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The foreign bully, the guest and the low-income knowledge worker: performing multiple versions of whiteness in China

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of China's economy, more and more white Westerners are moving to China for better job or business opportunities. In addition to the so-called transnational elites, there are an increasing number of middle-stratum white migrants whose lived experiences in China are marked by notable tensions between privileges and precariousness. Based on research in Beijing and Xi'an, this paper examines how white migrants from different backgrounds make strategic choices in coping with the decline of white skin privilege in China and feelings of insecurity in a highly competitive Chinese labour market. It identifies China as a new frontier zone where the meanings of whiteness are contested and reconstructed in interracial encounters between white migrants and various groups of Chinese. I argue that although these white migrants have little control over the multiple and contradictory ways that they are racialised in Chinese society, they still demonstrate a certain degree of agency in manipulating the Chinese gazes for their benefits through the strategic performance of different versions of whiteness.

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Emma, a 42-year-old visiting lecturer in an elite university in Beijing, came to China three years ago via the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service). When I met her at the university gate, she had just returned from a farewell lunch with a Spanish friend. As we were sitting near a small pond on campus, Emma asked me, 'If you were a foreign teacher in China and your boss asked you to work overtime, what would you say?' 'I would say no', I replied. 'That's very stupid', Emma declared. 'That's exactly what my Spanish friend did. Now she is losing her job.' 'So what's the right answer?' I asked curiously. Emma replied,

The first time they asked you, you should say yes with a happy face. Do the same for the second time. You may only complain during the third time. Then you will either get compensated during the fourth time or they will stop asking you. This is the Chinese way of handling things. If you are not busy, why not work for two hours extra? Then you will leave a good impression on your colleagues. When it's time to renew your contract, they will take your volunteer work into consideration. Now the job market is getting more competitive and some foreigners need to take care that they will not be replaced.

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Emma's advice on how to handle overtime requests points to three new developments in Western migrant experiences in China. First, growing competition in the workplace has led to precarious employment situations where some Westerners have to worry about being replaced. Second, white skin can no longer guarantee privileged treatment in the workplace, hence the pressure to adapt to Chinese cultural norms. Finally, it highlights the necessity of performing a specific version of whiteness that is friendly and desirable under the disciplinary power of the Chinese gazes.

With the rise of China as the world's second largest economy, more and more white Westerners are moving to China to pursue better job or business opportunities. In addition to the so-called transnational elites, there are an increasing number of middle-stratum white migrants who work as English teachers, self-initiated entrepreneurs, locally hired staff in transnational companies, lecturers in Chinese universities, and artists or creative workers in China's media and cultural sectors. Emma's story is important because she represents a new type of Western migrants who wish to settle for a longer period in China and to actively engage with Chinese people and culture. Unlike the transnational elites who usually have limited social interactions with local Chinese (Yeoh and Willis 2005), this new group often depends on professional and social networks with local Chinese to consolidate their business or career opportunities. Scholars have noted the decline of social privileges associated with white skin in many Asian societies (Lan 2011; Lundström 2014; Maher and Lafferty 2014). The diversification of the white population in China matches the expansion of job markets for 'foreigners' from coastal areas to smaller cities in the interior of the country. Due to the recent tightening in immigration controls and the rising tides of popular nationalism in Chinese society, the lived experiences of non-managerial and non-elite white migrants are increasingly marked by considerable tensions between privileges and precariousness (Farrer 2019; Lan 2021; Lehmann 2014; Leonard 2019; Stanley 2013). However, little has been written on how different groups of white migrants make sense of and try to cope with this daily experience of precariousness.

Existing literature on whiteness studies mainly focuses on white racial formation in Western countries (Frankenberg 1993; Hage 2000; Hartigan 1999; Roediger 1992; Wekker 2016). The field has received serious criticism for the prevalence of white academics conducting research on white people. This failure to conceptually break the linkage between corporeal whiteness and hegemonic whiteness runs the risk of perpetuating white domination in knowledge production (Nayak 2007; Wiegman 1999). To overcome the parochial nature of whiteness studies, scholars have been exploring new geographies of whiteness outside Euro-America (Bonnett 2000; Kelsky 2001). This research identifies China as an emerging frontier zone where the Western notion of whiteness is disassembled and re-assembled in a new historical context of changing power relations between China and major Western countries. Authors like DuBois (1903) and Fanon (1986) have noted the importance of the white gaze in creating a 'double consciousness' among blacks in the historical context of slavery, colonialism and white domination. This paper proposes that as whiteness becomes a highly visible minority status in China through transnational migration, Western migrants also develop a keen awareness of the disciplinary power of multiple Chinese gazes. Although the Chinese gazes do not command the same hegemonic power as the white gaze at the

global scale, they are playing an increasingly important role in shaping the lived experiences of various groups of Western migrants in China.

