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Race, capital, and nationhood in contemporary China

Ma, K.

Publication date

2025

Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ma, K. (2025). *The allure of white bodies: Race, capital, and nationhood in contemporary China*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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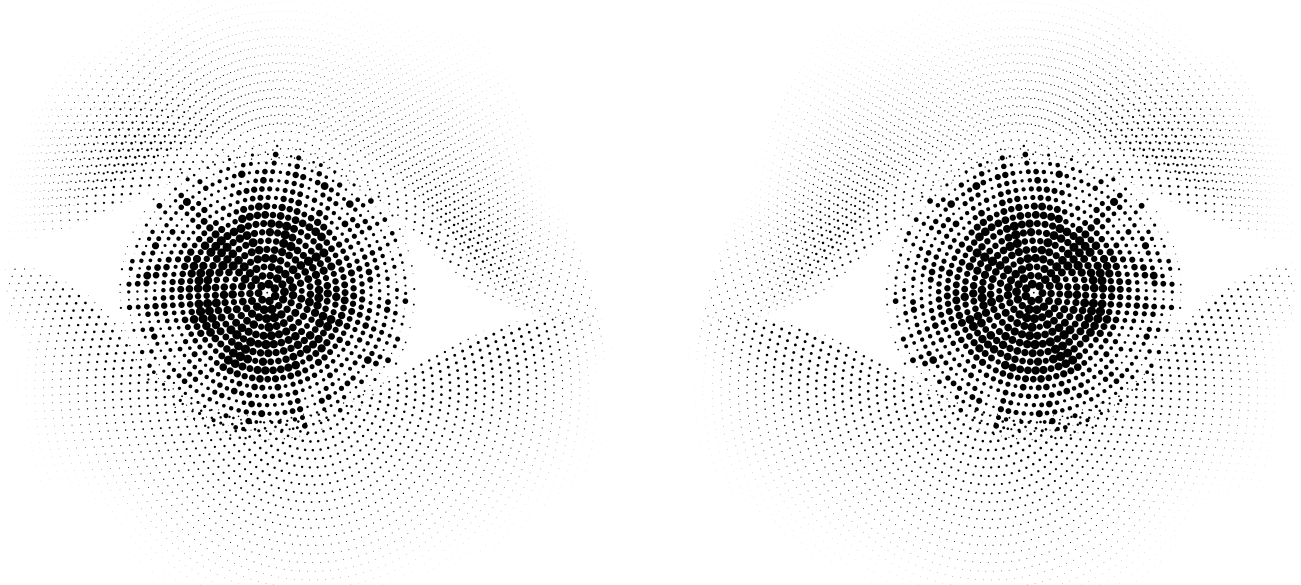
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The Allure of White Bodies

Race, Capital, and Nationhood
in Contemporary China



Ke Ma

The Allure of White Bodies: Race, Capital, and Nationhood in Contemporary
China

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. ir. P.P.C.C. Verbeek

ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel
op maandag 24 februari 2025, te 14.00 uur

door Ke Ma
geboren te Yunnan

Promotiecommissie

<i>Promotor:</i>	dr. S. Lan	Universiteit van Amsterdam
<i>Copromotores:</i>	prof. dr. R. Spronk dr. ir. B.J. de Kloet	Universiteit van Amsterdam Universiteit van Amsterdam
<i>Overige leden:</i>	prof. dr. F.E. Guadeloupe prof. dr. A.E. Mears dr. H.L.T. Tse prof. dr. P.D. Nyíri dr. W.M. Sier	Universiteit van Amsterdam Universiteit van Amsterdam Universiteit van Amsterdam Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam Universiteit Utrecht

Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragwetenschappen

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, my deepest gratitude goes to all the participants who welcomed me into their lives. Without your openness and generosity, this project would not have been possible. I am eternally thankful for your contributions.

I want to express my sincere thanks to my supervisors. I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have had your guidance, and I am deeply grateful for all the support you have given me over the years. Dear Shanshan Lan, you have taught me how to navigate my field and how to convey a story with both clarity and depth. You read every line of my drafts and guided me through the writing phase efficiently. I also greatly appreciate your prompt responses to my questions and concerns. Thank you for your unwavering patience and encouragement.

Rachel Spronk, your insights, patience, and care have been incredibly meaningful throughout my journey. Even though our research topics and contexts differ, you have provided invaluable constructive and critical feedback. Beyond your academic guidance, your emotional support has meant a lot to me. I always left our meetings feeling energized, curious, and motivated. Thank you for that.

Thank you, Jeroen de Kloet, for your careful reading of my drafts and for offering so much valuable advice. I also want to share that whenever I felt lost, I turned to your books and articles—they always reignited my joy of writing. Your creativity, criticality, and productivity have been a constant source of inspiration. I'm also grateful for the Transasia meetings, dinners, drinks, and picnics you organized. Thank you for creating such a warm academic family.

I am sincerely grateful to the members of my doctorate committee: Prof. Ashley Mears, Prof. Pál Nyiri, Prof. Francio Guadeloupe, Dr. Tommy Tse, and Dr. Willy Sier. Your research has been a significant source of inspiration for me. It is my greatest honour and pleasure to have you on my committee. Thank you for taking the time to read my dissertation and for sharing your valuable insights.

Willem van Schendel, although you were not officially my supervisor, you provided invaluable guidance and feedback during my PhD trajectory. Your critical perspective on the Chinawhite project encouraged me to think more deeply. Your intellectual and emotional support at numerous seminars and workshops has made my academic journey a wonderful experience.

I want to extend my thanks to Annemarie Mol. I appreciate your sharpness and criticality (I particularly like and always remember what you said: “Don’t be hopeful, be stubborn”). Thank you for taking the time to get to know me and offering your refreshing thoughts on my topic.

Thank you, Willy Sier, Ed Pulford, Aldina Camenisch, and Shichang Duan, for being the wonderful postdocs on the Chinawhite project. Willy Sier, thank you for setting such a great example and for always being always responsive and generous. I feel fortunate to have you as a colleague and a good friend. A special thanks to Ed Pulford, who encouraged me greatly and warmly introduced and welcomed me to the University of Manchester.

I want to thank Muriël Kiesel, Danny van der Poel, Marieke Brand, as well as the staff of the AISSR bureau, including Janus Oomen and Cristina Gafalo. Muriël and Danny, thank you for your care and love. You made me feel at home in the department.

Amongst the professors in our department: Tina Harris, Rosanne Rutten, Yatun Sastramidjaja, Luisa Steur, Gerben Nooteboom, Laurens Bakker, Francio Guadeloupe, Julie McBrien, Kristine Krause, Else Vogel, Linda Musariri. You inspired me greatly during my PhD trajectory. Thank you for your support and presence along the way.

I would also like to extend my special thanks to professors outside the department who have made an impact on my academic journey: Yiu Fai Chow, Peter Gries, Xiaobing Wang, James Farrer, Horacio Ortiz, Johan Hartle, Niall Martin, Daan Wesselman, Zhe Gao, and Shaoying He. Your enthusiasm for thinking and your ways of life have inspired me greatly.

It is hard to imagine how I could have finished my PhD without the love and support of the PhD family and friends I made at different stages of my life: Emily Ragus, Shahana Siddiqui, Kyana Dipananda, Michelle Geraerts, Butet Manurung, Arum Hayuningsih, Jori Snels, Yentl de Lange, Leonie Dronkert, Tara Asgarilaleh, Vita Febriany, Yuan Yan, Yves Wong, Pengnan Hu, Zhen Ma, Geradi Yudhistira, Ashry Sallatu, Sandra Zarofis, Amanda Mokoena, Chao Xin, Yu Han, Chen Zhou, Jiwen He, Zijie Zhou, Roselinde Bon, Jessie Gong, Xiaoyang, Coco Zhao, Mianmian Yang, Nathan Ceulemans, Kai Shmushko, and so on. Thank you for your time and kindness.

My paranymp, Kevin Singh, I love your smartness, your humour, and your dedication. More importantly, you have such a generous, beautiful heart. Thanks for taking care of me throughout my PhD journey. I am waiting in the wings to be your paranymp in your defence, and I hope we will make our home in the same city and experience more wonderful things together.

My heartfelt thanks go to Christina Kefala, my paranymph, my colleague, and my dearest friend. I do not know where to start because we have done so many silly and wonderful things together. I love your passion, your dedication, and your imagination. Thank you for being there for me and being you.

Bo Wang, my dear paranymph and best friend. I love your witty remarks, kindness, creativity, and dedication to art and research. You're also a fantastic chef—thank you for cooking so many delicious dishes for me. I feel fortunate to have had you by my side on this journey.

Raviv Litman, thank you for your kindness. I cherished our exchanges of wild research ideas over beers by the canals during the Amsterdam lockdown. You patiently endured my daily “what is whiteness” question and offered insightful feedback on my messy drafts. Thank you for your encouragement and companionship.

Thank you, Peter Miller. You made me feel at home in the department. I enjoyed every moment of our time together, whether it was our writing sessions, coffee breaks, or the nights out clubbing. You are such a genuine, strong, and warm-hearted person. I've learned so much from you. Thank you for your time, and thank you for taking care of my chubby cat Bubble.

Yvette Ruzibiza, your presence made our office the most gezellig place. Whenever you said with a big laugh, “Ke Ma, you are so productive this morning!” I knew it was my time to open my Word document and write. Thank you for being a great example and a supportive friend. You are magical to me: when I think about you, my face turns smiley.

