]). Generation Z, the cohort referred to by demographers includes those who were born after the mid-1990s, has become a distinctive new consumer group and is characterized as a “digital native” generation. In China, Gen Z has a strong presence in the e-commerce market, with 70% reporting that they are open to purchasing items through social media (Pan 2017). In addition, those consumers are little interested in traditional retail, instead using their smartphones to pay attention to social media advertising, in the form of live streams, short videos, and key opinion

leaders's ("influencers") recommendations (Wei and Banjo 2019). Recently, the rise of artificial intelligence-generated content on e-commerce platforms has drawn attention to Western brands and businesses that create immersive experiences, which resonate with their target audience, such as Gen-Z (Dudarenok 2023). Social media platforms, such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), Xiaohongshu (China's answer to Instagram), and many other Chinese e-commerce platforms, foster consumers' interactions with brands' content and media presence. As Western brands eagerly eye the vast Chinese e-commerce market, young consumers display a strong sense of taste and preferences regarding the promotion of products.

Social, cultural, and political pressures can influence purchasing patterns and product preferences. Nationalistic sentiments about consumption began with China's economic expansion and the government's efforts to strengthen the promotion of local products alongside imported goods. After China had experienced decades of egalitarian and controlled consumption during the Cultural Revolution (Zhang 2017), it underwent a "consumer revolution" (Davis 2000, 2005). Zhang (2017:648) argues that, since China's economy "shifted from socialism to 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics after the economic reforms of 1978" and thus "Chinese consumption patterns include both Western and Chinese characteristics." Liya, born in 2002 in Shanghai, said to me: "*Guócháo* is not just a trend. It's how brands are shaping the new business industries in China. We, as consumers, we are proud for our culture and it's always satisfying to see Western brands giving a flavor of China to their products." In 2014, Chinese leader Xi Jinping further proposed "the transformation of Chinese products into Chinese brands" (Cogné 2023). China's nationalistic branding effectively influences Gen Z consumers to feel a genuine sense of pride in and an active relationship with their country, and Western brands attempt this too through *Guócháo*. As the sociologist and philosopher

Baudrillard (1996:199) writes: “Consumption is an active form of relationship (not only to objects but also to society and the world), a mode of systematic activity and global response which founds our entire cultural system.”

“*Guócháo*,” the movement toward rediscovering and redefining what is “made in China,” became a buzzword online among China's young generation. Chinese sportswear brands Li-Ning and Anta inaugurated the term in media campaigns featuring clothing with patriotic designs, such as simplified Chinese characters and the Chinese flag (Zhou 2021), and young Chinese consumers responded positively to these strategies. For example, Peng, born in 1998 in Shenzhen, said: “Many fashion trends in China were largely influenced by the West. And you can see that in the advertisements too. White models, big logos on t-shirts written in English, English songs in the background, and other small details too. However, my generation found beauty in our heritage and our traditions. So yeah, it’s now considered cool to embrace a “Chinese look,” even down to the packaging!”

In line with this, we can define *guócháo* and its constituent forms, such as branding and consumption, as a subtype of China's consumer nationalism. Castello and Mihelj (2018) distinguish two types of consumer nationalism: political consumer nationalism and symbolic consumer nationalism. Political consumer nationalism combines political criticism of another country or boycotting foreign products and encouraging domestic purchases to boost one’s own country's economy. Conversely, symbolic consumer nationalism draws attention to actions and speech that serve cultural goals rather than political ones. This includes promoting nationalism through the consumption of not only domestically produced items but also imported goods that weave in nationalist elements through their production and distribution process. Li and Whitworth (2023) contend that consumer nationalism is a hybrid of political and symbolic

consumer nationalism, rather than seeing them as distinct entities. My research finds that both types of consumer nationalism participate in acts of consumption. I agree with Li (2016), who argues that in China consumer nationalism is expressed mainly though media communication. My research found that the younger generation in China actively participates in the advertising digital landscape, utilizing their consumption preferences as a means of expressing their nationalistic sentiments. *Guócháo* thus also affects Western businesses' branding and advertising campaigns (Cogné, 2023), and this practice contributes to shaping whiteness as a commodification strategy.

A distinctive example of these dynamics occurred in January 2023, when Mattel, the American toy company that owns the iconic Barbie doll, collaborated with the Chinese haute couture designer Guo Pei to design a special edition Barbie doll for the Lunar Year, which was released worldwide and in Barbie's online store in China. Referencing the traditional Qing Dynasty court dress, Guo Pei created a matching satin top and skirt in royal blue, embroidered with ornate swirling dragons to symbolize luck, strength, and "the union of earthly elements," as she explained in an online post to advertise the product. The doll's hair is sleek and black, cut in a bob with bangs, and wears gold jewellery and shoes. This was Pei's third design collaboration Mattel: in 2022, she created two different dresses for Barbie. One of them was a reinterpretation of a Yellow Empress Dress and the second, designed specifically for the Lunar Year 2022, was an embroidered traditional Chinese red dress with golden phoenixes representing femininity and grace.

The release of these dresses and Barbies on China's e-commerce platforms received unparalleled attention from young Chinese consumers due to how Mattel adapted to the Chinese market, including its collaboration with a famous Chinese designer, the dolls' unique

clothing pieces with Chinese patterns, and the dark, short hairstyle, as Barbie usually is depicted as a white woman with long blond hair and blue eyes. However, the production and promotion of Barbie with Chinese characteristics and clothes can also raise questions about those designs, and about Mattel's attempt to produce a kind of difference and a sense of belonging in the Chinese market. DuCille's (1999:38) research on so-called ethnic Barbies shows that dolls that diverge from the stereotypical Barbie still reify a white standard of beauty: "Today Barbie dolls come in a rainbow coalition of colors, races, ethnicities, and nationalities, [but] all of those dolls look remarkably like the stereotypical white Barbie, modified only by a dash of color and a change of clothes." As in the case of the Chinese Barbie and other products made by Western brands and entrepreneurs in the country, whiteness does not inhere exclusively in the body but symbolically represents a system of dominance that encompasses factors like nationality, gender, location, and class. Particularly in China, whiteness merges with *guócháo* and acts as both as a motif of consumption for Western products and a reflection of otherness in the eyes of young Chinese consumers.

***Representations of Whiteness in China***

At one level, advertising is a communication strategy to creatively promote products, but it also is a way that race is constructed, negotiated, and presented. The body, with its phenotypic characteristics, serves as the core element for the discourse of race (Hall 2013, 1980). Representation is a signifying practice of racializing the other, according to Hall's (2013) study of the nuanced ways that the media not only presents images but also connotations about race and ethnicity.