This paper focuses on two research questions: What are the opportunities and challenges faced by white migrants in different fields of employment and different geographical locations under the evolving nature of multiple Chinese gazes? How do various groups of white migrants engage with, negotiate or resist the Chinese gazes through quotidian racialised performances? Existing literature on international migrants in China mainly focuses on black Africans in Guangzhou (S. Lan 2017; Bodomo 2012; Haugen 2012). The relative absence of whites in migration studies literature points to the racialisation of 'migrant' as a category reserved mainly for non-white people (Lundström 2017). This research denaturalises whiteness as an invisible norm by rethinking it in a context of international labour migration and cross-cultural interaction. The paper attends to social stratification within the white population in China by moving beyond the binary between transnational corporate elites, who are often considered as privileged migrants (Camenisch and Suter 2019; Farrer 2019) and foreign English teachers, who are stigmatised as occupying a lower status within the expatriate community (Leonard 2019; Stanley 2013). Instead, it focuses on a group of middling migrants (Lehmann 2014), namely self-initiated migrants who are neither recruited by transnational companies nor by talent schemes of Chinese universities, nor by commercialised brokers (as is the case of many foreign English teachers). I argue that although these white migrants have little control of the multiple and contradictory ways that they are racialised in Chinese society, they still demonstrate a certain degree of agency in manipulating the Chinese gazes for their benefit through strategic performances of different versions of whiteness. In this vein, the paper highlights the situational nature of whiteness, which is mediated by nationality, gender, class, Chinese language skills and length of stay in China.

Methodology

This research is part of an ongoing project which examines the shifting meanings of whiteness in China's teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) industry; the transnational business and entrepreneurship sector; the media, fashion and entertainment industry; and the area of interracial romance. The data collected so far consists of 45 semi-structured interviews with foreign migrants in 2 cities (Beijing and Xi'an) during the period of 12 June 2019 to 16 January 2020. This paper is based on 13 in-depth interviews chosen from the larger dataset. The participants are self-initiated migrants who desire long-term career opportunities in China. Their length of stay in China ranges from 3 to 14 years, with an average of 7 years. Their age ranges from 29 to 60, with an average of 40. Three (two males and one female) are married to Chinese spouses and six (males) are currently involved in romantic relations with the Chinese. Five participants speak Chinese fluently, while the rest have elementary or no knowledge of Chinese at all. Five are from the United States, and the rest are from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Iceland, Italy, Germany, South Africa, Venezuela and Jordan. The South African self-identifies as black, while the rest identify themselves as white. Four work as English teachers in universities. Another four work in the private educational sector. They resort to language teaching as a transitional strategy to

support their career or business interest in journal editing, live jazz performance, photography and transnational education. Two participants are university lecturers, one is an NGO staff, one is in the media sector and one is in the creative industry.

Beijing and Xi'an are strategically chosen for comparative purposes. Being the capital city, Beijing is noted for the diversity of its international population and its highly competitive job market. Xi'an is a provincial city located in central China's less affluent Shanxi province. It attracts foreign migrants due to its rich historical and cultural heritage, affordable living expenses and less competitive job market. A comparison between data collected in the two cities yields valuable insight on the spatial dimension of the Chinese gazes and how white capital is evaluated differently on different geographical scales. In both cities, I first used my personal network to recruit participants and then followed the snowball sampling method. To avoid focusing on migrant perspectives alone, I also conducted open-ended interviews with 12 Chinese who had various levels of interactions with 'foreigners'. As a middle-aged Asian woman conducting research on white 'foreigners' in China, I initially faced some challenges obtaining trust from my participants. However, my status as an academic living in Europe also helped position me in a flexible middle ground between foreign migrants and their Chinese employers, colleagues and clients.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: I first discuss the theoretical framework, then provide background information on the changing nature of the Chinese gazes. I then present three case studies which represent three divergent strategies of engaging with the Chinese gazes: resistance, accommodation and ambivalence. These three cases are carefully chosen to reflect diversity in terms of field of employment (higher education and transnational entrepreneurship), gender (two males and one female), nationality (American, German, Italian) and Chinese language proficiency (zero, elementary, advanced). Although the data presentation focuses primarily on three case studies, my data analysis is informed by knowledge gained from all 13 interviews. In the conclusion, I identify similarities and differences in my participants' racialised performances of whiteness and discuss their larger theoretical implications.

Whiteness, foreignness and white skin privilege

The racialisation of whiteness in China is mediated by the interplay between global white supremacist ideologies and indigenous constructions of self/other differences. In pre-modern China, cultural difference was the primary means to distinguish Chinese from non-Chinese. Foreigners were considered as 'barbarians' or 'devils' due to an ethnocentric cosmology, which placed China at the centre of human civilisation (Ho 1985). This cultural determinism persists until today, since migrants of non-Chinese descent are generally perceived as 'foreigners' by the Chinese public. Unlike in many Western countries where the self/other distinction is usually drawn between whites and non-whites, the primary distinction in China is between the Chinese self and the foreign other. In other words, white migrants in China are perceived as 'foreigners' first and white people second. However, whiteness also represents a special type of foreignness in China because of its dual nature of being both marked and unmarked. White migrants are physically and socially visible due to their racialised minority status. Meanwhile, they remain largely invisible within the foreigner category (in contrast to black Africans) in

times of state crackdowns on undocumented migrants (Lan 2017). While white people are often considered the default group of ‘foreigners’ in China, the elastic nature of the ‘foreigner’ category (i.e. in its broadest sense it includes the entire international population in China) often obscures the hegemonic nature of whiteness within the domain of foreignness (Lan 2021).