Thank you, Ruowen Xu, my dearest PhD- and dance-mate. I enjoyed how we spent the afternoons studying and finished the days with a dance class. You are among the most beautiful, kind-hearted, and talented people I know. Thank you for your time and sweetness. I also want to thank Jochem de Kok for being such a supportive friend.

Ting Gong, my best friend, and my dearest sister. For so many years, you have kept reminding me that we ought to do something meaningful and adventurous in our lives. I thank you and love you for that.

Long Wu, my dearest friend and fabulous designer, thank you for making this book so stunning. Above all, your love and support in Amsterdam and Shanghai have meant the world to me.

I want to thank my editor, Ross Ludlam, who has been very helpful in improving

the accuracy and clarity of my writing. It has been truly joyful to work with you.

I would also like to acknowledge my dance teachers: Debora Gegoli, Vera Tsyganova, Charmaine du Mont, Chanquito van Hoeve, Vince Koffijberg, and Alexander Zhebrosky. I could not imagine completing my dissertation without having practised ballet with you everyday—it was my sanctuary. Thank you for teaching me how to move with strength and lightness, not just on the dance floor but also in life.

Finally, to those who have always loved and supported me. Mom and Dad, I feel incredibly fortunate to have you. It is your love that has carried me this far. Your understanding, generosity, and dedication have granted me the freedom to do things that I am passionate about. Thank you for always being there for me, and thank you for setting great examples. I am grateful to you, I am proud of you, and I love you.

Tim, who filled my PhD years with love and laughter and always supported me, thank you. It was your patience, encouragement, forgiveness, your smart comments on my writing, and your belief in me that have got me through this journey. You are the best, and I love you!

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Publication History

- Ma, K. (2022). Transnational white masculinity on Chinese social media: Western male vloggers' self-representations during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Asian anthropology*, 21(3), 211-223.
- Ma, K. (2024). The cultural politics of race in Chinese cinema: Nationalism and the changing representation of whiteness in *Big Shot's Funeral and Crazy Alien*. *Global media and China*, 9(1), 69-83.
- Ma, K. Trading beauty, making race: whiteness in China's modelling industry. In H. Ø. Haugen and B. Wang (Eds.) *Migration to China*. *Elgar*.
(Under review)

Introduction

A snapshot

On a chilly winter afternoon in 2021, I sat in the rear of a van alongside Natalie, a 21-year-old Serbian female model. Having relocated to Shanghai just a month before, Natalie's presence in Shanghai coincided with China's strict Zero COVID-19 policy, which significantly impacted the local fashion and advertising industries. Despite these challenges, Natalie's features—golden hair, blue eyes, and a slender physique—continued to capture the attention of various Chinese advertisers. This allure led to her receiving invitations from several Chinese advertisers, granting her numerous opportunities to work as a model.

On this day, the driver took us to a photography studio called “Euro-American studio” (欧美片场) in a Shanghai suburb. We didn't know which brand Natalie would work for; the production team booked the job. However, we did know that the assignment would last about six hours, for which the client would pay about RMB 9,000 (about US\$1,267) to Natalie and her modelling agency in Shanghai.

The Euro-American studio is a five-floor building, each consisting of several studios mimicking Western-style bars, living rooms, and meeting rooms. Given its extensive size, it took us a while to find the correct studio due to its vastness. As soon as we arrived at the right place, a 30-something Chinese woman, who was the director of the advertisement, came and led us to a dressing room. While letting Natalie put on a silken white slip dress, the Chinese woman handed us a piece of paper showing a few scenes that tell the story of a woman drinking wine, doing oil painting, eating dried beef, and enjoying herself at home. “We are going to do these shots with Natalie,” the director explained.

After completing all the preparations, I discovered that Natalie's modelling work was centred on promoting a Chinese snack, dried beef, which one can find in any grocery store across China. However, this Chinese brand was not content with selling dried beef as an ordinary, local snack. Instead, they pack the food in a sturdy gift box. On the box, the image of an idyllic European farm was printed. Beneath the pastoral scene was a line in Chinese claiming that the beef is produced and crafted in the Swiss tradition.

The most common Chinese dried beef was then staged as an exotic, high-end delicacy from an affluent, tranquil, and organic foreign land. The portrayal of Natalie as a middle-class, artsy European woman enjoying the beef with red wine enhanced the aura of exclusivity surrounding this beef product. In other words, this brand had sought to create a narrative positioning the dried beef with a touch of Western sophistication, catering to Chinese consumers' aspirations for a more refined lifestyle.

Central aim and research questions

The vignette above reflects two aspects of contemporary China's dynamics re-

volving around racial whiteness. First, the increasing transnational migration to China has brought about a diverse influx of migrants with varying class and cultural backgrounds. While some come as high-skilled labour workers, a significant number find themselves, like Natalie, engaged in zero-contract, low-skilled jobs like modelling. Second, as a visual component of race, corporeal whiteness appears to be embraced as something captivating, fascinating, and highly symbolic in contemporary China. The visual representation of white bodies quite often takes on a role in projecting Chinese aspirations and desires as well as defining the boundaries between “us” Chinese and foreign “others”.

In this dissertation, I will investigate white embodiment within three distinct types of visual engagement: Chinese cinema, social media, and fashion modelling. Combining cultural studies and ethnography, I will explore how white people are represented and how these representations are produced in these three cases. In doing so, I will unpack the complexities at play in the racial formation of whiteness in contemporary China.

The empirical chapters variously elucidate how multiple players in Chinese visual culture negotiate, reproduce, contest, and profit from the allures of corporeal whiteness. These chapters all—in one way or another—try to answer the following sub-questions.

1. How is whiteness perceived in relation to Chineseness? Particularly, how have rising Chinese nationalism and the increased geopolitical tension between China and major Western countries in recent years impacted the representation and production of whiteness?
2. To what extent does white embodiment afford foreign migrants material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages? How does it enrich our understanding of the notion of white privilege?
3. How does racial whiteness intersect with other social categories such as gender, class, and nationality?

I will position my research questions within the existing academic debates and outline my analytical strategies. Subsequently, I will elaborate on the social context of my research, my case studies, and the methodologies employed. The introduction will conclude with a summary of the empirical chapters that follow.

Whiteness

In the 1990s, Stuart Hall (1993) rightfully diagnosed that “the capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty-first century” (p. 361) Indeed, along with the uneven flows of globalization, racism remains a critical issue of our time. Even though phrases such as “race is a construct” and

“race does not exist” have now become frequently articulated within and outside academia, race remains one of the key systems of organizing difference in our world. As Sara Ahmed (2015) poignantly observes, race is “an invention that lingers as and in life, in how we see things, in how we do things: how the world appears for me, falls for us; how we fall, in shadows, with shadows, in darkness, in light” (p. 94).

Before the 1980s, research on racial relations was primarily focused on non-white identities. Whiteness research has only established itself as a coherent field of research in the 1980s. As an interdisciplinary project, whiteness studies have brought together insights from various disciplines, such as history, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. What binds these studies is their concentration on the socially constructed nature of white identity and the social impact of white privilege. In contrast to studies of other racial identities, which often focus on the issue of marginalization and exclusion, the initial purpose of whiteness studies is to make visible and problematize white identity and the practices around it.

Whiteness studies in the early stage have contributed to recognizing whiteness as a socially constructed category rather than a biological fact. They also emphasize the idea that those categorized as white are afforded better access to various social resources due to the positive associations made concerning whiteness, regardless of their intentions. While this privilege can benefit individual white people in various everyday situations, it also manifests in broader structural forms that advantage the white community as a whole. In addition, it suggests that white identity tends to appear as an invisible, non-racial identity since whiteness works as a racial norm in various settings in Western societies. For instance, McIntosh (1988/2001) popularized the term “white privilege” to describe how being racially white in the US is a promise of better access to social resources as if carrying “an invisible weightless knapsack.” In examining whiteness in Western visual cultures, Dyer (1997) also notes that white people always produce “the dominant image of the world” and construct “the world in their image” (p. 11), rendering whiteness as normal and invisible.

Since the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the field has further foregrounded white privilege as the central concept. Meanwhile, increased attention has been paid to the intersection of whiteness with other social factors, with the aim of deconstructing the assumption that people are a monolithic group who experience racial privileges in the same way. To put it differently, race is then understood not as a “distinct realm of social experience and location” but exists in relation to other social categories such as gender and class (McClintock, 1995, p. 5). This theme is explored, for instance, in Frankenberg’s (1993) analysis of the

intersection of gender and whiteness, in which she shows how “whiteness as a site of privilege is not absolute but rather crosscut by a range of other axes of relative advantage and subordination” (p. 76).

Meanwhile, the class composition in the racial formation of whiteness has been further explored. For instance, Historian David R. Roediger (1991/2007) examines the formation of white identity among European-American workers in the North during the antebellum period. Initially, low-skilled European immigrants in the working class were not regarded as white. Confronted with labour exploitation, they found solace and validation in the social distinction of being free citizens compared to Black workers, thereby fostering a sense of white superiority. This emergence of white identity undermined the solidarity of the American working class across different racial lines, underscoring how whiteness was pivotal in shaping the politics of the American working class. Wray (2008) examines the historical stereotypes of “white trash” in the US and how these perceptions and meanings have shaped and constructed the white, middle-class American identity. He argues that while “white” appears as an “ethnoracial signifier” of privilege, “trash” connotes a sense of “abject class status” (p. 3). This tension within the notion of white trash confronts us with “the multithreaded nature of social inequality” (p. 4). Whiteness is, therefore, a process of social differentiation, encompassing not only skin colour but also “systems and practices related to other social processes that differentiate along lines of class, gender, and sexuality” (p. 5).