The growing scholarship on advertising, branding, and race in China (Chen 2023; Kefala 2023; Mak 2007; Johansson 1999) is a significant backdrop to the present study. Scholars have

established that the advertising industry in China has been playing an essential role in producing and representing whiteness. The white body, as represented in advertisements by white models or white entrepreneurs, visually displays the commodification of whiteness. Still, Western fashion products are considered more fashionable and beautiful by Chinese consumers when they are associated with Western white models in their ads (Zhou and Belk 2004). The research presented here adds to understandings of whiteness as it is represented with the white body by tackling a relatively unexplored topic: the representation of whiteness as manifested in an immaterial form, as an invisible veil. In a more critical view of the structures of whiteness, the recognition of it as marked (visible) and unmarked (invisible) (Fujikawa 2008) reinforces the importance of the context of representation. On the one hand, corporeal whiteness is apparent (white bodies); on the other, it remains invisible (white supremacy and white norms). In centering this contradiction in the racialization of Western advertisements in China, this study considers whiteness a polysemic construction.

Prior scholarship on whiteness focused on white racial formation (Frankenberg 1993; Hage 2000; Hartigan 1999; Roediger 1992; Wekker 2016) and media representation of white hegemony (Bonnet 2000; Gabriel 1998; Dyer 1997), mainly in Western countries. Critiques of those studies point to their parochial outlook, suggesting new geographies to investigate how whiteness can be displaced (Ang et al. 2022; Nayak 2007; Wiegman 1999). Since race is a social construction and whiteness is a social and cultural process that holds a structural position, it can also be interrogated in different socio-political, cultural, and local contexts. China has become an emerging place for scholars to investigate the reconfiguration of whiteness and its changing power in the Chinese context.

Focusing on white racial formations, researchers have examined the experiences and positionality of Western white migrants in China. These studies highlight the conflation of whiteness with advantage and illuminate the disadvantages those migrants encounter in the country as foreign others (Kefala 2023; Kefala and Lan 2021; Ma 2021; Litman 2021; Camenish and Suter 2019; Lan 2022; Leonard 2019; Lehman 2014). Drawing from studies that emphasize the "territorially bounded nature of whiteness (Lan 2022; Lundström 2014), Lan (2022: 119) makes a "distinction between white privilege as a form of structural domination in Western societies and white-skin privilege as a form of embodied racial capital in China". Since whiteness in China does not hold structural dominance, social privilege and favorable treatment is largely attributable to white skin and Western appearance. Ma's (2023) study on the representation of whiteness in Chinese cinema in relation to Chinese nationalism, shows the multiplicity of whiteness mirroring the Chinese audience's nationalistic feelings in which white superiority is affirmed and questioned. Ma also argues that Chinese media play a role in contributing to racial ideologies concerning whiteness. Therefore, while whiteness "in China still benefits, to some extent, from white supremacist ideologies, structures, and practices embedded in global media, the neoliberal market economy, and consumer culture" (Lan 2022: 119), it is also marginalized.

While these scholars offer incisive assessments of the conflicting and complex social construction of whiteness in China, they have paid less attention to advertising and how it contributes to white racial formation. Moreover, racialization in digital media and technology suggests that offline power dynamics get reproduced online in retrogressive ways (Hobson 2008). To contextualize the meanings of whiteness and positioning them within the framework of current developments (Twine and Gallagher 2008), I use the case of China, focusing on the stereotype of Western brands and Western entrepreneurs, through the representation of

whiteness. Thus, the paper exemplifies how race is constructed and visually expressed through China's digital advertising and consumption.

***Methodology***

This study is part of an ongoing online ethnographic research project from 2020 to 2023 that examines the racial and gender performances of foreign digital entrepreneurs and their businesses in China. In the context of the production and promotion of Western brands in China, in which the representation of whiteness is increasingly equated with branding techniques to attract consumers, entrepreneurs' marketing strategies seem essential to analyze the construction of whiteness in China's media. My in-depth analysis for this paper follows an inductive pattern, which involves building meaning from the rich descriptions found in research participants' narratives (Lapan et al. 2012), and a careful reading of my data and the development of my argument.

When seeking to analyze people's experiences in producing or interpreting media content such as advertising campaigns, methods such as interviews and participant observation produce data sufficient to generate insights. Since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted my on-site ethnographic research in China due to travel restrictions for foreign nationals, I turned my focus to digitally mediated practices, conducting online interviews with Western entrepreneurs, young Chinese consumers, and advertising companies. Finally, I analyzed Western advertising campaigns on China's social media platforms, deploying a behind-the-scenes form of observation that helped me see how the advertising of Western brands in China is distributed to audiences online. As Lopes (2020: 20) states: "The way media are created and what happens behind the scenes then affect the representations we end up seeing on-screen."

For the Western research participants in this study, I contacted them through my network in Shanghai, Facebook, Instagram, and job portals like LinkedIn and WeChat (China's largest mobile app) and conducted interviews with 20 participants. They ranged in age from 20 to 38, and the interviews were conducted in English. This group of participants were from Europe or the United States, and all identified as white. They had all lived in China for the last six years, working in creative industries as fashion or jewellery designers, artists, craft makers, writers, and photographers.

In addition, to probe the characteristics of China's Gen Z consumers and the specific aesthetics they prefer from Western brands, I interviewed ten young Chinese consumers studying in Shanghai; all were in their mid-twenties. In addition, I was also in contact with people from the marketing departments of three Chinese advertising companies, to discuss the marketing strategies that famous Western brands choose to promote products in China.

The last step of my data collection was the visual and textual analysis of several Western brands on China's social media platforms, such as WeChat, Douyin, Kuaishou, and Xiaohongshu. I was looking to see if there were differences across platforms for, as Belk (2017: 40) argues: "Advertisements are targeted to different audiences, and audiences may form different interpretive communities, the members of which respond to particular ads in unique ways." Finally, textual analysis is an established strategy for studying race and the media. In-depth analyses of media work to comprehend the significance of racial representations by dissecting the general trends they have adopted and the intricacies of particular storylines, dialogue, scenes, or characterizations.

***Research Findings***

*Western brands and the unbearable whiteness of advertising in China*

One Saturday morning in September 2021, I received a video call from Ivan, a Chinese friend who lives in Shanghai. When I opened my camera, I saw Ivan running, and I could barely hear her as she asked, "Do you have time now to talk? I want you to see something." It took me a few minutes to understand what was happening, but I discerned that Ivan was in the city centre of Shanghai, trying to squeeze herself among many young Chinese standing in front of one of the city's wet markets. She explained that the previous night, she saw on several social media that Prada, the Italian luxury fashion brand, had created a spot in the Wuzhong market in Shanghai to market the Fall/Winter 2021 campaign, and she thought I'd be interested to see it as well. With the title "Feels like Prada," the campaign, which had occupied several building façades and stores in several cities worldwide, travelled to China for a two-week pop-up event. From the first day of the campaign's release, the wet market received hundreds of young Chinese and celebrities daily to purchase food products, such as vegetables and meat from different vendors inside the market, in wrapping paper and shopping bags with the Prada logo and take photographs inside the decorated Prada market stall. The campaign was quite different than previous ones, as it replaced white models with a physical space occupied by Chinese employees and businesses. After Ivan showed me the market and the products, I noticed the excitement on her face and the smiles she exchanged with other young Chinese consumers there, and she enthusiastically told me:

> It not only feels [like] Prada to me, but it also feels [like] China. Prada's aspiration to localize itself serves as an unprecedented invitation to our culture – a form of marketing we are encouraging other Western brands to adopt. Personally, I've grown tired of

> mainstream ads featuring exclusively white models. I crave something more innovative and distinctive.