The overlap of whiteness and foreignness in the Chinese cultural context calls for a reconceptualisation of white privilege, which is often theorised as a form of structural domination in Western societies (Bonnett 2000; McIntosh 1988). This research makes a distinction between white privilege in the Western context and white skin privilege in the Chinese context. While white privilege in Western societies is often based on the racialisation and structural marginalisation of various groups of non-white people, white skin privilege in China is based on the racialisation of white ‘foreigners’ as a visible minority under multiple Chinese gazes. Since China has never been fully colonised by any Western power, there is no historical legacy of an institutionalised structure to support white privilege. Instead, the presence of white ‘foreigners’ in China has always been strictly controlled by the state’s *waiishi* (foreign affairs) and immigration policies (Brady 2003). This paper understands white skin privilege as a form of embodied racial capital in China, which benefits from the expansion of white supremacy as a global power system and its invisible workings in different local contexts (Beliso-De Jesus and Pierre 2019). I interpret white skin privilege as a type of circumscribed privilege which capitalises on cultural and racial stereotypes associated with white skin and Western looks. This circumscribed privilege is highly contingent and may easily transform into precariousness, since racial stereotypes are often based on homogenisation and othering (Lan 2021).

The precarious nature of white skin privilege is closely related to the contradictory and arbitrary nature of the Chinese gazes: for example, from admiring to alienating, from fetishisation to stigmatisation (Liu and Dervin 2020; Lan 2021). It also reflects the changing power relations between China and major Western countries. Farrer (2019) argues that as the Chinese state and various non-state actors play increasingly important roles in defining the rules of the game in international migration and cross-cultural interactions, expatriates in Shanghai are more likely to function as ‘the foreign support-staff for the Chinese Dream’ (200). I propose that the incrementing disciplinary power of the Chinese gazes also produces a double consciousness among some Western migrants: a consciousness of the decline of white skin privilege, and a consciousness of the need to develop new forms of transnational white capital in order to survive in China’s competitive neoliberal job market. Lundström (2014) conceptualises white capital as an embodied form of cultural capital that can be ‘interlinked with and upheld by (transnational) institutions, citizenships, a “white (Western) *habitus*” and other resources that are transferrable (but mediated differently) cross-nationally’ (14). While acknowledging the racialised nature of white capital, this paper questions the naturalised linkage between white bodies and white capital. Instead, I propose 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.

The changing nature of the Chinese gazes

Liu and Dervin (2020) compare the popular Chinese gaze on white foreigners as ‘a pervasive tourist gaze, which visually consumes these white minorities as a spectacle and elicits their feelings of being constantly watched and objectified’ (7–8). This research moves beyond the tourist gaze and emphasises the institutional power of the Chinese gazes. I propose to examine the Chinese gazes from four analytical dimensions: political, legal, racial and cultural. While these four are inseparable in practice, some are prioritised over others, depending on the specific historical context. For example, the political dimension loomed large from the 1950s to 1990s, when China’s foreign policy was deeply influenced by Cold War politics. Since the 2000s the legal dimension has become more salient due to reforms in China’s immigration policy. Although the racial dimension of the Chinese gazes is seldom acknowledged in Chinese society, it is closely related to the contradictory constructions of white foreigners as the emissary of the modern and the dangerous foreign devil (Henry 2013; Leonard 2019). Within the realm of higher education, the cultural dimension is increasingly valorised in terms of international collaboration, cultural exchange and the cultivation of cosmopolitanism and world citizenship among Chinese youth. With the escalation of Sino-US trade wars and geopolitical tensions between China and major Western powers, the political dimension of the Chinese gazes is being revived under the regime of President Xi Jinping.

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the images of ‘foreigners’ kept changing due to China’s shifting policies on international migrants. In the 1950s and 1960s, ‘foreigners’ were divided into friends and enemies based on their political affiliation with the Chinese Communist Party. In the early reform era between the late 1970s and 1990s, ‘foreigners’ were evaluated by their contribution to China’s economic development (Brady 2003). In the 1980s, there was a notable conflation of whiteness and foreignness since the majority of the ‘foreigner experts’ in China were white Westerners who worked as investors or top managerial staff in multinational corporations. The association of white bodies with wealth and social prestige was perpetuated by the state’s *waiishi* (foreign affairs) policy, which pursued a segregation doctrine prohibiting daily life interactions between ‘foreigners experts’ and ordinary Chinese (Brady 2003). Meanwhile, the *waiishi* policy also facilitated the political, social and cultural marginalisation of whites as the ‘foreign other’. In the Communist Party’s Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1983, Westerners were constructed as potential threats to Chinese cultural values and moral standards (Carrico 2017).