While whiteness gains broader currency in the studies of racialized social relations, it has also been criticized for being almost entirely centred on the US and UK context. To move away from Anglo-Saxon-centred analyses of race, more recent academic attempts have been made to study how “global white supremacy”, as articulated by Mills (1997), manifests in other regions, which recognize the global interconnectedness of race-inflected power dynamics. For instance, Lundström (2014) explores how white privilege is played out in Swedish transnational migration to the US, Singapore, and southern Spain, arguing that the “global extensions of whiteness are dependent on asymmetric transnational power relations and institutional forms of privilege being asserted locally” (p. 177). Wekker’s (2016) examination of Dutch society reveals a distinctive manifestation of white consciousness. That is, white Dutch individuals tend to perceive themselves as progressive and colour-blind and view their country as small and tender. In other words, a sense of innocence exists in the self-perceptions of dominant white individuals in Dutch society. And it is precisely such innocence that serves to mask underlying racism and xenophobia directed towards the non-white immigrants in the Netherlands. Contrary to the common view of white Europeans as predominantly middle- and upper-middle-class adherents of heteronormative whiteness, Narkowicz’s (2023) research shows a more complex re-

ality. Not all white Europeans fit neatly into this category, and the level of racial privilege experienced by each white individual varies. Narkowicz shines a light on this phenomenon by uncovering the ambiguous relationship between whiteness and Polishness in the UK, examining under what conditions the Polish migrants are perceived as “white enough”. On the one hand, the historically peripheral position of Poland in Europe contributes to the exclusion and marginalization of Polish migrants when they interact with white British and other Western Europeans. On the other hand, these white migrants tend to (re)assert their white identities when they encounter other non-white groups in the UK. Simply put, the categorization of whiteness involves not only the distinctions between white people and people of colour but also the hierarchies within the white population itself, within which white Western Euro-Americans are often racialized as superior to white Eastern Europeans.

The aforementioned literature on whiteness serves as an essential reference for my study of the formation of white identity in contemporary China. Specifically, the concept of white privilege, the intersectionality of race and other social categories, and the hierarchy within the white population will continue to inform the analysis in this dissertation. However, a significant issue is that most research is conducted within a Western Euro-American context, where white people constitute the majority of the population. Given that race is always socially and historically constructed and influenced by various social factors, this group of research, while valuable, has limited analytical power in describing how whiteness is translated, challenged, reproduced, and even reinvented in societies where non-white people constitute the major population. As Anoop Nayak (2007) emphasises in his call for new geographies of whiteness, “The social construction of race is not a philosophic platitude; it is evidenced in the making and unmaking of whiteness. Who is white, when did they become white and why, are crucial questions” (p. 752). This concern with the specificity of whiteness in a given geographical and historical location prompts this study to focus on whiteness in contemporary China.

Whiteness in China

This dissertation explores white formation in contemporary China, emphasising the roles of the Chinese state, the Chinese people, and white foreign migrants in China in defining and shaping the meanings and social effects of whiteness. Existing literature on race in the Chinese context and transnational migration to China indicates that, unlike in the Western context, whiteness is a contested issue.

The first aspect of the contested nature of whiteness in China involves the gaps and discrepancies in how whiteness is perceived as a racial category, specifically regarding who is considered white and who is not. In his book chapter “The Im-

perial Order of Things, or Notes on Han Chinese Racism” (2010), cultural studies scholar Chen Kuan Hsing points out that in pre-modern China, the dominant Han ethnic group primarily used distinctions between human and non-human to differentiate outsiders and foreigners. This process involved employing, instead of the idea of race, cultural imagery such as demonization and animalization to establish hierarchies of superiority, inferiority, and unfamiliarity. Meanwhile, Dikötter’s (1992, 1995) and Bonnett’s (2000) historical research highlights that, unlike Western societies, where whiteness typically aligns with racial categories, in indigenous Chinese thought, whiteness often pertains to skin tones and carries connotations of class distinction. Notably, throughout much of Chinese history, social elites have used the concept of whiteness to define their social collectivity as distinguished from the darker-skinned, often peasant population.

The rise of Western racial ideologies and exclusionary European concepts of whiteness have significantly influenced the Chinese perception of their racial identity, shifting it towards a “yellow” identity (Bonnett, 2000). Western racial classifications first appeared in the writings and publications of Qing medical and geographic scholars around the mid-19th century, reflecting China’s growing interest in Western scientific knowledge (Barth, 2015). From the late 19th century, China was ravaged by Japan and multiple Western imperialist powers. In response, nationalism and racial constructs were intertwined, creating a political distinction between Self and Other. Scholars, reformers, and revolutionaries adapted the concept of race to support their nationalist agendas (S. Zhao, 2004). Since then, whiteness has more commonly been associated with people of European descent.

Racial whiteness, rooted in Western colonial and imperial history, is often closely associated with the notion of the “West” in Western countries. Scholars have noted that the construction of the West as a superior and privileged category is ideological, being tightly linked to colonial history and the definition of an Other, such as the “East” and the “Third World” (Le Renard, 2022, p. 3). However, as Bonnett (2004) argues, while it is important to critically examine how the West constructs itself, it is also essential to recognize that the ideas about the West are “not simply a Western invention” (p. 11). Instead, the concept of the West has also been developed and often essentialized by non-Western societies, making it “far more diverse and with many points of creation” (p. 8).

In the Chinese context, the idea of the West is overloaded with meanings and often revolves around anxieties about the Chinese self. In Meinhof’s (2007) reflection on the coloniality of China, he notes that despite China never being fully colonized by a Western power, China’s modernity has often been described by the Chinese through constant comparison with the West, such as how far away China is from

the West and how long it will take for China to surpass the West. From glorification to condemnation of the West, one may find different opinions from the Chinese, who hold different political, class, and gender positions. Nevertheless, the West remains an important point of reference. In his own words, “Chinese discourses on modernity are compelled to constantly observe the West and compare their own country to it, and they are compelled to do so by the colonial temporality they themselves construct in order to imagine historical agency” (2017, p. 66).

Finally, what makes the category of racial whiteness unique in China is that racial dynamics there do not primarily revolve around the binary of whiteness and blackness, as they do in the US. Instead, the primary racial binary in China is Chineseness versus foreignness. Meanwhile, although whiteness is just one of the subcategories distinguishing Chinese insiders from foreign outsiders, white people are predominantly perceived as the default group of foreigners. In the Chinese context, the term “foreigner” explicitly refers to individuals who do not hold Chinese nationality but are implicitly associated with whiteness. In the 1980s, most “foreigners” were white Western elites working as investors and top managers in multinational corporations in China (Lan et al., 2022). This tendency to equate foreigners with whiteness persists to the present day. For example, in China’s booming English teaching industry, a foreign English teacher typically refers to white-skinned non-Chinese individuals (S. Lan, 2022). As I will demonstrate in this thesis, the terms “foreign” and “foreigner” in China’s modelling industry and influencer culture also primarily imply racial whiteness.

Apart from the inconsistencies and differing views on whiteness as a social category, the notion of white privilege in China is also debatable. China has never been fully colonized by Western powers, resulting in a lack of institutional support for white dominance. However, Chinese attitudes toward white foreigners can be ambivalent, mixed with feelings of both superiority and inferiority. In his examination of popular Chinese nationalism, Peter Gries (2009) explores how the contemporary narratives of China’s “5,000 years of Civilization” and the “Century of Humiliation” shape the contradictory way the Chinese perceive themselves in relation to others. The discourse of China’s “5,000 years of Civilization” creates a sense of burden and fosters a feeling of Chinese superiority and Sino-centric cultural nationalism. Meanwhile, China’s traumatic memory of its interactions with foreign powers—from the defeat in the First Opium War and the British acquisition of Hong Kong in 1842 to the War of Resistance against Japan from 1937 to 1945—also engenders a sense of vulnerability, weakness, and fear of the West. These narratives, combined with China’s emergence as a major economic and political power over the past four decades, can significantly impact the present-day Chinese attitudes toward the white population.

Studies on the lived experiences of Western migrants in China have revealed some nuances of white privilege in the Chinese context. In Farrer's (2013) study of Shanghai nightlife, he demonstrates that Euro-American male migrants often have easy access to sexual intimacy with Chinese women because their masculinities are associated with "glamour and sex appeal" and economic prestige in the local context (Ma, 2022). Similarly, in Stanley's (2012) exploration of Euro-American migration to China, she describes the "superheroes phenomenon", whereby Chinese women perceive Euro-American men as more sexually attractive and financially affluent than Chinese men, placing Western men in seemingly powerful positions. Consequently, many Western male migrants feel pressured to conform to this attributed identity, or as Stanley puts it, an "Occidental Chinese construction of what Western men are like" (2012, p. 227). White Western women, in contrast, have often described China as a "dating wasteland" (Nilsson, 2006) due to the cultural barriers they face when dating Chinese men and competing with Chinese women for foreign partners. However, recent research by Sier (2023) on online discussions about romance between white women and Chinese men reveals that this perception is evolving. With the influx of young, adventurous Western women migrating to China, they are increasingly open to forming romantic relationships with urban Chinese men. Meanwhile, Chinese discourse around the ideal foreign wife has increasingly shifted focus to white Russian women, who are seen as embodying a racialized symbol of prestige and higher accessibility due to their relatively lower socioeconomic and nationality status (Barabantseva, 2021).