Prada's event, which was advertised on several Chinese social media platforms, received millions of views. In a similar vein, another Italian luxury brand, Fendi, received on several social media platforms more than 2 million views with users using the hashtag "#喜茶FENDI" in early summer 2023 after its collaboration with the tea brand HEYTEA, which is popular among Chinese Gen Z consumers. However, young people like Ivan commented on social media rather skeptically, stating things like: "brand's loyalty remains, it just looks different," "break the stereotypes, make it Chinese," and "redressing white brands." Consumers' reactions on social media raise questions about Western brands' use of whiteness, and specifically voice a demand for non-white models and the adoption of *guócháo*.

I interviewed Yvette, a manager in a Chinese advertising company in Shanghai, regarding the above examples and asked about her feelings about these advertising campaigns. She told me:

> Whether or not a brand is successful, it must respect the consumers and their demands. Today, consumers in China, mainly the younger generation, can easily backlash against a brand and a product. There is no more excuse to favor a Western brand. We must be constantly alert to what consumers want and how they want something. Today, the idea that a white Western model can give value to a brand is faulty. Those brands are still white but in a symbolic way. For example, my company started to work mostly with Chinese models, incorporating Chinese elements in advertisements, and I noticed that sales rose dramatically because still consumers buy a Western brand.

Yvette's response illuminates white racial formation through advertising: whiteness is not only constructed through skin color in China but also mediated by "nationality, gender, class,

Chinese language skills" (Lan, 2022). Moreover, it emphasizes that Western products in China still index whiteness for consumers.

Some participants pointed directly at the representation of whiteness by Western brands. My interview with Eva, a 23-year-old Chinese bachelor's student in anthropology, clearly shows the dynamic of whiteness in China's advertising industry. She said:

> What matters is the message a brand wants to share with consumers. My generation experiences economic uncertainty. We can barely afford to buy a luxury product, but if we do, the brand must have a very successful communication strategy. Indeed, we are not mesmerized by white Western models that look like Barbie. I need a representation of myself, but in the right way.

Moreover, while Eva exemplifies the communicative significance of Western brands in advertising their products according to consumers' demands, her last quote suggests that several Western brands in China have failed to adjust to the local culture and thus to young Chinese consumers.

So far, there are several controversial cases in China in which Western brands have failed to adapt to the Chinese market with their online advertisements. In 2018, Dolce & Gabbana, the Italian luxury brand, released a provocative video on social media titled "Eating with Chopsticks," with a Chinese model struggling to taste Italian dishes using chopsticks. The video is considered a significant miss, with many viewers, primarily young Chinese consumers, angrily commenting online that the ad was disrespectful of their Chinese culture and identity. After this harsh criticism from Chinese consumers, many e-commerce platforms in China decided to remove Dolce & Gabbana products from their websites. The German automaker

Mercedes-Benz also drew backlash in 2021, accused of perpetuating harmful stereotypes about Asians in an advert in which they used Chinese models with very distinctive slanted eyes. Similarly, the same year, the French brand Dior received criticism, with young consumers commenting on social media that the brand was "smearing Asian women" in their social media ad that featured a Chinese model with "spooky" eyes and dark skin, dressed in traditional Chinese clothing, and holding a bag from the brand.

This is but a small sample of Western brands' advertising campaigns that failed to display cultural sensitivity toward Chinese consumers. Those ads illustrate how Western brands have used and positioned the Chinese body to embrace *guócháo*. Using the Chinese body may be understood as an attempt of those brands to shed their whiteness, make it invisible. But veiling whiteness in this way, making it symbolic and not physical, hiring Chinese models instead of white ones, does not necessarily make their products appealing to consumers.

The brands' whiteness still grounds the product's value, concealed behind the packaging. The desire to reduce brands' association with whiteness in ads under the "national wave" does not entirely reduce the commodification of whiteness, as it is sometimes still conveyed as a marker of desirability and distinctiveness. As Pitcher (2014) states: "We are all consumers, and we are all producers just as we are all positioned and produced in discourses of race." Let's now take a look at online advertising by white Western entrepreneurs, where the white body dominates the campaigns and whiteness is represented in creative practices.

*The art of making whiteness desirable for consumption*

Working in a small, neat, and modern design studio in central Shanghai, Ann, a 35-year-old American fashion designer and entrepreneur, not only designs clothes for adults, but she also

makes clothes and accessories for plastic dolls, like Barbie, promoting her products on China's social media platforms. Ann's designs for the dolls are embroidered in traditional Chinese patterns. At the same time, the fabrics she uses are imported from Italy and France:

> I love creating and producing designs with a Western fashion attitude but with Chinese characteristics. My designs and clothes for those dolls might look like art but conceal the dynamic of China's marketing and advertising industry to succeed as a Western brand. A product that replicates whiteness dresses as non-white. But it is still white, right? I am white.

Similarly, Sofia, a 32-year-old entrepreneur from Belgium, works as a fashion designer in Beijing, mainly creating dresses with sustainable materials, and promoting her work on various Chinese social media platforms. For her, it is crucial to stylize her online presence and her advertising campaigns as an aesthetic form for successful branding, as she explained in our interview:

> I often dance during the live streaming, wearing my dresses, and I mostly receive comments on how beautiful and flawless my dresses are made. Many users often mention on my posts that my dresses match my blond hair and aesthetically present something European. I am trying to prove to them that they are wrong and that my designs are made exclusively for young Chinese consumers and look beautiful in them. Many times, I invited my best friend, who is Chinese, to become the model for my photo shoots while I recorded the process and posted small clips later. I recognize that I am a foreigner here, but I also want to blur the lines of always feeling like an outsider. To do so, I learned Chinese fast, and now I exclusively promote my clothes in the Chinese language. Being white still benefits me somewhat, but that is not enough, especially for Gen Z.

