



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Representation and performativity of whiteness in China

The case of foreign digital entrepreneurs

Kefala, C.

Publication date

2024

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kefala, C. (2024). *Representation and performativity of whiteness in China: The case of foreign digital entrepreneurs*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

CHAPTER 6

Chapter 6:

CONCLUSION

Whiteness beyond skin

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

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

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

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

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

Studying the reconfiguration of whiteness in China

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Future of whiteness studies in China

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

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

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

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