With China’s accession to the WTO in 2001 and the rapid growth of the Chinese economy, the images of white people became more diverse in popular media due to the diversification of the foreign population in the country. News about ‘foreigners’ hustling in China with part-time jobs and dubious legal status helped foster the changing perception of whites as beneficiaries of China’s economic prosperity (Hu 2012; Zhang 2012). Meanwhile, obnoxious behaviours of whites towards Chinese citizens in public spaces also gave rise to periodic outbursts of popular nationalism on the Chinese internet, which sometimes resort to racialised languages such as ‘the foreign trash’ (Lan 2017; Zhuang, Xu, and Xu 2012). In response to the rising tide of popular nationalism, the state has been reforming its immigration policy to make distinctions between desirable and undesirable ‘foreigners’ (Haugen 2015). This has contributed to social stratification

among the foreign population in China. In 2011, the state introduced a ‘Thousand Talents Program for Non-Chinese Foreign Experts’, aiming to recruit ‘top foreign talents’ to work in Chinese universities, research institutions and state-owned enterprises (Farrer 2019). In July 2013, a new Exit and Entry Administrative Law was implemented, which contains tougher provisions for illegal immigrants. Meanwhile, it also introduced a new visa category to facilitate the inflow of ‘foreign talent’. In 2016, China started a new pilot programme, which used an elaborate scoring system to rank ‘foreigners’ into three categories: (A) top talent, (B) professional talent and (C) unskilled workers. The goal was ‘encouraging the top, controlling the middle and limiting the bottom’ (Tatlow 2016). The programme was implemented nationwide in 2017.

In addition to state policy, the changing images of ‘foreigners’ are also reflected in individual perceptions. Yu, a 46-year-old Beijinger who had worked for 20 years in international business, divided the foreign population in China into 3 groups. The first consists of those who have a genuine interest in China and Chinese culture. The second group comprises losers in their home country, who come to China pretending to be VIPs. The third group is made up of labour migrants, who come to China to make money. Yu specifically named Filipino domestic helpers and foreign English teachers in kindergartens as two examples. It is interesting to note that Yu’s criteria for evaluating different groups of foreign migrants are based on how friendly and how useful they are to the Chinese society. This Sino-centric view echoes the Chinese state’s long-standing policy of ‘making the foreign serve China’ (Brady 2003). Although Yu made no explicit reference to white migrants, by naming Filipinos as the default group of labour migrants, he unwittingly perpetuated the unmarked status of whiteness within the foreigner category. Yu did not know any black person in Beijing, yet he was quick to note nationality and class-based distinctions within the (white) ‘foreigner’ group. He observed, ‘Some of the bottom tier foreigners are from East European countries. They work in nightclubs, kindergartens and sports clubs. Those from the U.K. are bifurcated. They are the best and the worst.’ Yu’s testimony indicates his nuanced knowledge of the heterogeneity within the white community in Beijing. It also shows the overlap between state and individual Chinese gazes in defining (white) foreign identities.

‘I feel like a migrant here ...’

Nicolas is a 34-year-old adjunct associate professor in an elite university in Beijing, who is originally from Italy. He first came to China in 2011 as a Master’s student in the China Studies programme at Zhejiang University, funded by the China Scholarship Council. During his one-year stay in Hangzhou, Nicolas fell in love with Chinese culture. He went back to Italy and enrolled in a PhD programme at University S with a research focus on China’s water policy. During his PhD years, Nicolas worked as a coordinator for academic exchanges between University S and a local university in Chongqing, a major city in Southwest China. After obtaining his doctoral degree in 2017, Nicolas worked as a coordinator for the Study in China Program at University T, where he had received his first Master’s degree. Every year University T sends about 55 students to study in different Chinese universities, and Nicolas functions as a liaison between the Italian students and their Chinese universities. In addition, he also found a teaching job at a prestigious university in Beijing, giving lectures on public policy. Nicolas holds a

category A work permit, which is only issued to ‘top foreign talent’. He can speak Chinese fluently and is currently in a stable relationship with a Chinese girlfriend.

One prominent thing Nicolas noted during his nearly a decade’s living and working in China is the changing perceptions of ‘foreigners’ among ordinary Chinese. He remarked,

In 2011 we were like movie stars in Hangzhou. It did not matter whether you were an Italian, or an American, or a German. We were just foreigners. Now they can tell which group of foreigners you belong by asking your nationality, job, etc. Chinese are savvier about telling the difference between foreigners.

Nicolas spoke with nostalgia about his glamorous days in Chongqing four years ago, where he was treated as the stereotypical foreign scholar with all the privileges. Since it was still rare to have a social science scholar from a prestigious overseas university in a provincial city, Nicolas was invited to every international event and even the vice president of a local university asked for his opinion on their international projects. However, this was not the case in Beijing. Nicolas lamented,

White skin privilege is no longer obvious in Beijing because there are too many foreigners here. Chinese people are also getting smarter. They know we are equal to them. Students are interested in us because we provide a different perspective, not because we are more qualified or better teachers.

Nicolas’ story points to the temporal and regional variations of white experiences in China. The honour and respect he received in his pre-doctoral years in Chongqing formed a contrast with the relative obscurity in his post-doctoral teaching years in Beijing. This also reflects the changing nature of the Chinese gazes over time and the growing Chinese awareness of social stratification within the white migrant community.