Ann's and Sofia's narratives illustrate how representations of whiteness are creatively exposed on China's social media platforms. Their performances—through their designs, their bodies, and their use of Chinese patterns, language, and models—reveal how whiteness is both visible and invisible in the advertising sector. The invisible side becomes more 'expressive' to gain consumers' attention. As the above case studies exemplify, whiteness is ambivalent: a Western product equals a white product and thus a good product for consumption, and, at the same time, it threatens the nationalistic sentiments of consumers and the politics of *guócháo*.

Several of my research participants mentioned that *guócháo* plays an essential role in how they represent whiteness. Theano, a 32-year-old jewelry designer from Greece, shared with me

> If I want to target only Chinese consumers, it is difficult to market my products online by raising only my nationality or showing my face. Young Chinese consumers today expect from us [white Western entrepreneurs] a high performance, both from the quality of our products and the advertising campaigns on social media platforms. I literally and metaphorically need to perform myself. During my livestreams on Douyin, I speak, for example, fluent Chinese, and I have both Chinese and Western models for my posts on several social media. This also fits with consumers' demands as the advertising industry in China constantly changes. To be white or to promote a Western brand matter to some extent, but under a specific frame on how to brand a product or yourself.

When I asked why she must use China's social media platforms and target specifically young Chinese consumers, she replied

> There are the general consumers and the Gen Z consumers in China. The younger generation is the engine for China's consumption growth. Their demand from Western brands and eventually from us is to redress ourselves and our products with Chinese

characteristics. China's social media is a part of these characteristics. We constantly need to find ways to advertise and thus represent online ourselves and our work creatively.

Moreover, in China, creativity signifies a critical indicator of modernity and the country's competitiveness with the global market (de Kloet et al., 2019). The creative industry (including advertising), expressed under the Chinese policy umbrella as "industries that engage in creative cultural content, production, circulation, and services based on Internet technology and core digitization" (Xie et al., 2019: 504), is a multilayered field, charged with spreading nationalistic sentiment. In addition, social media are not only the digital spaces for expressing creative practices but are also spaces to deliver the desires of consumers. Hence, whiteness is also becomes politically visualized as represented online by Western brands and entrepreneurs.

***Discussion and Conclusion***

By focusing on Western brands and entrepreneurs' online advertising campaigns, this article critically examines the representation of whiteness within the context of visual communication in China. Two key points were presented. Firstly, presenting China's Gen Z nationalistic sentiments regarding consumption, this piece offered a way to conceptualize how whiteness is constructed in efforts to grab those consumers' attention. The study demonstrates that, without the stereotypical figure of the white Western model as a typical prop in advertising campaigns, an invisible form of whiteness remains involved in consumption. Using examples of famous Western fashion brands and their advertising practices, such as their integration with other Chinese brands, markets, or cultural elements, I showed that they have attempted to follow *guócháo* while whiteness remained salient through the brand's value as a Western product. The failure of several brands to adjust their branding and advertising campaigns to *guócháo* meant that China's young consumers were repulsed.

Second, and related, this article also reveals how Western entrepreneurs reinforce the representation of whiteness on social media platforms through using their white bodies and their skills in targeting the production and distribution of ads to Gen Z in China. The success of Western entrepreneurs in online ventures is primarily a result of the adaptability of whiteness, allowing consumers to subtly understand race as a commodity.

The article introduces new perspectives on how Western brands and white Western entrepreneurs in the country can approach advertising campaigns in China, where portrayals of whiteness in the media are actively debated, replicated, and enacted. In so doing, I consider the representation whiteness as a continual and incomplete narrative that influences the positions of bodies, in this case of white Western entrepreneurs, in particular ways, "affecting how they 'take up' space" (Ahmed, 2007). Whiteness thus in China's advertising sector may function as a form of commodification shaping the bodies in the digital space.

Through the above analysis of Western brands and entrepreneurs, the paper argues that the representation of whiteness in China's advertising industry is a polysemic construction. It is both visible and invisible. In addition, the invisible commodification of whiteness plays an increasingly significant role in China's consumer landscape. Thus, there is a complex interplay of the representation of whiteness on social media platforms, which aligns with its hegemonic norms of whiteness in the country.

We see that businesses adopt a marketing communication strategy to deploy aesthetics compatible with consumers' demands. These findings answer Schroeder's (2008) call for researchers to construct inquiries that allow readers to delve deeper into how images and videos communicate, and how the value they produce is reflected in the racial aesthetics in China's advertising business. The continued adaptations of Western brands suggest the need for further

research, especially in China's digital field. Finally, China's business cooperation with countries away from the Euro-American context can raise more questions about the visualization and the materiality of race.

# *CHAPTER 6*

# Chapter 6:

# CONCLUSION

***Whiteness beyond skin***

This dissertation engages with digital entrepreneurship and the formation of white racial identity within China's online business realm. Such an intriguing avenue for exploration became apparent due to my own experiences during my internship back in Shanghai, while promoting French lipstick as a white, western woman. Thus, in this dissertation I explore how foreign entrepreneurs construct their online personas, by asking the question: "How is whiteness as a power structure produced, represented, and performed among white young foreign entrepreneurs in China, particularly within the context of their business activities, social interactions, and the intersections of race, gender, and digital entrepreneurship?"

Early in my research, I observed that corporeal whiteness was closely associated with my participants' business and entrepreneurial success. However, as my study progressed, I noticed that a deeper layer of the formation of whiteness is represented and performed online through their businesses. When I started spending time listening to the narratives shared by my participants, I realized that the white body is just *one* aspect in shaping their online identity and subsequent achievements. In contrast to my own experience as an intern, where my eyes and skin color alone sufficed for branding the lipstick, these entrepreneurs, whose migrant trajectories have affected their business dreams, artfully construct their digital, racial identity beyond mere appearance. This intricate process allows them to represent and perform their whiteness in the digital entrepreneurial landscape of China. They showcase their proficiency in English and Chinese, highlight their educational achievements, and subtly convey aspects of

their ethnicity and gender identity. These are additional markers of whiteness that are often invisible to the eye. In essence, the participants navigate the complexities of China's digital entrepreneurship field, leveraging various facets of their racial identity to carve out success in a competitive environment.

In order to analyze my research findings, I developed a theoretical framework rooted in critical race studies. This intellectual process generated invaluable insights, setting the stage for a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics surrounding race. With this theoretical toolset at hand, I first examined the nuances of whiteness across diverse environments, and thereafter I delved into the understudied field of white racial formation in China. In short, my dissertation explored and analyzed the reconfiguration of whiteness within contemporary Chinese society.

Within this theoretical framework, China emerges in my research as a context where white skin no longer dominates social hierarchies but rather undergoes a transformation into a minority identity. As the country's economy has flourished and the business landscape has grown more competitive, alongside the deepening of nationalist sentiments in society, foreign entrepreneurs are shaping and reshaping their digital racial presence under the increasing power of the Chinese state and society's gaze.