While this research teases out the advantageous aspects of white identities in China, certain studies also emphasize that whiteness can be conflated with foreignness, leading to its transformation into a marginalized identity. This perspective is best exemplified by Liu and Self's (2020) exploration of Americans' lived experience in mainland China. They report that these migrants' non-Chinese physical appearance often leads to diversely motivated stereotyping on the part of Chinese individuals, thereby rendering them as permanent outsiders who are subject to Occidentalism in China. As for foreigners in China's cultural sector, Lin's (2019) ethnography on Western creative workers' migration to China highlights their precarity and vulnerability in facing the state's restrictions on migration and its incorporation of "foreign creativity" into the politico-economic governance of culture in China.

The above-mentioned two aspects of the contested nature of whiteness motivate this study to explore further the tension-fraught racial formation of whiteness in contemporary China. My aim in this dissertation is not to underplay the global spread of white superiority but instead to provide a more fine-grained understanding of whiteness in a transnational context.

Existing literature on whiteness and transnational migration in the Chinese context predominantly focuses on the perspective of white migrants, examining how they perceive and experience their racial identity in the Chinese context. While this dissertation will continue to address the racial dynamics surrounding white individuals' lived experiences in China, it will also consider the active role that Chinese people play in the racial formation of whiteness. In S. Lan's (2022) pioneering study of whiteness in China's English teaching sector, she goes beyond analysing individual privileges by examining the racialization of English teachers through state policies, brokerage services, and the daily experiences of white English teachers. In doing so, her research broadens the horizon of understanding whiteness both as an individual privilege and a more comprehensive structure of power.

Inspired by her research, this dissertation will also go beyond individual-based analysis by exploring the racial formation of whiteness in Chinese visual culture. According to Omi and Winant (1994), race is "a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (p. 55). Racial formation thus describes "a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized" (1994, pp. 55–56). Following their conception of race and racial formation, this dissertation sees white formation in Chinese visual culture as an ongoing process shaped by multiple actors, including white performers, Chinese audiences, and the Chinese working in the cultural industry. On the one hand, this dissertation aims to investigate the cultural meanings ascribed to racial whiteness through Chinese films, social media, and advertisements. On the other hand, it seeks to explore how the meanings attributed to whiteness influence the social relations underpinning the production of these media objects. Put differently, racial whiteness will be approached as "a discursive system", which has "'real' social, economic and political conditions of existence and 'real' symbolic and material effects" (Hall, 2002, p. 453). In the same vein, by using terms such as "white individual", "white bodies", and "white people", this dissertation does not mean that race or whiteness is an inherent attribute that is something one can hold or is born with. Rather, the term white in this dissertation denotes those who are often of European descent and "become" white through the process of racialization.

From cultural representation to cultural production: Chinese gazes, stereotype, and commodification

Popular culture emphasizes communicating and disseminating values and beliefs and embodies a unique capacity to influence societies and people. It is one of the most fertile terrains on which ideological currents and power relations negotiate and take shape. To borrow Stuart Hall's words, popular culture is "profoundly mythic" in that it is a "theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies" and "where we discover and play with the identification of ourselves, where we

are imagined and where we are represented” (1993, p. 113). Taking culture’s role seriously in mediating and negotiating white privilege in China, this dissertation will analyse how the images of white bodies and their producers participate in the discursive racial formation of whiteness in China. Chinese gazes, stereotypes, and commodification are the key concepts that frame the analysis of whiteness in this dissertation. In the following section, I will explain how each term helps unpack the complexity of white formation in contemporary China.

Chines gazes

The term “gaze” is largely popularized by film theorist Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). In the essay, she notes that mainstream Hollywood films tend to position the audience as male, and through identification with the male protagonist, these films give the audience an active role in viewing the female subject on screen and gaining pleasure from doing so. In her words, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (1975, p. 19). This male gaze can be “voyeuristic”, which objectifies the recipient of the gaze in a non-sexual way; it can also be “fetishistic”; namely, looking in a sexual manner (Mulvey, 1975). The crux of “gaze”, here, is to uncover the power dynamics in media representation—specifically, who holds the power to represent and for whom the representation is intended. Under the framework of gaze, the default audience is presumed to adopt the dominant group’s perspective. Meanwhile, the subordinate group—in this case, females—are depicted as objects to be fascinated by, othered, and consumed.

The influence of postcolonial studies on film theory has broadened the usage of the concept, extending its scope to include representational issues regarding race and ethnicity. W.E.B Du Bois (1903/1994) coined the term “double consciousness” to describe the experience of Black people seeing themselves through the gaze of both the dominant white people and that of their blackness in the US. Fanon (1952/2008) similarly uses the term “white gaze” to describe the exercise of white power over Black individuals, especially in the historical context of colonization. Here, the look is not only an act but also a mechanism through which the Black subject is turned into an object, and the human is turned into a non-human. Under the white gaze, blackness is “there, dark and unarguable. And it tormented me, pursued me, disturbed me, angered me” (Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 88). In the realm of media studies, Ella Shohat (1991) talks about the “disciplinary gaze of empire”, describing the looking relation that privileges Western spectatorship while reducing (post-)colonial, non-white bodies on screen into a spectacle of difference in cinema. As she puts it, “The cinema brought credibility to anthropology, arming it, as it were, with visual evi-

dence – not only of the existence of ‘other’ but also of their existing otherness. The mimetic capacities of the cinema satisfied the three-dimensional need for gazing at the ‘other,’ bridging, as it were, the spatial gap between the Western spectators and the objects of their gaze” (Shohat, 1991, p. 68). While the gaze is often used to discuss the dominant white Western position, it is also used to think about how the subordinated groups may contest such power dynamics. bell hooks, interested in Black people’s “rebellious desire”, coined the term “oppositional gaze” to describe black females’ critical response to mainstream white representations, where Black female spectators neither identify with “the phallocentric gaze nor the construction of white womanhood as lack” (hooks, 1992, p. 316). Instead, they “gaze” at the lack of representation of Black females as a way to “construct a theory of looking relations where the cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation” (hooks, 1992, p. 316).

Informed by the feminist and postcolonial conceptualization of gaze, this dissertation uses the “Chinese gazes” as a heuristic device to consider the power dynamic within the looking relations between different groups of white and Chinese in Chinese media. In the context of this research, the Chinese are the subjects who gaze upon white bodies on the Chinese screens, and whiteness embodies a kind of to-be-looked-at-ness for different forms of Chinese spectatorship. As my empirical chapters will demonstrate, the Chinese gazes differ significantly from other types discussed in cross-racial representation. Unlike the white gaze, the Chinese gazes do not possess the same level of global hegemonic power (S. Lan, 2021). Consequently, white minorities under the Chinese are not as disempowered and oppressed as, for instance, non-white minorities under the white gaze. At the same time, however, whiteness is indeed often stereotyped and objectified in various forms of visual media in China and marginalized in Chinese society. Put differently, there is often a tension and interplay between white superiority and Chinese superiority within this dynamic of looking.

In addition, by using “Chinese gazes” instead of “Chinese gaze”, this dissertation views China and the Chinese not as monolithic but as encompassing a wide range of perceptions of and attitudes toward white individuals. The subjects of Chinese gazes discussed in this dissertation include different groups of Chinese media producers and consumers. As I will show in my empirical chapters, given their different social roles and backgrounds, whiteness is valued, imagined, and treated differently. For instance, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, while young Chinese netizens largely view white influencers as attractive yet suspicious foreign migrants, Chinese entrepreneurs in the modelling industry mainly see white models as racialized commodities with different potentials for generating profits.

Stereotype

Closely related to Chinese gazes is the concept of stereotyping, which is central to interpreting the meanings produced within such a racialized-looking relation. In Richard Dyer's (1999) insightful discussion of stereotyping in culture, he points out that the act of stereotyping fixes and essentializes differences by reducing everything about a person into easily understandable characters. When it comes to a group of people, stereotyping reduces their individual differences and highlights their perceived collective characteristics. The act of stereotyping is, then, part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order since it divides the insider and the outsider and differentiates between us and them. Thus, it is intricately linked to unequal power relations and is often used by the dominant group to mark boundaries, assign meanings and values, and exercise their symbolic power.

In the book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2002), cultural theorist Rey Chow further reflects upon the idea of stereotyping in the context of cross-racial representation. Although her project focuses on the question of "ethnicity", her approach is helpful in looking at white representation in China. In her book, she critically identifies two problematic tendencies within the existing analyses of the representation of difference. The first type of analysis, according to Chow, treats ethnicity as a thematic concern, approaching ethnicity at the level of realist cultural content. In this case, analysing ethnic characters may reveal insightful stories, but it does not necessarily provide a critical perspective on "the act of representation per se" (2002, p. 51). The second type of analysis avoids treating representation as reality and considers ethnicity as "something ontologically liminal, something between subject and object". However, this approach tends to equate critical thinking with political activism and solely bases its analysis on the idea of resistance (2002, p. 52). Chow argues against the realistic approach of deciphering the representation of ethnic minorities. However, she also cautions against the often too formulaic and simplistic readings of ethnic representation as either oppression or liberation. Building on Fredric Jameson's (1993) argument, she suggests that stereotypes are inevitable in cross-cultural representation. Contrary to the common belief that stereotypes are inherently harmful, untrue, and reductive, she considers the act of stereotyping to be productive. This productivity does not imply that stereotyping is not something to be morally or politically advocated. Rather, it is meant to highlight the effectiveness of stereotypes in generating group boundaries.