Nicholas belongs to the group of non-tenure-track local hires who are not directly recruited from overseas via the state’s talent scheme. He complained to me about the discrepancy between his privileged visa status and precarious economic status. He said,

If you go to other cities, you tell people ‘I am teaching at X University in Beijing,’ it sounds very prestigious, but few people know the precarious side of my life. My salary is very low. My position is a teaching one so my university does not care about my research output. They hire me as a token foreign teacher because they don’t have many foreign professors on campus.

Nicholas felt unhappy comparing his salary with foreign colleagues working in elite universities in Shanghai, who received much better pay and benefits. He attributed this differential treatment to his status as a China expert and a local hire. He reflected,

Chinese universities are attracting senior scholars from Europe and America and they offer highly competitive benefit packages for these people. If they know you are already in China and you have a family here, they don’t pay you a lot. My girlfriend even joked with me that if I pretend not speaking Chinese I can get paid better.

Nicolas’ story shows that the racialisation of white migrants as ‘foreigners’ can be a double-edged sword. Although he obtained the job in Beijing partly due to his status as a token foreign teacher, he was also considered less foreign due to his intimate knowledge of the Chinese language and culture. Ultimately, Nicolas’ case reflects how some white migrants’ career opportunities in China can be severely constrained by existing stereotypes about ‘foreigners’ in Chinese eyes, i.e. the ‘foreign expert’ must be a non-

Chinese speaker recruited from outside China, preferably from Europe and North America.

Nicolas' frustration with his financial status is closely related to his desire to build a family in China. He told me,

I feel like a migrant here because I don't know how to build a pension. I don't know how to pay for the education of my child if I have one in the future. I feel like I am a new generation blue-collar worker of the intellectual sector. I have the social privilege of a foreign scholar, but I do not have the financial stability.

Although Nicolas worried about his relatively low income, he was not ready to identify as a migrant yet. He opined,

I know I am exaggerating a bit, but I feel uncertain about the future. My understanding of a migrant is an economic migrant. I am not an economic migrant per se, but I feel I am gradually sliding into a category of not being an expert, a privileged person.

Nicolas' panic of becoming an economic migrant echoes the stigmatisation of migrants as people of colour in the Western world (Lundström 2017). It also highlights his fear of losing the social privileges associated with his white skin and Western looks. Although Nicolas was not making more money in Chongqing, the respect and honour he received from Chinese colleagues and the vice president of a local university functioned as psychological wages of whiteness (Roediger 1992), which distinguished him from local Chinese scholars. Nicolas' identity crisis reflects the depreciation of white capital in an increasingly competitive Chinese job market. Depending on the needs of the Chinese employer and the Chinese state, the white capital toolkits of different 'foreigners' may be evaluated differently and subjected to a re-assembling process. Only those qualities that are considered desirable in Chinese eyes (despite the potentially problematic nature of the Chinese gazes) can be appreciated and converted to wealth and prestige.

'You have to make yourself useful to the Chinese ...'

Like Nicolas, Emma works as a visiting scholar in a major university in Beijing and holds a temporary contract. Emma has been in Beijing for three years. She teaches German economics, business administration and marketing in the German department. Her contract can be renewed every year for up to five years. Being the only foreign teacher in the department, Emma has enjoyed certain privileges compared to her Chinese colleagues. For example, she does not have much administrative responsibilities. She has worked less than Chinese teachers and she has been under no pressure to do research and publish. However, Emma has also complained that she was paid less than her Chinese colleagues. She blamed her German organisation DAAD for failing to negotiate a better benefit package with her Chinese employer. In addition to her Chinese salary, Emma also receives a monthly stipend from DAAD, but she declined to disclose the amount. Having grown up in East Germany, Emma had a socialist education until she was twelve years old. She studied Chinese for two years in college and even visited China for one month as a tourist in 2002. She holds a Master's degree in Education Administration from a German university and a PhD in German and Spanish Law from Spain. Emma speaks Russian, Swedish, Spanish and German. Her multilingual background

and socialist upbringing has fostered in her a critical reflection on white skin privilege in China.

Unlike Nicholas, who had lived for nearly a decade in China and had experienced the golden years of white skin privilege in a provincial city before moving to Beijing, Emma witnessed the decline of white skin privilege even before moving to China. She was once hired to tackle a crisis in international collaboration between a German business school and a Chinese university. It turned out that her predecessor, a senior white German professor, had insulted the head of the international office of the Chinese university. Emma told me,

He got angry because he was not treated like a VIP. Of course, he got kicked out of the international office and had to return to Germany. When the Chinese side threatened to discontinue the collaboration, he was forced to retire.

After Emma took office, she first consulted some Chinese friends in Germany and received good advice. When she arrived in China, she tried to build a relationship with the personal assistant of the head of the international office. Emma reflected, 'I treated Chinese people with respect. I talked to them about Chinese tea, Chinese culture, and Chinese history. I was able to repair the relations so the collaboration would continue.' Emma's story highlights the shifting power dynamics between Chinese and European universities and the growing confidence of Chinese universities in international negotiations. It also attests to the changing attitude of white Europeans towards the Chinese: from condescension to accommodation and respect. Emma's predecessor failed his mission because he considered himself superior to the Chinese. Emma handled the crisis successfully because she not only treated the Chinese as her equals, but paid respect to key decision-makers through the cultivation of informal personal relations.