***Studying the reconfiguration of whiteness in China***

Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, I elaborated on the significance of studying the cohort of young, foreign entrepreneurs, analyzing white racial formation as manifested in China's social media platforms. Meanwhile, the importance of exploring the 'reconfiguration of whiteness' extends beyond introducing new terminology into critical race studies. It also lies

in its capacity to reveal diverse interpretations of whiteness through representation and performance across various social and cultural contexts, acknowledging of course the systemic dominance of whiteness on a global scale.

Existing scholarly works, mainly written before the COVID-19 pandemic, have examined the trajectories of elite and middle-class migrants involved in businesses, emphasizing privileges associated with their white skin colour. However, there exists a gap in academic literature concerning the recent transformations in China's business sector where e-commerce markets are proliferating, xenophobic sentiments are rising, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and where nationalism is expressed more intensely through social media. This dissertation identifies and examines a subset of foreign migrants involved in digital entrepreneurship within this transformative business landscape. It elucidates the fragmented construction of whiteness, highlighting a noteworthy shift in the dynamics of racial perceptions.

In the first chapter I explain my positionality and performativity as a digital ethnographer of China's social media platforms amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and I explain the methodological challenges that emerged during the early stages of my research when attempting to connect with potential participants as a foreigner. The difficulties I faced coincided with the emergence of xenophophic sentiments within Chinese society, as reflected on social media, attributing foreigners in the country as virus carriers. However, my role as a researcher not only allowed me to navigate these initial impediments but also afforded me a distinctive standpoint to delve into the intricacies of Chinese digital platform society. In addition, my experience provided insights into the nuanced ways in which race is formulated and digitized within this sociocultural and digital research framework.

The three empirical chapters that follow the chapter on my positionality unfold the multiple versions of whiteness in China. First, delving into the lives of foreign entrepreneurs amid the turbulent period of the pandemic – as many departed from China either due to business failure or because they got stuck abroad and were unable to return due to China's travel restrictions and lockdowns – Professor Shanshan Lan and I noticed the evolving significance of whiteness as a form of capital. This is not only expressed through physical attributes such as white skin but also through the skills that these migrants bring with them from the West. In contrast to established foreign entrepreneurs in the country, the participants of my study encounter substantial constrains in sustaining their businesses. Additionally, our research underlines the precarious nature of whiteness and the decline of its hegemonic power in a global context within China's transnational business sector.

The open-ended dynamics of white racial formation in China are mainly spotlighted in Chapter three where my focus shifts towards young, foreign, female entrepreneurs, both from Western and African countries. Employing an intersectional theoretical approach that intertwines race and gender, my research introduces 'racialized branding' as a new concept for analyzing changes in white racial formation in China. Specifically, I posit that young, foreign, female entrepreneurs strategically leverage online representations of whiteness, by showcasing their skills of emphasizing specific facial characteristics to navigate the challenges of operating a business within China's predominately masculine business sector. Furthermore, I content that whiteness, treated as a form of capital, undergoes a continual construction and is instrumentalized through the business performances of these women as a practice for achieving

success. This approach sheds anthropological light on the complex interplay between racial dynamics, gender roles, and entrepreneurial strategies within the Chinese business sector.

Concluding the empirical exploration, the last chapter shows the polysemic construction of whiteness through an analysis of China's advertising sector as expressed visually online by foreign brands and foreign entrepreneurs, who brand their products on China's social media platforms. In a period when nationalism and consumerism converge in China, a phenomenon known as guócháo, race undergoes a transformation into a consumable commodity. The study showed that the white body no longer maintains a structural dominance but rather exhibits a fragmented structure, aligned with the demands of Chinese Gen Z consumers.

Moreover, during my research, I was specifically inspired by Richard Dyer's proposal in his book "White", to "making whiteness strange" (2017: 4). While there is no settled answer on how to do this, my research tried to reveal the nuanced complexities surrounding white racial formation in the context of China, especially in the urban landscape of places like Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen. Alongside exploring the life trajectories of migrant entrepreneurs, I carefully crafted my study to encompass a diverse array of perspectives from China, including government migration policies, nationalist sentiments among the public, gender roles and stereotypes, consumer preferences, and the broader business landscape in the country. These varied influences, combined with migrants' aspirations for business success, contribute to a multifaceted portrayal of whiteness in China. The transformation of whiteness from its position of power, as depicted on the white body, is notably visible in the realm of digital entrepreneurship. Moving beyond corporeal depictions of race, the narratives of my participants unveil the significance of portraying whiteness online in accordance with skills

and the expectations of Chinese perspectives. This underscores that the formation of white racial identity in digital China is always context-dependent, shaping not only foreigner experiences with China's social media platforms but also influencing how whiteness is manifested.

Moreover, since the core of each chapter centers on examining race as capital, I uncover the various forms it takes within the business experiences of my participants. Race as capital in my research is redefined and appraised differently, depending on the requirements of Chinese gazes. While physical appearance still holds significance to some extent, these young foreign entrepreneurs are forging new types of racial capital. This includes proficiency in the Chinese language, the cultural understanding of Chinese society, extensive, social networks in China, and adapting to the evolving trends in the country's business landscape, as formulated by government agendas. As Lund states “Whiteness is, has been, and can be many different things. It’s been a bride and bludgeon, a lie and promise. One thing that it is not, though, is neutral” (2022: 213). Consequently, in the case of China, multiple Chinese players, the state and the society such as consumers, are functioning as gate keepers and evaluators of the changing values of white capital.

These empirical findings offer substantive contributions to anthropological discourse concerning the intersections of race, gender, ethnicity, and entrepreneurship in China. My dissertation unveils a complex interplay between racial dynamics and entrepreneurial strategies, thereby providing significant insights that enhance our comprehension of the perpetually evolving landscape of whiteness embedded within the sociocultural fabric of contemporary China.

***The Future of whiteness studies in China***

In this dissertation I have acknowledged the limitations of my research due to relying on digital ethnography and the absence of gathering" empirical data through traditional fieldwork methods, such as living among research participants for an extended period. However, it is essential to recognize that social media platforms have become central technological hubs of social life in contemporary society. They offer valuable insights into embodied experiences and positionalities, making them significant avenues for studying various aspects of human interaction and behavior.

I believe that my dissertation opens up new horizons for research in whiteness studies, not only within the context of China but also other (non-Western) countries. China's contemporary socio-political landscape continually shapes and redefines the experiences of white foreigners within its borders, particularly in a period when race is reflected through technologies such as robots and artificial intelligence systems. As I develop new research aspirations, I am venturing into a new field of study: China's Artificial intelligence world, the future of beauty standards and the construction of race.

