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### Representation and performativity of whiteness in China

*The case of foreign digital entrepreneurs*

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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 2020, 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)<sup>1</sup>.

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

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<sup>1</sup> <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 continually 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<sup>2</sup>. 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

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<sup>2</sup> 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'<sup>3</sup>. 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.

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<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>4</sup>.

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,

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<sup>4</sup> 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, AsiaScope: 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<sup>5</sup>.

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

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<sup>5</sup> 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<sup>6</sup>.

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 advertising, 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<sup>7</sup>.

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.

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<sup>6</sup> 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

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