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Representation and performativity of whiteness in China

The case of foreign digital entrepreneurs

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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].

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SUMMARY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SAMENVATTING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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