Inspired by Dyer and Chow's insights into stereotypes in cultural representation, this dissertation neither focuses on evaluating the white characters on screen as truthful or false nor solely criticizes the immorality of these representations. Instead, in my analysis, I will focus on the functioning aspect of stereotyping and view it as a form of signifying and meaning-making practice. I examine how the

characteristics attributed to white people in Chinese media accommodate the cultural tastes and feelings of nationalism among the Chinese. As demonstrated in my empirical chapters, the characteristics ascribed to white people in Chinese media are diverse. The portrayal of whiteness can vary significantly depending on the subject matter, form of media, and the sociohistorical context. For instance, in Chapter 1, I illustrate that a Western male in Chinese films could be depicted as a rational, knowledgeable, and kind figure in the 1980s, yet a silly, arrogant villain in a 2010s film. Meanwhile, as discussed in Chapter 2, Western male influencers on Chinese social media, aiming to gain online attention and likes from Chinese youth, may perform ordinariness and friendliness to cater to the Chinese youth's imagination of ideal foreign migrants in China. These attributes of whiteness by no means reveal any truths about the actual white population. However, they are crucial for understanding the Chinese people's growing national pride and changing self-perception in relation to foreign others since the reform and opening up of the 1980s.¹

Commodification of whiteness

The term commodification is generally conceptualized in terms of the conversion of an object or aspect of life that has yet to be previously regarded in economic terms into a commodity with exchange value. Race scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/1994) and Cedric Robinson (1983) have long argued that race is fundamental to understanding capitalist commodification, as capital accumulates by producing and moving through unequal relations among different groups. While their analysis generally refers to historical arrangements such as colonialism and the slave trade, it also allows us to consider how, in our current time, perceived racial differences continue to shape different forms of commercialized social activities.

In the field of whiteness studies, some scholars have explored how whiteness comes to hold a certain exchange value. Roediger's (1991/2007) term "the wages of whiteness", for example, conceptualizes whiteness as a form of racial currency for the white American working class. The term sheds light on the symbolic and material advantages afforded by racial whiteness and, in this case, the power of whiteness in compensating for white workers' experience of exploitation and alienation at work. In more recent scholarship, some literature builds on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) differentiation of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital to understand how race may work as a form of "embodied and institutionalized capital" (Lundström, 2014) in different social settings. While some conceptualize

¹ The reform and opening up refers to the Chinese Communist Party's market reform. Following Mao Zedong's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping rose to power and initiated the reforms in 1978, shifting China's planned economy toward a state-regulated market economy.

whiteness as a component of “symbolic capital” (Prasad, 2023) or “cultural capital” (P.C. Lan, 2011; Hof, 2021), others coin neologisms such as “white capital” (Lundström, 2014) and “racial capital” (Molina-Gusmán, 2013) to further specify the power and persistence of racialization in assigning value to white individuals.

These Bourdieusian readings of race and whiteness inform this study. Since the 1980s, the introduction of a market economy in China has been a major driver of the nation’s economic takeoff. The visibility of white bodies in Chinese visual culture, such as the white female body in the Chinese food advertisement mentioned in the vignette, highlights not only the cultural meanings ascribed to white bodies but also the extraction of surplus value from them. This involves marketing, valuing, and selling whiteness as a commodity that generates profits and stimulates China’s economic growth. By examining the intersection of race and commodification, we can view white identities in popular culture as commodities with exchange value, and the white performers in these images—such as actors, singers, or models—as racialized labourers.

As previously mentioned, this dissertation employs a racial formation perspective to explore whiteness in China. According to Omi and Winant’s (1994) framework, racial formation encompasses cultural representation and social structure. They caution against understanding race solely through one of these dimensions, stating, “too often, the attempt is made to understand race simply or primarily in terms of only one of these two analytical dimensions” (p. 56). To avoid placing undue emphasis on the cultural meanings of white bodies in China, this dissertation also examines the commodification of white bodies, thereby integrating the aspects of racial representation and racialized social structure in the analysis.

To elucidate the commercial aspect of whiteness in China, particularly in China’s fashion advertisements, this dissertation introduces the notions of “racialized aesthetic value” and “racialized aesthetic labour” to understand the distribution of racial capital in China’s fashion modelling industry. As detailed in Chapters 3 and 4, as racialized aesthetic labour, foreign models’ white embodiment may grant them preferential treatment in the Chinese job market. However, as a kind of transnational labour undesired by the Chinese state, most white foreign models in China face significant precarity in the workplace. Meanwhile, Chinese companies and businessmen who extract the racialized aesthetic value of these models may be the primary beneficiaries of white privilege in this context.

Background and case Studies

In the following section, I will begin with a brief overview of the presence of white foreigners in China from the 1950s to the 2020s, establishing the sociohistorical context for my research. Subsequently, I will introduce the three media types ana-

lysed in my empirical chapters: cinema, social media, and fashion advertisements.

Foreigners' presence in China

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese state has rigorously controlled the presence of the foreign population in China. The foreign affairs (*waishi*) policy has dominated China's regulation of its international population since the 1950s. Brady (2003, as cited in S. Lan, 2022) argues that one of the fundamental principles of China's *waishi* policy has been to differentiate between insiders and outsiders and to make the incoming outsiders serve China's national benefit. However, the treatment of foreigners has varied across different historical periods in the PRC.

From the PRC's founding to the late 1970s, foreigners were predominantly categorized based on "their political sympathies rather than by their race or nationality (i.e. comrades, progressives, bourgeoisie, imperialists, and later on, 'revisionist')" (Brady, 2003, p. 1). One may understand migration management in this period as characterized by ideological considerations. Such politically motivated management and control of foreigners was also evident in Chinese media at the time. Chinese socialist artworks, for instance, often depicted friendly relationships between the Chinese and people from the Second and the Third World. This portrayal not only perceived racism as a byproduct of Western capitalism and imperialism but also sought to construct a Chinese identity that was proletarian and non-racist.

Along with initiating the reform and opening up policy in 1979, China underwent a significant socioeconomic transformation, through which state ownership was reduced, and market force was unleashed. Meanwhile, China's diplomatic relations with many countries started to be normalized. This period witnessed a relaxation of controls over transnational migration to China. By the late 1990s, first-tier Chinese cities such as Beijing and Shanghai were able to provide foreigners with a living standard comparable to many cosmopolitan areas worldwide (Haugen & Speelman, 2023). During this period, the majority of foreign migrants in China were Western corporate expatriates, diplomats, and students (Pieke, 2012). Notably, the relevance of foreigners' ideological beliefs slowly gave way to considerations regarding their race, nationality and class.

With the growing number of Western migrants in China, their representation in Chinese popular media also became more and more prevalent in this period. In 1988, CCTV's Spring Festival Gala invited a foreigner² to perform crosstalk with the Chinese performers for the first time. Young Canadian Mark Henry Rowswell

² The person who joined the show was someone called Carlos from the former Yugoslavia.

participated in the same show in subsequent years. Rowswell, later known as “Dashan”, gained popularity on Chinese TV shows in the 1990s because of his white appearance, excellent command of the Chinese language, and extensive knowledge of China. Beyond the state-owned TV channels, foreigners started to feature in Chinese advertisements, movies, and TV series such as *A Native of Beijing in New York* (1994). In general, whiteness was associated with wealth, social prestige, and modernity in the Chinese context during this period. This shift in cultural representation mirrors the changing dynamics of migration and evolving perceptions of foreigners in the reform era.

In the year 2000, President Clinton of the US signed the US-China Relations Act, establishing normal trade relations between China and the US. The following year, China became a member of the World Trade Organization. With China’s economic development flourishing, the country could offer new professional and educational opportunities. Consequently, the foreign migrant population in this era became more diverse in terms of class, gender, nationality, citizenship, legal status, and length of stay in China (Pieke, 2012).

With the broader changes in China’s global engagement, representations of foreigners in Chinese media became increasingly common. More and more Chinese advertisements started to employ Western aesthetics and white models to represent Chinese-made products. Meanwhile, a variety of Chinese TV shows and movies showcased foreign casts with white appearances, such as *Chinese Maids in Foreign Families* (2001), *The Modern Family* (2002), and *Go La La Go* (2010). Despite the Chinese state’s censorship on culture production, the portrayals of white foreigners not only multiplied but also diversified in terms of roles and subject matter compared to those of the 1990s.

In 2010, China surpassed Japan to become the world’s second-largest economy. Two years later, Xi Jinping became the president of China. Along with Xi’s enunciation of the political meta-discourse, the “Chinese dream,” the Chinese state mobilized various resources to envision and realize China’s great power status on the world stage. In 2012, China also enacted the exit-entry law. For the first time, the new law comprehensively addressed the issues of exit, entry, settlement, immigration, expulsion, naturalization, refugee status, and trafficking (Pieke et al., 2019). In 2016, China officially became the 165th member state of the International Organization for Migration. The Chinese government also set up CSC Scholarships to bring young talents to study in China.³

³ According to the Chinese Scholarship Council, scholarships are awarded by CSC to international students at 274 Chinese universities that are affiliated with CSC. CGTN’s data analysis points out that there has been an average yearly increase of 13.84% in foreign graduates in China between 2001 and 2018.

However, despite these efforts to attract more foreigners to migrate to China, the country was largely viewed as less accommodating to foreigners during this period. Indeed, under the new immigration law, China's visa policy has become stricter, and border control has tightened. While the state tried to encourage inflows of high-skilled labour, it also launched a set of rules and campaigns to manage, control, and reduce the population of "three illegalities" (illegal entry, employment, and stay), particularly targeting undocumented African migrants in the city of Guangzhou (Pieke et al., 2019).