Emma divided white migrants in China into two types, the 'stupid foreigners' and the 'wise foreigners'. The former are the ones who expect special treatment and who behave arrogantly towards the Chinese. Commenting on the increasing dependence of foreign migrants on Chinese employers for job opportunities, Emma said, 'You have to make yourself useful to the Chinese to get respect from them. If you are not useful to them, you lose your respect.' Emma's emphasis on being 'useful' to the Chinese reflects the pressure faced by some migrants to expand their white capital toolkit for the purpose of increasing the symbolic and market value of whiteness in China's neoliberal economy, i.e. to develop new skills such as cross-cultural communication, networking with local colleagues and flexibility in adjusting to the Chinese workplace culture. Emma considers herself a 'wise foreigner' because she knows how to perform the image of the 'friendly foreigner' when she needs to renew her work permit with staff in the international office. She said,

Some stupid foreigners would go to the office and make a demand, 'I need my visa renewed.' They did not get their request met because they behaved rudely. When I go there, I would smile to the staff and started with some small talk. Then I would tell them I need some help with renewing my visa and I asked them to do me a favor. It always worked.

According to Emma, 'stupid foreigners' have difficulties surviving in China due to their inability to humble themselves and pay due respect to their Chinese hosts. A 'wise

foreigner' can handle delicate relations with incompetent staff in the international office because she knows how to treat them as gatekeepers overseeing important resources rather than service workers.

Emma's performance of the 'friendly foreigner' shows her awareness of the increasingly critical nature of the Chinese gazes. It also needs to be contextualised by the temporary nature of her work contract and her status as a visiting scholar. Emma confessed to me that she had to write to DAAD several times to persuade them to sponsor her visiting position in China. She told me, 'I am a guest. I am here for five years, then I will leave. If you are a guest, you have to respect your host and make no trouble. You have to follow the rules of your host.' As a female foreign teacher, Emma also felt the gendered gazes from her Chinese students. She opined,

Many of my students are from the provinces. They dress themselves in a rather conservative way. They once complained to the university about indecent dressing of foreign students on campus. I don't wear makeup because none of my Chinese colleagues do that.

The disciplinary power of the Chinese gazes not only alters Emma's self-representation of white femininity, it also creates a sense of insecurity for the future due to her precarious job-hunting experiences in the global higher educational market. She remarked,

In two weeks things may change. I might have a bad incident and start hating Chinese. I might lose favor with my Chinese boss and my German organization. I am scared of this – because I had experiences of companies going bankrupt and I got unemployed.

Emma's performance of the 'friendly foreigner' is a racialised and gendered strategy to cope with neoliberal competition in the global job market and the depreciation of white capital in Chinese society. However, unlike Nicholas, who is still nostalgic of white skin privilege from earlier days, Emma seemed to be rather critical of the unearned privileges associated with white skin and Western looks, and opted for a more culturally sensitive approach in accommodating the Chinese gazes and adjusting to Chinese work-place norms.

'Every day I have to bully to survive here.'

Compared to Nicolas and Emma, who both work in China's public educational sector, Tony, a 60-year-old white American, is a self-initiated entrepreneur in China's private educational sector. Before his retirement, Tony worked as the principal of a private high school in the Midwest of the United States, where he noticed a sharp increase of international students from China. Taking advantage of this business opportunity, Tony co-founded an international recruitment network with twelve private American high schools in 2011. Since then, he has travelled to over 40 cities in China as a recruiter for US high schools. He also took part-time jobs teaching English in various Chinese cities. In 2016, he finally settled in Xi'an, a provincial city in China's Shanxi Province. Tony picked Xi'an because the immigration control is more lenient there. While Beijing already stopped issuing work visas to 'foreigners' who are close to 60 years old, with the support of some Chinese business partners, Tony managed to obtain a renewable work permit in Xi'an. Tony speaks no Chinese and he loves talking about the preferential treatment he has received as a white American. He said,

Here people give you enormous respect beyond what you deserve. I can get away with a lot of things due to my white skin privileges. I used to be a shy and self-conscious person back in the States, but my personality changed in China. I feel comfortable being treated like a celebrity. Always being in the spotlight makes me more confident.

Tony's case shows that as the value of white capital gets depreciated in the saturated job market for 'foreigners' in big cities, some white migrants can still enjoy privileged treatment in provincial cities, where being a white foreigner remains a status symbol.

One Thursday night I visited an English language club, where Tony worked as a volunteer teacher. He was discussing an article called 'The Chinese Onion' with the students. The main idea of the article was about the challenges faced by 'foreigners' in integrating into Chinese society. After explaining some new words and correcting a few students' pronunciations, Tony shared his own experiences living as a 'foreigner' in China. He said,

I've travelled in China for ten years. Every time I stayed for a few weeks then I left. People were nice to me. Three years ago, I came to Xi'an and settled here. Then I experienced the onion. When they saw I was learning the culture, they got nervous. The fact that I do not speak Chinese makes me less threatening. Most of my Chinese friends think I am stupid and they love helping me.