To conclude, throughout my PhD journey, colleagues, family, and friends often asked me to define what whiteness means in China and who is considered white. Whenever I faced this question, I turned to Steve Garner's book "Whiteness. An Introduction" (2007). Garner acknowledges the difficulty in providing a direct answer, comparing it to defining concepts like love or sadness. Furthermore, the meaning attached to race varies based on the location, historical period, and the racial regime of the nation under examination. Whiteness in China encompasses a set of conceptual frameworks and diverse perspectives rooted in power

dynamics. It hinges on other racialized identities such as Chineseness, Blackness, Asianness, and more. It is crucial to recognize that whiteness is not a monolithic identity but a structure that invokes unequal power relations. Ultimately, who is considered white in China depends on how it is structured and restructured over time through categorizing and defining someone. The exploration of the reconfiguration of whiteness in China by foreign digital entrepreneurs highlights an ongoing process, where white racial identity undergoes continuous and dynamic transformation. Thus, as this Ph.D. dissertation draws to a close, the imperative for unyielding scholarly engagement in whiteness studies resonates, akin to the pursuit of unraveling the mysteries of love or sadness.

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# SUMMARY

## Representation and Performativity of Whiteness in China: The Case of Foreign Digital Entrepreneurs

Drawing on three years of digital ethnographic research, this dissertation, aligned with the European Research Council (ERC) China-White anthropological research project, focuses on young, foreign, digital entrepreneurs, a rather unstudied group of foreign migrants in China. These migrants are actively engaged in business activities on China's social media platforms and within the platform economy to enhance their enterprises. The dissertation explores their migration trajectories, experiences, challenges, and strategies in navigating China's entrepreneurial landscape, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing how they represent and perform whiteness in their business endeavors. Through an intersectional approach, the study scrutinizes the interplay of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and technology in shaping racialized positions and racial capital in China's entrepreneurship sector. By viewing whiteness as a performative and socially constructed identity, the dissertation emphasizes the fluidity and complexity of racial formation, offering insights into the nuanced manifestations of whiteness in contemporary China.

The research question is: “How is whiteness as a power structure produced, represented, and performed among white, young, foreign entrepreneurs in China, particularly within the context of their business activities, social interactions, and the intersections of race, gender, and digital entrepreneurship?”

In exploring the central question of my research, in my study I focus on three distinct facets. First, I am unveiling the intricate tensions stemming from the interaction between privileges and uncertainties in shaping white racial identity within the transnational business framework, emphasizing the concept of whiteness as a form of capital. Second, I am examining the performative aspects of racialized white identity, particularly concerning its intersection with gender dynamics, and how these dynamics intersect in shaping business strategies, notably through the lens of racialized branding. Finally, I analyze the visual manifestations of racialized practices on social media platforms, exploring how representations contribute to the digital formation of racial identities in the entrepreneurial landscape.

The ***Introduction*** chapter of this dissertation serves as a gateway to the captivating world of foreign entrepreneurship within the dynamic business landscape of China. It introduces us to the realm of young, foreign, digital entrepreneurs who are trying to integrate into China’s bustling economic scene, driven by aspirations of business success. In this chapter, I provide an overview of China’s policies regarding the influx of foreign businesses and entrepreneurs, the shift towards digital entrepreneurship in the country’s platform economy, and the digital engagement of businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. I also foreground the theoretical framework of my research by analyzing the historical formation of white racial identity in

China, digital racial discourse, and finally, the emergence of white capital within the entrepreneurial landscape. With such a conceptual lens, I highlight how whiteness intersects with concepts of hegemony, foreignness, and nationalism in China, and how it shapes the formulation of ideas about race across diverse segments of the population. Through an examination of digital racial representation and the formation of white capital, my research offers insights into the evolving construction of white racial identity and its implications. Overall, this chapter explains how my study contributes to the broader field of critical whiteness studies by providing new geographical perspectives and by deepening our understanding of white racial dynamics beyond Euro-American contexts.

***Chapter 2*** explores my methodological approach to conducting digital ethnography on China's social media platforms as a foreign woman. Amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which hindered my onsite research in China, I had to turn my focus to the country's digital landscape, with social media platforms serving as my primary research arena. The questions raised in this chapter regarding the challenges an ethnographer may encounter when conducting digital ethnography on China from a distance, as well as the strategies for engaging with potential research participants through social media, lay the foundation for the analysis of the following chapters. Drawing upon academic literature on autoethnography, performativity, and researchers' engagement with China's social media platforms, this chapter delves into the intricacies of remotely navigating China's digital space and networks. Furthermore, it explores the impact of social media on relationships with potential research participants. Digital ethnography in this context, emerges as a crucial tool for critically examining the notion of digital China. It elucidates how the country's institutional regulations imposed on social media platforms and how it challenges the positionality and performativity of the ethnographer when conducting digital ethnography.

In ***Chapter 3***, I examine the experiences of two distinct groups of young Western entrepreneurs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic: those encountering business failures and those stranded abroad due to China's travel restrictions and lockdowns. My inquiry centers on their cross-border mobility and the tensions stemming from the privilege they once enjoyed, rooted in their white racial identity. Drawing from existing literature on the accumulation of white capital among foreign migrants, skilled migration, and neoliberal ambitions in the Asian context, we develop a theoretical framework to analyze our participants' accounts and unpack the tensions arising from their experiences. Our analysis explores the emotional responses of Western entrepreneurs, presenting four potential interpretations. First, their struggles underscore the fragile nature of their accomplishments in China, entangled with their white privilege yet hindered by limited resources, as they have yet to establish themselves as prosperous entrepreneurs. Second, China's prioritization of its citizens and the stigma against foreigners as carriers of the virus during the pandemic have reshaped the social landscape, transforming white privilege into a liability. Additionally, our participants' feelings of loss reveal an assumed entitlement rooted in their whiteness, shattered by the challenges brought upon them by the pandemic. Lastly, their experiences shed light on the evolving significance of whiteness globally, transitioning from 'esteemed expatriates' to potential virus carriers, underscoring the

frailty of white privilege and the disillusionment of the "China Dream" on an international scale.

In ***Chapter 4***, I analyze how foreign, female, migrant entrepreneurs navigate China's online business sector, examining the intersection of gender and race in their strategies for success. Through empirical analysis and a review of literature on skills, gender performance, and race studies focusing on white capital, the chapter unveils how these entrepreneurs leverage their white racial identity and gendered performances to thrive in the market. A significant contribution of the study is introducing the concept of "racialized branding," which elucidates how these entrepreneurs strategically utilize their racial identity, particularly whiteness, to distinguish themselves in the market. They achieve this by highlighting attributes such as their nationality, English proficiency, Western education, and their previous clientele from Western countries, crafting a narrative of competence aligned with China's male-dominated, transnational, business landscape. The concept of racialized branding underscores the pivotal role of racial identity in shaping business strategies and market positioning within the transnational context of entrepreneurship in China's online business sphere. Furthermore, the study sheds light on the intricate interplay between gender and racial dynamics in transnational migration, offering valuable insights into the evolving landscape of gender, race, and entrepreneurship in Asia.