White foreigners remained prominently visible during this period in China's media landscape. Nevertheless, the rise of digital media—mainly social media platforms—brought new dynamics to the representation of white people in China. For example, after several failed attempts to enter China's entertainment industry via TV shows, mixed-raced Chinese American Mike Sui became well-known on Weibo⁴ as a foreign blogger. By the late 2010s and the early 2020s, many foreigners had become famous on Chinese social media by publishing images, texts, and short videos about their daily life in China and their home countries.

Transnational migration to China nearly came to a halt during the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 and 2021. In March 2020, China implemented a near-complete ban on the entry of foreign nationals. As of early 2022, these border restrictions remain exceptionally stringent due to the Chinese government's adherence to a "zero-COVID" strategy, which prioritizes the prevention of imported COVID-19 cases. During this time period, a significant number of foreigners left China or were stranded outside of China. This also caused a shortage of foreign labour, with many Chinese companies struggling to adjust their business strategies and operations (Morgan & Zhu, 2022). During this period, China's nationalist sentiments surged amid a US-China trade war and the larger geopolitical tension between China and major Western countries. In Chinese media, news outlets extensively feature stories about misbehaving foreign migrants. One of the most telling examples is the widespread circulation of a comic on Chinese social media, in which foreigners in China who do not follow the quarantine rules, referred to as "foreign trash" (洋垃圾), are thrown into garbage bins by Chinese people in hazmat suits (Ma, 2022). Given the continuation of strict COVID-19 restrictions, China's tightening border control, and the public resentment toward foreigners, the number of foreigners living in China declined significantly.

China officially ended its zero-COVID-19 policy on 8 January 2023. Since then, China has been lifting its stringent COVID-19 border controls and attracting foreigners once more by relaxing visa application requirements and simplifying

⁴ Weibo, launched in 2009, is one of the most popular Chinese social media platforms.

visa application materials. A 14-day visa-free policy for German, French, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, Malaysian, Swiss, Irish, Hungarian, Austrian, Belgian, and Luxembourgish nationals was implemented in early 2024. In the first quarter of 2024, China saw over 13 million cross-border trips by foreigners, four times more than the previous year. Despite this surge, the total number remains below pre-pandemic levels, with foreign trips down 40% compared to 2019 (Z. Zhao, 2024). Lingering wariness of the previous Zero-COVID policy and increasing geopolitical tensions mean that it remains uncertain whether China will attract long-term migration to China in the coming years.

This dissertation aims to capture the evolving dynamics of whiteness within the specified timeframe by investigating three key areas: Chinese cinema, influencer culture, and fashion modelling. Empirically, white foreigners are prominently visible in these forms of media within China's visual culture, rendering them significant fields for analysis. Analytically, these three media types offer interconnected yet distinct perspectives on the perception and production of whiteness. The dissertation thus seeks to elucidate the multifaceted nature of whiteness in contemporary China by conducting a comparative analysis of these cases.

Whiteness in Chinese cinema

Since the reform and opening up, along with the industrialization and commercialization of Chinese cinema, a handful of Chinese films featuring white foreign characters have been produced. These films span various genres, from war history films (e.g. *Red River Valley*, 1999), to melodrama (e.g. *Kissing Russia*, 1994), and from action (e.g. *Wolf Warrior 2*, 2017) to science fiction (e.g. *Wandering Earth*, 2019), each with unique subject matters and aesthetics. Unlike Hollywood, which relies heavily on the global market, Chinese films are primarily consumed by domestic audiences (Leung & Lee, 2019, p. 199). Consequently, white foreign characters in these films are typically included to appeal to Chinese viewers. They do not hold the "subject position" (Hall, 1997) as they do in the West; instead, Chinese filmmakers and production teams shape their depictions to resonate with local Chinese audiences. As a result, these white foreign characters are often objectified and simplified, serving to highlight the subjectivities of the Chinese protagonists. As mentioned in the previous section, stereotyping in media maintains the symbolic order by defining in-group and out-group relations and articulating meanings of who "we" are. Chinese films featuring white foreigners are, therefore, a fruitful site for examining the meaning-making of whiteness in the Chinese context.

This dissertation thus begins with an exploration of cinematic stereotypes of white foreigners. I will closely read the Chinese dark comedy films *The Black Cannon Incident* (1985), *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001), and *Crazy Alien* (2019). The

three films are well-received dark comedies in China, emblematic of the Chinese popular perceptions of Self and white foreigners. The three selected films span distinct historical eras in post-socialist China. During the nearly 40 years between the three films' releases, significant historical events concerning China's relationship with major Western countries have occurred. These events include the 1989 Tian'anmen students' protest, the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2002, the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and the US-China trade war starting in the late 2010s. Through a comparative analysis of these portrayals of white foreigners in the three films, this dissertation contemplates how Chinese people's common perceptions of white Westerners are informed by China's evolving self-perception and, more generally, the larger changes in the world order, geopolitical dynamics, and the domestic political climate.

Whiteness in Chinese social media

The rise of digital social media and the popularisation of influencer culture since the beginning of the 2010s have enabled foreigners, the majority of whom can speak Mandarin, to publish audio-visual materials on Chinese video-sharing platforms such as Bilibili, Douyin, and Little Red Book. Unlike in Chinese cinema, where white foreign actors have little say in the roles they perform, these online influencers have considerably more autonomy to portray who they are and decide how they want to be seen in front of the Chinese audience.

However, this does not mean these white foreign influencers have full control over their representations and the freedom to publish any content they want. Like Chinese influencers on Chinese social media, foreign influencers who aim to remain visible and popular must create content that aligns with the Chinese state's ideological framework and complies with Chinese censorship regulations. Moreover, these influencers also need to meet the expectations of their Chinese audiences, primarily media-savvy young Chinese. Consequently, although the Chinese do not directly engage in stereotyping when producing white representations online, white foreign influencers often, in an effort to attract attention, portray themselves in ways that cater to the Chinese imagination of the ideal foreign minority in China. Understanding influencer culture as a continuation and evolution of traditional media such as cinema, this dissertation focuses its second case study on the self-representations of white foreigners under the gazes of Chinese online audiences. While the first case study on cinema provides insights into the Chinese perspective on white identity, this second case study highlights the active roles of both Chinese audiences and white foreigners in shaping the cultural meaning of white identity on social media platforms.

To conduct the analysis of these racialized online interactions, I have chosen

Bilibili as the primary site for investigation. Bilibili is one of the most popular social media platforms where foreigners post videos and engage with their young Chinese audiences. Established in 2009 as a video-sharing community, Bilibili has evolved from a niche platform for ACG (animation, comics, and games) content to a popular site offering various forms of entertainment. Like many other platforms, Bilibili enables influencers to monetize their online fame. Additionally, it features a *danmaku* interface, which allows users' comments to appear as streams of scrolling subtitles overlaid on the video (Ma, 2022). This technical feature provides a unique opportunity to observe and analyse how white identity is articulated and negotiated through the interactions between foreign influencers and their Chinese audience online.

Whiteness in Chinese fashion advertisement

Compared to cinema and online vlogs, fashion advertisements offer arguably the highest visibility for whiteness in China's media landscape. Fashion modelling was absent during Mao's era due to its conflict with Communist ideology. The concept of fashion modelling was (re)introduced to China in 1980 through the first fashion show in Beijing by Italian-French designer Pierre Cardin. From the 1980s to the 2000s, fashion modelling gained popularity in China, leading to significant expansion and professionalization of the industry (C. Lan, 2000).

Since the 1990s, white foreign models have carved out a niche market in China. Initially, foreign faces in Chinese advertisements were mostly foreign students and tourists visiting the country. In the early 2000s, following China's accession to the WTO, some Chinese entrepreneurs began establishing modelling agencies to bring in professional foreign models and market their looks to Chinese clients. Over the past decade, the number of white models and the Chinese modelling agencies specializing in managing them has grown significantly. In 2018, Alibaba estimated that around 10,000 international models moved to China for work (Alibaba, 2018). This figure partly reflects the market demand and the widespread aspiration and desire for whiteness.

At its core, fashion is not primarily driven by practicality. Instead, it is fuelled by aspiration, inspiration, and a sense of belonging. Fashion serves as a marker of class distinction, highlighting the divide between the affluent and the poor and those aspiring to different lifestyles. The symbolic nature of fashion is crucial in shaping the evolution and transformation of the fashion market, as the industry aims to offer products and styles that people find inspiring. The prevalence of white foreigners in Chinese advertisements, therefore, demonstrates that whiteness is perceived as a symbol of glamour and desirability and embodies a premium value, which makes the modelling industry a promising site to examine involvement with Chinese entrepreneurs and intermediaries in leveraging such a

premium and strategically profiting from the aesthetic value of white bodies.

