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### Representation and performativity of whiteness in China

*The case of foreign digital entrepreneurs*

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## *CHAPTER 4*

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### WHO RUNS THE WORLD? GENDER PERFORMANCES AND RACIALIZED BRANDING AMONG YOUNG FOREIGN WOMEN DIGITAL ENTREPRENEURS<sup>14</sup>

#### *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

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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 than 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: seizing 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 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 with 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.