Tony went on to explain why he had to play the role of 'the stupid foreigner' from time to time. He remarked, 'If I were to be open about the things I know, people get nervous. I have to play stupid in order not to ruin the relations.' Tony's elaboration of the Chinese onion phenomenon highlights the contradictory nature of the Chinese gazes: it can both elevate his social status as a white foreigner and alienate him as the racialised other and cultural outsider. Tony's strategic performance of the 'stupid foreigner' reveals his agency in manipulating the Chinese gazes for his own benefit. However, in some situations, he also needs to perform the 'foreign bully' stereotype to resist his racialisation as a 'stupid foreigner'.

During the interview, Tony complained about many things in China: visa is a nightmare, banking is a nightmare, too; people cancel their classes at the last minute; people tell you what to do without explaining why, etc. Instead of attributing these to language problems and cultural misunderstanding, Tony interprets them as mistreatment of foreigners by the Chinese. He opined,

Every day I have to bully to survive here. The Chinese take advantage of me because they think I am stupid. Some foreigners here got tired of being taken advantage of and they just left. Part of the reason I survived is that I fight back. We Americans have a deeper sense of justice.

Once Tony was in a bank, where two female clerks were helping a lady. He waited patiently for 20 minutes, but they ignored him. Then a Chinese man came and cut in front of Tony. He got served right away. Tony became angry. He went to the other area where people were waiting for their numbers to be called. When a certain number was called, Tony went straight to the counter and sat down. He talked to the bank clerk with sign language and google translation on his phone. He told her he would not leave until he was served. Tony reflected,

I knew there were many people waiting behind me. If I did not leave, the Chinese would get angry with the woman, not with me, because they thought I was stupid. To get rid of me, she had to do something. She called her two colleagues and I got served immediately.

Tony's experience in the bank was probably common to many 'foreigners' who do not speak Chinese. Yet he chose to solve the problem in a rather dramatic way. He forced the bank clerks to notice him by becoming a nuisance to them. Tony's bullying tactic in the bank ironically betrays the precarious nature of his white skin privilege. Instead of being served right away, he had to fight to get the attention he wanted.

Tony's performance of the 'foreign bully' needs to be contextualised by his negative experience with a previous employer in Guangzhou. He had a three-year contract with an English training school there. However, he was fired after the first year for no obvious reason. He later found out that the school stole his ideas about teaching and continued using his image to advertise their business. Tony considered filing a lawsuit but dropped the idea. He was told by some Chinese friends that the company has connections with different levels of Chinese authorities and as a 'foreigner' he would never win the case. Tony's Guangzhou experience reveals the vulnerability faced by foreign teachers in China's TEFL market. It also galvanises his 'American sense of justice' to defend his rights. To a certain extent, the 'foreign bully' tactic became a new weapon in Tony's white capital toolkit, often mobilised together with his American citizenship. In reality, such racialised performance can be both empowering and disempowering. While Tony's bullying tricks worked most of the time, he was also perpetuating the 'stupid foreigner' stereotype since in the Chinese eyes an angry 'foreigner' is stupid because he does not know the Chinese way of solving a problem. By using one stereotype against another, Tony ended up reinforcing his racialised status as a cultural outsider.

As his bullying skills perfected, Tony started to abuse the tactic. Once he managed to eat for free in a buffet place by complaining about the food and threatening to post the name of the restaurant on the internet. Another time he managed to obtain an aisle seat on an aeroplane by making a big fuss and refusing to sit down. While flaunting his white American privilege, Tony also recognised its limitations. He confessed, 'There is a limit to how much you can bully. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it did not. You have to know the limit.' Once Tony was playing his bullying trick on an aeroplane and the flight attendants called the airport security. He had to sit down quietly, otherwise he would be thrown off the plane. Tony's performance of multiple stereotypes in different social settings underlines the situational nature of white identities and the tensions between privileges and precariousness. Although he might qualify as a 'stupid foreigner' in Emma's eyes, Tony's performance of the non-Chinese speaking, ignorant yet aggressive 'foreign bully' stereotype is actually based on his nuanced knowledge of Chinese culture and Chinese perceptions of whiteness. It not only shows his resistance to the racialised and gendered Chinese gazes, but his agency to manipulate the Chinese gazes for his own benefit. However, by justifying his bullying performance as a self-defensive strategy, Tony failed to critically reflect on his identification with white hegemony and the damage his behaviour may cause to the wellbeing of many Chinese.

Different shades of whiteness

Scholars have argued that whiteness can be a key component of the skills white migrants bring to labour markets in Asia and the conversion of white capital into economic and social capital is context dependent and field specific (Farrer 2019; Lan 2011; Leonard 2019; Lundström 2014). However, there is a lack of critical reflection on the shifting

meanings of whiteness and white capital in the Asian context. The racialised and gendered performances of Tony, Emma and Nicolas are symptomatic of the conflation of whiteness and foreignness under the Chinese gazes. They also reflect the changing nature of the Chinese gazes and the uneven construction of white skin privilege across time and space. While the respect Nicholas received in Chongqing four years ago was largely based on his status as one of the few (white) foreign scholars in the city, the respect Emma received from her Chinese colleagues and employers in Beijing had to be earned by making herself useful to the Chinese and by respecting cultural norms in the Chinese workplace. If Nicholas' Chongqing experience still indicates a certain degree of white superiority, Emma's case shows that this white superiority is short-lived and the workplace norm in Beijing is based not only on mutual respect between Chinese and 'foreigners', but on the latter's readiness to accommodate the needs of Chinese employers. In other words, the transnational white capital toolkit of my participants has had to go through a re-assembling process, since what counts as white capital is now largely defined by various Chinese stakeholders.