Moreover, the state plays a slightly different role in regulating advertisements compared to its involvement in Chinese cinema and social media. Advertisements in China are overseen by the State Administration for Market Regulation (SAMR), which ensures they do not contain false information, infringe on intellectual property rights, or violate public morality (Huld, 2023). According to the Advertising Law of the People's Republic of China, advertisements are prohibited from "damaging the dignity or interests of the country"; however, the law primarily focuses on consumer protection and fair competition rather than strict ideological compliance. Although advertisements that address sensitive political issues or violate cultural norms may still be censored, the level of ideological control is less stringent than that applied to Chinese cinema and social media platforms.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that the Chinese state is more tolerant of the presence of white models in China's consumer culture. With the industry's growing size, the Chinese state has been increasingly keen to regulate it, as reflected in the stricter immigration policies for foreign models. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the border control of foreign models was relatively lenient. However, since 2012, when the Chinese authorities made a new Exit and Entry Administrative Law, foreign modelling in China has been recognized as formal work. Since then, foreign models who wish to work in China must apply for work permits and model visas (as a subtype of work Z-visa), and both require the applicants to submit various documents to the Chinese authorities. This requirement contributes to the industry's professionalization since it establishes a formal framework for employment, ensuring that models are recognized as legitimate workers. However, the demanding requirement for work permits and visas also creates a series of barriers to the models' entry to China and the Chinese players' access to white labourers. This was particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022, when the Chinese authorities enforced strict travel restrictions. Against such a backdrop, it is interesting to examine white foreign models' migration experiences and ask to what degree corporeal whiteness, as an aesthetic component of foreign models' physical appearance, provides them tangible benefits in the workplace in China.

Additionally, I will consider how their status as low-skill, undesirable migrants contributes to their precarious position as transnational labourers, hindering their opportunities for upward mobility in China.

Methodology

This thesis set out to employ a combination of textual analysis and ethnographic methods to explore the multiplicity of whiteness in China's cultural sector. Dur-

ing my proposal-writing period, I planned to conduct one year of ethnographic fieldwork in China. However, the global outbreak of the COVID-19 virus from the beginning of 2020 to late 2022 significantly impacted my research plan. From September 2020 to September 2021, I had to stay in my apartment in Amsterdam due to the restricted flights to China and lockdowns in both the Netherlands and China. During this period, I watched many Chinese films and online videos featuring foreigners in China. By closely reading these cultural objects' visuality, narratives, and subject matter, I discovered that they were rich cultural "texts" containing complex racial messages. Thus, during the lockdown in Amsterdam, I mostly stayed at home and wrote analyses of these cultural artefacts. In September 2021, I was finally able to book the tickets and travel to Shanghai, China, to conduct my ethnographic fieldwork. Due to the limited timespan of my Ph.D. contract, I shortened my fieldwork to seven months (September 2021–April 2022), during which I focused primarily on my last case of inquiry, namely, China's foreign modelling industry.

While the global outbreak of COVID-19 significantly disrupted my initial research plan, it also allowed me to explore the notion of whiteness from a more interdisciplinary approach. The adjustment of my research trajectory has resulted in my thesis travelling between the writing styles of cultural studies and anthropology. In Chapters 1 and 2, in which I reflect upon the meanings of whiteness imagined and negotiated in Chinese cinema and social media, I gave the method of textual analysis a more prominent place. Part of Chapter 2 also employs ethnographic methods, showcasing white foreign influencers' lived experiences of navigating the vlogging scene in China based on my fieldwork. The last two empirical chapters, which investigate the racial formation of whiteness in China's modelling industry, mainly employ ethnographic methods.

Analysing the images of white foreigners in Chinese media

Textual analysis is a crucial method for interpreting the content, structure, and meaning of given materials. According to Norman Fairclough, texts not only constitute but also produce, reproduce, and transform social structures, relations, and identities (1995, pp. 208–209). In this research context, the selected Chinese media portrayals of white foreigners can be seen as sensitive barometers of the meanings, social practices, and transformations of white identity in the Chinese context. Textual analysis, then, is employed as a crucial method for this dissertation to examine recent depictions of white foreigners in China. This method allowed me to explore Chinese popular perceptions of white people as well as white people's self-representations under the Chinese gaze.

In Lister's (2004) reflection on cultural studies as a method to analyse visual material, he suggests that many scholarly attempts to study images employ

“elaborate and systematic semiotic theories of codes based upon the paradigm of language” (p. 205). However, given the visual’s emphasis on the “plural, messy, contested, and even creative nature of our discourse” (p. 205), applying rigid frameworks for analysis risks missing the specificity of the medium. Given this perspective, I adopted a bottom-up, inductive approach to analysing the visual-textual material for this dissertation, which allowed for a more flexible and responsive analysis that can better account for the particularities of the selected media content. On the one hand, I looked for recurring patterns related to my research questions to capture an overview of how white identities are portrayed in Chinese media. This involved identifying common themes and motifs concerning white identity across different media texts. On the other hand, I paid particular attention to production elements such as narratives, camera angles, editing, and mise-en-scène. This detailed examination allowed me to closely read how white people are characterized and how they present themselves in front of the camera. By focusing on these elements, I sought to uncover the nuanced and often contested aspects of whiteness in China.

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in China

In addition to textual analysis, I employed ethnographic methods as the main approach to addressing my research questions. To gain firsthand insights and observations, I travelled to China and conducted fieldwork in Shanghai from September 2020 to April 2021. Located at the crucial crossroads of trading routes between Japan and the West, Shanghai stands as China’s economic and fashion hub. In 2010, the city’s then-mayor, Xu Kuangdi, ambitiously proclaimed Shanghai’s aspiration to become “the world’s sixth fashion centre, alongside London, Paris, New York, Milan, and Tokyo” (Beward, 2020, p. 5). Over the past decade, Shanghai has made significant progress toward this goal. The city’s fashion industry is notably diverse, featuring a blend of international luxury brands, local designers, fashion shows and fairs, and the manufacturing sector. Additionally, Shanghai is the most popular destination for foreigners migrating to China due to its numerous business opportunities, vibrant expatriate communities, high-quality infrastructure, and cosmopolitan atmosphere. According to a 2020 survey by the State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs in China, Shanghai, home to 215,000 foreign workers—23.7% of the national total—was named the favourite city of foreigners on the Chinese mainland for the eighth consecutive year (Science and Technology Commission of Shanghai Municipality, 2020).

The modelling industry in Shanghai is a relatively exclusive field, making it challenging for outsiders to gain insights into practices revolving around modelling as a profession and a business. I did not have a personal relationship with individuals in the modelling sector who could facilitate the introduction. Yet, I wanted to gain insightful knowledge about the field. Thus, I decided to conduct

my fieldwork in Shanghai by finding a “job” at a local modelling agency specializing in trading and managing foreign models.

To initiate my fieldwork, I made a list of model bookers in Shanghai and systematically reached out to them through email, phone calls, and WeChat. In my communication, I introduced myself and my research project, inviting them to meet up to discuss further potential collaboration. Most of them disregarded my messages as soon as they realized I was not of immediate commercial interest. However, one booker patiently asked me more questions. Later, he introduced me to his boss, who was the owner of Fame, one of the oldest modelling agencies in Shanghai. The owner of Fame and I reached an agreement: While I was allowed to conduct my fieldwork in his company, I would offer assistance to their business. The assistance initially took the form of small tasks such as English-Chinese translation and document organization. It later expanded to assisting foreign models at castings, photoshoots, and fashion shows.

Throughout my seven-month stay in Shanghai, I dedicated approximately four days a week to Fame to learn about their business operations and contribute my voluntary labour. Initially, I spent most of the time in the office learning about the company. I usually sat next to the Chinese model bookers in the office. I chatted with them about their experiences and perceptions of the modelling industry in China when they were less busy with work. I also attended the company’s weekly staff meeting, where my Chinese participants discussed their performances at work and commercial strategies to sell models’ looks to Chinese clients. After about a month and a half, I had established a sense of trust and familiarity with them. I then sought additional tasks that would allow me to work closely with the foreign models. The bookers then introduced me to the foreign models they worked with, assigning me to follow them for castings and jobs.

In most of these instances, I played the role of Fame’s booker in front of the Chinese clients. In other words, I undertook the responsibilities of a booker, ensuring that models arrived on time, put on the right clothes, posed according to the Chinese clients’ preferences, and conveyed the impression that Fame was a highly professional agency. Throughout this process, I closely observed the interactions between foreign models and clients, taking note of their reactions to various situations. Spending long hours with foreign models during their work also allowed me to develop stronger connections with them. As my fieldwork progressed, particularly in the last two months of my research, I found myself frequently invited by foreign models to their parties and gatherings outside of work. This provided me the opportunity to deepen my understanding of their experiences and perceptions beyond the work setting.

The biggest challenge I encountered during my fieldwork in the modelling industry

was establishing and securing people's participation. Fashion modelling is a highly transient field. People come and go quickly. When I accompanied models to castings, photoshoots, and fashion shows, I was given opportunities to meet numerous Chinese clients, such as those working for production teams, casting companies, and brands. I had hoped to recruit them to participate in my research. But it turned out to be a difficult process. I tried a few times to introduce myself as a researcher affiliated with the models to the clients, but most clients were reluctant to participate. They were, on the one hand, busy with their own work and life and saw no interest in my research. On the other hand, they were very cautious with people whom they did not know, given the industry's prevalent conflicts of interest.

In the case of foreign models, many were willing to participate. However, their unpredictable and at times demanding timetables often posed a hurdle. Models usually would only find out their work schedule for the next day on the night before. Those who got many jobs rarely had days off. When they did, they often would rather stay in to rest. Arranging meetings was logistically challenging. Much time could pass between them saying yes to my invitation and meeting to talk. I had to give up on some model participants to whom I sent many messages but got no replies, and I had to respect the space and time of those who cancelled the meetings several times.