In ***Chapter 5*** I delve into the portrayal of whiteness in China's visual communication, focusing on Western brands and entrepreneurs' online advertising campaigns. I emphasize two key points: first, the significance of whiteness in capturing the attention of China's Gen Z consumers amidst their nationalistic sentiments. This part of the chapter illustrates how Western brands seamlessly integrate with Chinese elements, while preserving the appeal of Western products. Second, it explores how Western entrepreneurs reinforce the representation of whiteness on social media platforms, effectively targeting Gen Z consumers by leveraging their white bodies and expertise. By presenting these insights, the chapter provides fresh perspectives on how Western brands can navigate China's advertising sector in its evolving media landscape. It also advocates for further research in the digital field and underscores the importance of examining the role of race in business collaborations beyond the Euro-American context.

In the ***conclusion***, I recall back my main research question. The central argument of this dissertation revolves around the reconfiguration of whiteness within the digital entrepreneurship landscape of China. Through an in-depth exploration of the experiences of young, foreign entrepreneurs, mainly focusing on the intersection of race, gender, and digital entrepreneurship, my research demonstrates that whiteness operates as a dynamic and multifaceted power structure. My dissertation contends that the traditional hegemonic dominance of whiteness is undergoing a notable shift, particularly in China's evolving business sector, where foreign entrepreneurs navigate complex sociocultural dynamics. By analyzing the strategies these entrepreneurs employ, such as "racialized branding," the dissertation elucidates how whiteness is actively constructed and leveraged as a form of capital within the digital entrepreneurial landscape. Furthermore, my study highlights how race intersects with

other social identities and how it influences entrepreneurial strategies, contributing to a deeper understanding of the contemporary dynamics of race and entrepreneurship in China.

# SAMENVATTING

## Representatie en Performativiteit van Witheid in China: De casus van Buitenlandse Digitale Ondernemers

Gebaseerd op drie jaar digitaal etnografisch onderzoek en in lijn met het antropologische onderzoeksproject China-White gefinancierd door de European Research Council (ERC), richt dit proefschrift zich op jonge, buitenlandse, digitale ondernemers, een relatief weinig onderzochte groep buitenlandse migranten in China. Deze migranten zijn actief betrokken bij zakelijke activiteiten om hun ondernemingen te versterken op China's sociale mediaplatforms en binnen de Chinese platformeconomie. Het proefschrift onderzoekt hun migratietrajecten, en hun ervaringen met en strategieën voor het navigeren van het Chinese ondernemerslandschap, vooral tijdens de COVID-19-pandemie, waarbij wordt benadrukt hoe ze witheid vertegenwoordigen en uitdragen in hun zakelijke activiteiten. Door middel van een intersectionele benadering onderzoekt de studie de wisselwerking van 'race', etniciteit, geslacht, klasse en technologie in het vormgeven van geracialiseerde posities en raciaal kapitaal in de ondernemingssector van China. Door witheid te beschouwen als een performatieve en sociaal geconstrueerde identiteit, benadrukt het proefschrift de flexibiliteit en complexiteit van raciale vorming en biedt het inzichten in de genuanceerde manifestaties van witheid in het hedendaagse China.

De onderzoeksvraag is: "Hoe wordt witheid als machtsstructuur geproduceerd, vertegenwoordigd en uitgevoerd onder witte, jonge, buitenlandse ondernemers in China, met name binnen de context van hun zakelijke activiteiten, sociale interacties en de intersecties van hun 'race', geslacht en digitale ondernemerschap?"

Bij het verkennen van de centrale vraag van mijn onderzoek, richt ik me in mijn studie op drie verschillende facetten. Ten eerste onthul ik de complexe spanningen die voortkomen uit de interactie tussen privileges en onzekerheden bij het vormgeven van de witte raciale identiteit binnen het transnationale zakelijke kader, waarbij de nadruk wordt gelegd op het concept van witheid als een vorm van kapitaal. Ten tweede onderzoek ik de performatieve aspecten van de geracialiseerde witte identiteit, met name met betrekking tot de intersectie met de genderdynamiek, en hoe deze dynamieken elkaar kruisen bij het vormgeven van zakelijke strategieën, met name via de lens van geracialiseerde branding. Ten slotte analyseer ik de visuele manifestaties van geracialiseerde praktijken op sociale mediaplatforms, waarbij ik onderzoek hoe representaties bijdragen aan de digitale vorming van raciale identiteiten in het ondernemerslandschap.

Het ***inleiding*** hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift dient als een toegangspoort tot de boeiende wereld van het buitenlandse ondernemerschap binnen het dynamische zakelijke landschap van China. Het introduceert ons in de omgeving van jonge, buitenlandse, digitale ondernemers die

proberen zich te integreren in het bruisende economische landschap van China, gedreven door hun verlangen naar zakelijk succes. In dit hoofdstuk geef ik een overzicht van de beleidsmaatregelen van China met betrekking tot de instroom van buitenlandse bedrijven en ondernemers, de verschuiving naar digitaal ondernemerschap in de platformeconomie van het land, en de digitale activiteiten van bedrijven tijdens de COVID-19-pandemie. Ik schets ook het theoretisch kader van mijn onderzoek door de historische vorming van de witte raciale identiteit in China, digitale raciale discoursen, en tot slot, de opkomst van wit kapitaal binnen het ondernemerslandschap te analyseren. Met deze conceptuele lens belicht ik hoe witheid intersecteert met concepten van hegemonie, buitenlander zijn, en nationalisme in China, en hoe het de formulering van ideeën over 'race' vormgeeft. Door middel van een studie naar digitale raciale representatie en de vorming van wit kapitaal biedt mijn onderzoek inzichten in de evoluerende constructie van witte raciale identiteit en de implicaties ervan. Over het algemeen legt dit hoofdstuk uit hoe mijn studie bijdraagt aan het bredere veld van kritische witheidsstudies door nieuwe geografische perspectieven te bieden en door ons begrip van witte raciale dynamiek buiten Euro-Amerikaanse contexten te verdiepen.