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. Since Americans constitute the biggest foreign population in China, American whiteness is often perceived as the default whiteness within the white foreigner category. Tony's white skin privilege is enhanced not only by his American citizenship, but by the fetishisation of white native speakers in the global TEFL industry (Kubota and Lin 2006). Compared to Emma and Nicolas, Tony's American citizenship functions as a valuable white capital in China's private educational sector, which brought him both social prestige and financial rewards. However, working in the private sector also involves considerable risks and uncertainties such as irregular contracts, workplace exploitation and visa problems. Despite their modest income, Emma and Nicolas enjoy higher class status and more institutional support, since both work for elite public universities whose international office can assist foreign employees with immigration-related issues. Although Tony's performance of the 'bullying foreigner' stereotype is buttressed by his American citizenship, it may turn against him in the future due to the escalating tensions between the Chinese and the US governments. As the political dimension of the Chinese gazes resurges under the leadership of President Xi, white Americans like Tony may face more constraints in playing the foreign bullying tactics in Chinese public spaces.

Unlike Tony, Emma and Nicolas' German and Italian citizenship did not bring them extra favour in the eyes of their Chinese employers. Their stories showcase the stratification within the 'foreign talent' category, which is mediated by distinctions between local and overseas hire, part-time and full-time employees, scholars in social sciences and natural sciences (Farrer 2019). Since the Chinese state attaches more importance to scholarship in natural sciences, Western scholars with research interests that match the needs of the Chinese state receive priority in terms of employment, welfare packages and funding opportunities. As Emma and Nicolas's primary responsibilities are teaching and they do not have a strong research profile, the two face pressures to upgrade their transnational white capital toolkit in order to meet new challenges in the workplace. While Emma's Chinese skills are appreciated in her workplace and even add credibility to her performance of the 'friendly foreigner', Nicolas' Chinese skills are depreciated,

since as a local hire he does not fit into the non-Chinese speaking ‘foreign expert’ stereotype. The differential evaluation of Emma and Nicolas’ Chinese proficiency reveals the arbitrary nature of the Chinese gazes. It also echoes Tony’s theory of the Chinese onion: the Chinese language and cultural proficiency of a ‘foreigner’ is tolerated and even encouraged as long as the boundary between Chinese and ‘foreigners’ is clearly maintained. Otherwise, he or she runs the risk of being perceived as a threat in the Chinese eyes.

Scholars have noted how white masculinity in China is buttressed by white men’s desirability as sexual partners for Chinese women (Farrer 2019; Stanley 2013). To a certain extent, Tony represents a different type of white masculinity that is not based on sexual appeal, but on white skin privilege and American cultural superiority. Tony’s performance of the ‘foreign bully’ has a clearly gendered dimension, since the Chinese media portrayal of the aggressive ‘foreigner’ is usually associated with white males. Nicolas’ performance of the ‘low-income knowledge worker’ is also gendered because it reveals his anxiety about a potential crisis of white masculinity in China, which is defined not by sexual desirability, but by financial stability and the capacity to provide for one’s family. Emma’s performance of the ‘friendly foreigner’ reflects her vulnerable status as a temporary visitor, yet it also betrays the gender dilemma faced by white women in China, i.e. the difficulty of building romantic relations with either Western or Chinese men (Stanley 2013). The lack of intimate emotional bonds in China further reinforces Emma’s in-between status and prevents her from imagining a future life in China. Emma’s critique of the arrogant behaviours of some ‘stupid foreigners’ also reflects her resistance to gender hierarchies within the white expatriate community. By showing her willingness to adapt to Chinese cultural norms, Emma was repackaging her white femininity to make it more palatable in the Chinese eyes.

The changing value of white capital in China also has its temporal and spatial dimensions. Nicolas’ lament over his previous glory as a VIP in Chongqing, his current anonymity in Beijing, and his precarious future as a blue-collar intellectual oscillating between China and Italy speak volumes about the shifting meanings of whiteness across time and space. While Tony was able to launch a more proactive defence of his declining white skin privilege, his bullying tactics seem to work more effectively within the provincial city of Xi’an, rather than in big cities such as Beijing and Guangzhou. International migration from the global North to the global South has facilitated the transnational circulation of white privilege, yet it also leads to the destabilisation and fragmentation of hegemonic whiteness in non-Western contexts. The feelings of precariousness among some of my white participants can be attributed to the tension between their desire for alternative life opportunities in China and the circumscribed and contingent white skin privilege they experienced in daily life. For these non-elite and non-managerial white migrants, their transnational white capital can function as both a resource and an obstacle to their integration into an increasingly ethnocentric Chinese society.

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