***Hoofdstuk 2*** gaat in op mijn methodologische aanpak van het doen van digitaal etnografisch onderzoek op China's sociale mediaplatforms als een buitenlandse vrouw. Door de uitdagingen veroorzaakt door de COVID-19-pandemie, die mijn onderzoek in China bemoeilijkten, moest ik me richten op het digitale landschap van het land, waarbij sociale mediaplatforms dienden als mijn primaire onderzoeksarena. De vragen die in dit hoofdstuk worden gesteld over de uitdagingen die een etnograaf kan tegenkomen bij het uitvoeren van digitaal etnografisch onderzoek op afstand in China, evenals de strategieën om te communiceren met potentiële onderzoekdeelnemers via sociale media, leggen de basis voor de analyse van de volgende hoofdstukken. Puttend uit academische literatuur over auto-etnografie, performativiteit, en onderzoek naar Chinese sociale mediaplatforms, duikt dit hoofdstuk in de complexiteiten van het op afstand navigeren van het digitale landschap van China. Verder onderzoekt het de impact van sociale media op relaties met potentiële onderzoekdeelnemers. Digitale etnografie komt in deze context naar voren als een cruciaal instrument voor het kritisch onderzoeken van de notie van het digitale China. Het verduidelijkt hoe China's institutionele regelgeving met betrekking tot sociale mediaplatforms en de positionering en performativiteit van de etnograaf uitdagingen vormen voor het uitvoeren van digitaal etnografisch onderzoek.

In ***Hoofdstuk 3*** onderzoek ik de ervaringen van twee verschillende groepen jonge westerse ondernemers te midden van de COVID-19-pandemie: degenen die geconfronteerd worden met zakelijke mislukkingen en degenen die vastzitten in het buitenland vanwege reisbeperkingen en lockdowns in China. Mijn onderzoek richt zich op hun grensoverschrijdende mobiliteit en de spanningen die voortvloeien uit het privilege dat ze ooit genoten, geworteld in hun witte raciale identiteit. Puttend uit bestaande literatuur over de accumulatie van wit kapitaal onder buitenlandse migranten, geschoolde migratie, en neoliberale ambities in de Aziatische context, ontwikkelen we een theoretisch kader om de rekeningen van onze deelnemers te analyseren en de spanningen die voortkomen uit hun ervaringen te ontrafelen. Onze analyse verkent de emotionele reacties van westerse ondernemers en presenteert vier mogelijke interpretaties. Ten eerste onderstrepen hun worstelingen de fragiele aard van hun prestaties in China, verstrengeld

met hun witte privilege maar gehinderd door beperkte middelen, aangezien ze zich nog moeten vestigen als welvarende ondernemers. Ten tweede hebben de prioritering van China voor zijn burgers en het stigma tegen buitenlanders als dragers van het virus tijdens de pandemie het sociale landschap getransformeerd, waarbij wit privilege werd omgezet in een nadeel. Daarnaast onthullen de gevoelens van verlies van onze deelnemers een veronderstelde *entitlement* geworteld in hun witheid, geschonden door de uitdagingen die de pandemie met zich meebracht. Ten slotte werpen hun ervaringen licht op de evoluerende betekenis van witheid wereldwijd, waarbij ze veranderen van 'geëerde expatriates' in mogelijke virusdragers, de kwetsbaarheid van wit privilege en de desillusie van de "China Dream" op internationale schaal benadrukkend.

In ***Hoofdstuk 4*** analyseer ik hoe buitenlandse, vrouwelijke, migrant-ondernemers China's online zakelijke sector navigeren, waarbij ik de intersectie van gender en 'race' onderzoek in hun strategieën voor succes. Door middel van een empirische analyse en een overzicht van literatuur over vaardigheden, genderprestaties, en race studies gericht op wit kapitaal, onthult dit hoofdstuk hoe deze ondernemers hun witte raciale identiteit en genderprestaties benutten om te gedijen op de markt. Een belangrijke bijdrage van de studie is het introduceren van het concept van "geracialiseerde branding", dat verduidelijkt hoe deze ondernemers strategisch hun raciale identiteit, met name witheid, gebruiken om zich te onderscheiden op de markt. Ze bereiken dit door attributen zoals hun nationaliteit, Engelse vaardigheid, westerse opleiding, en hun vorige cliënteel uit westerse landen te benadrukken, waarbij ze een verhaal van competentie creëren dat aansluit bij het door mannen gedomineerde, transnationale, zakelijke landschap van China. Het concept van geracialiseerde branding onderstreept de cruciale rol van raciale identiteit bij het vormgeven van zakelijke strategieën en marktpositionering binnen de transnationale context van ondernemerschap in China's online zakelijke sfeer. Bovendien werpt de studie licht op de complexe wisselwerking tussen gender- en raciale dynamiek in transnationale migratie, en biedt het waardevolle inzichten in het evoluerende landschap van gender, 'race', en ondernemerschap in Azië.

In ***Hoofdstuk 5*** duik ik in de voorstelling van witheid in de visuele communicatie van China, waarbij ik me richt op westerse merken en reclamecampagnes online van ondernemers. Ik leg twee belangrijke punten uit: ten eerste, de rol van witheid in het trekken van de aandacht van de Gen Z-consumenten van China ondanks rijzende nationalistische sentimenten. Dit deel van het hoofdstuk illustreert hoe westerse merken naadloos Chinese elementen integreren, terwijl ze de aantrekkingskracht van westerse producten behouden. Ten tweede onderzoekt het hoe westerse ondernemers de representatie van witheid op sociale mediaplatforms versterken, door gebruik te maken van hun witte lichaam en expertise in hun campagnes gericht op Gen Z-consumenten. Door deze inzichten te presenteren, biedt het hoofdstuk nieuwe perspectieven op hoe westerse merken de advertentiesector van China navigeren in een evoluerende medialandschap. Het pleit ook voor verder onderzoek op digitaal gebied en benadrukt het belang van het onderzoeken van de rol van 'race' in zakelijke samenwerkingen buiten de Euro-Amerikaanse context.

In de ***conclusie*** kom ik terug op mijn hoofdvraag. Het centrale argument van dit proefschrift draait om de herconfiguratie van witheid binnen het digitale ondernemerschapslandschap van China. Door een diepgaande verkenning van de ervaringen van jonge, buitenlandse ondernemers, met name gericht op de intersectie van 'race', geslacht, en digitaal ondernemerschap, toont mijn onderzoek aan dat witheid werkt als een dynamische en veelzijdige machtsstructuur. Mijn proefschrift stelt dat de traditionele hegemoniale dominantie van witheid een opmerkelijke verschuiving ondergaat, met name in de evoluerende zakelijke sector van China, waar buitenlandse ondernemers complexe socioculturele dynamieken navigeren. Door de strategieën die deze ondernemers gebruiken, zoals "geracialiseerde branding", te analyseren, verduidelijkt het proefschrift hoe witheid actief wordt geconstrueerd en benut als een vorm van kapitaal binnen het digitale ondernemerschapslandschap. Verder belicht mijn studie hoe 'race' intersecteert met andere sociale identiteiten en hoe het ondernemersstrategieën beïnvloedt, en draagt mijn werk bij aan een dieper begrip van de hedendaagse dynamieken van 'race' en ondernemerschap in China.

**Representation and Performativity of Whiteness in China: The Case of Foreign Digital Entrepreneurs**

**Christina Kefala**

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