Much of the empirical material gathered for this project comes via participant observation from attending meetings, castings, photo shootings, and fashion shows. Over the course of my time in Shanghai, I also navigated public and private spaces relevant to foreign models in the city, including, for example, foreign models' homes, as well as cafés, restaurants, and nightclubs they frequently visited, which provided me with a comprehensive perspective of foreign models' life in Shanghai.

The participant observation I conducted among foreigners and Chinese in Shanghai's modelling industry enabled me to talk to 71 individuals. Of these, 31 were Chinese who worked in the modelling and fashion industry. Their jobs ranged from model booker, producer, photographer, stylist, fashion editor, and artistic director to brand owner. Of these participants, 18 were female and 13 were male. The remaining 40 were models who had moved to China to work. These models came from various countries, including Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Serbia, Hungary, Montenegro, Slovakia, France, and Brazil. Of these participants, 19 were male and 21 were female.

In addition to exploring the modelling industry, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with three Western male influencers. Recruiting Western male influencers in China proved to be challenging due to my lack of personal connections

within the group. During my fieldwork, I reached out to them via social media, introducing myself and my research project. However, the response rate to my inquiries was low. Fortunately, three male influencers, who came from Germany, the UK, and the US, did respond and agreed to participate in my research. However, due to their busy schedule, I was given limited time for interviews. I was able to conduct informal, hang-out-type interviews with one participant for two afternoons in the city of Guangzhou, where he lived and worked. Another participant resided in Shanghai, and I was able to chat with him in person for one-and-a-half hours in a café in his neighbourhood in Shanghai. The other participant lived in Beijing and frequently travelled between different Chinese cities. I thus conducted a 30-minute interview with him via voice call on WeChat.

Due to privacy concerns, I only taped 23 interviews in total and transcribed them in my free time during the fieldwork. For the rest of the formal and informal interviews, I employed a two-step process. First, I took handwritten notes during each interview. Second, I transcribed the information onto my laptop within 24 hours of each interview. The data analysis process involved thoroughly reviewing the field notes to identify recurring themes. Pseudonyms were used to safeguard the confidentiality and privacy of my participants in all these instances.

Positionality

Qualitative research relies directly on the researcher and the research process since it is always a relational act in which many aspects of the personhood of the researcher and the participant can affect the process. This is of even greater importance when researching race since the position of my race, ethnicity, gender, and class can create unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched, and, at the same time, shape my perspective of analysis on my research topic. This section thus further contextualizes my research by reflecting my positionality in this research.

I am a native Chinese-looking person raised in mainland China. After I finished my bachelor's degree in Beijing, I moved to the Netherlands to further pursue my academic and professional career. By the time I started my fieldwork, I had lived in the Netherlands for six years. In the Netherlands, I am a Chinese migrant and a foreigner. In China, I am a distant local. In developing my research project, I knew I could strategically use this in-between position to gain access and optimize my interactions with both Chinese and non-Chinese participants in my field in many social settings. However, I was also aware that my Chinese ethnicity might hinder my interactions with some white foreigners, as I might not be perceived as part of their group.

My in-betweenness stood out as the fascinating aspect that benefited my re-

search. Despite the fact that I had to spend some time and effort to readjust myself to the Chinese norms and values at the initial stage of my fieldwork research, my Chinese background allowed me to discern the nuances of the Chinese participants' languages, actions, and emotions. Moreover, my Chinese participants often took me as one of "them" quite naturally when they expressed their opinions on foreigners. In most scenarios, my Chinese participants did not shy away from talking about foreigners negatively in front of me, which offered me a better opportunity to learn the complexity of the Chinese perceptions of foreigners in China. Meanwhile, foreign participants often turned to me for help because of my Chinese language skills and cultural knowledge. In doing so, many foreign participants developed a sense of reliance on me to navigate Chinese society.

While taking advantage of my Chinese heritage, my six years of living and working experience in Europe also gave me an advantage in the field. On the one hand, my Chinese participants often relied on me to communicate with foreigners when they felt uncomfortable talking in English. This reliance helped me get a better opportunity to learn what was happening in the field. On the other hand, my lived experience in and knowledge of Europe helped me enormously in gaining the trust and affection of my foreign participants. From politics and history to food and lifestyle, I was among the few Chinese people who knew more about Europe. Some of my participants described me as "a bit European" or "not so Chinese". They found it comfortable and easy to communicate with me. In many cases, they also did not feel too reserved to tell me how they perceived China and the Chinese negatively.

Nevertheless, as I had anticipated, my Chinese ethnicity did sometimes limit my ability to gain more comprehensive access to white foreigners in China, particularly among Western male influencers. After interviewing the three Western male influencers, I learned that numerous Chinese followers, especially female followers, frequently send messages to these popular influencers. As a Chinese woman, many of them may have perceived my messages as just another follower trying to connect with them. I expect they would have been more open to being responsive to me if I had been a foreign, Western researcher.

Moreover, my in-betweenness also put me in a confrontational position when there were conflicts of interest between the Chinese and foreigners. I shall give a brief example here. When I exited my field in Shanghai, the city went into a total lockdown due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Having been quarantined at a small apartment for more than three weeks, one of my foreign model participants also intended to leave despite his unfinished contract: he was emotionally devastated due to the loneliness and boredom. Knowing that I was planning to leave China, he kept calling and messaging me to ask for tips for leaving a lockdown city full of travel restrictions. His Chinese boss, who was also

my research participant, asked me to calm him down and convince him to stay in Shanghai. I knew the Chinese boss had invested enormous amounts of time and money in this model. Also, I could see the communication between the Chinese boss and the model's big boss in Europe—both of their attitudes towards the model's insistence on leaving Shanghai were negative. I was concerned that if my model participant returned to his home country, then he might face some career-related consequences, of which he might not be aware at the time. I was then caught in the middle. During the lockdown in Shanghai, I tried to help this model participant arrange groceries and other daily needs as much as I could, voluntarily. However, I was evasive about my plan to leave. After I successfully left Shanghai, my model participant was mad at me. To express his disappointment, he sent me aggressive messages such as “You are just like other Chinese, so sneaky.” I did not know how to respond. I was shocked by his racially charged comment about me. I felt it was unfair, especially considering I had spent much time and effort to make him feel better. Meanwhile, I also felt guilty: had he not been my research participant—and I not afraid to jeopardize my relationship with my Chinese boss—I would have been honest with him and helped him to leave Shanghai. As I contemplate this emotionally and ethically charged incident, I find it fascinating that the outburst of “you sneaky Chinese” does not emerge in isolation but in a range of social actors and practices: the cultural aspirations of Chinese consumers toward Western Europe, the Chinese and French businessmen's incentive to profiteer in the capitalist economy, the Chinese state's hegemonic presence dominating daily life in China during the COVID-19 pandemic, and my own position, a PhD student who earned a living from a European grant to write about whiteness. Terms like “white privilege” seem inadequate to fully address the complexities of this racialized remark about Chineseness made by a white European. I hope the following empirical chapters will further explore and unpack these issues.

Chapter outline

This thesis comprises four empirical chapters. Chapter 1, “The Cultural Politics of Race in Chinese Cinema: Nationalism and the Changing Representation of Whiteness”, begins with an analysis of postsocialist Chinese films featuring white foreign characters. Employing textual analysis, it examines the representation of white identity in *The Black Cannon Incident* (1985, dir. Huang Jianxin), *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001, dir. Feng Xiaogang), and *Crazy Alien* (2019, dir. Ning Hao). These films, all well-received Chinese post-socialist dark comedies, depict the encounters and interactions of ordinary Chinese people with Euro-Americans. Through comparative analysis, this chapter reveals how portrayals of Euro-Americans articulate Chinese identities and nationalist sentiments and how the meanings ascribed to white identity evolve amidst the shifting power dynamics between China and the West. Additionally, this chapter offers a historical overview of

whiteness in reform-era China, setting the stage for the dissertation's exploration of more recent racial dynamics in Chinese social media and the fashion modelling industry in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

Chapter 2, "Performing Ideal Foreigners: Western Male Influencers' Self-Representations on Chinese Social Media during the COVID-19 Pandemic", examines how white male identity is debated on Chinese social media. Focusing on the self-portrayals of white Western Euro-American men and the reactions of young Chinese audiences on the video-sharing platform Bilibili, this chapter utilizes textual analysis and ethnography to explore how white Western male influencers attempted to sustain their positive images among Chinese netizens. The research was carried out in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when rising Chinese nationalism often led to mockery and disdain of the West and foreign migrants in China. The chapter further reveals that the notion of white superiority is fragmented on the Chinese screen. Influenced by the broader geopolitical dynamics of the pandemic, white identity emerges as a racial and gender category that simultaneously attracts admiration and suspicion from young Chinese audiences.

Chapters 3 and 4 delve into white formation in China's modelling industry. Moving away from the close reading of white representation, these chapters illuminate how white foreigners are deployed and valorized in China's racialized modelling market. Chapter 3, "Trading Beauty, Making Race: Whiteness in China's Fashion Modelling Industry", focuses on the practices of Chinese modelling agencies that specialize in the acquisition of foreign models. I analyse how race and whiteness become significant in the processes of selecting foreign models, facilitating their migration to China, and marketing their looks to local clients. My ethnography shows that Chinese modelling agencies leverage prevalent racial and gender norms to market white models as glamorous, high-end, and exclusive Western Europeans. Simultaneously, these agencies actively seek out Eastern European models to reduce labour costs; when the camera is off, the portrait of the ideal white model is transformed to one of an inexpensive, resilient, and hardworking labour migrants. From the perspective of cultural production, this chapter further reveals that whiteness in China is multi-layered and contested.

Chapter 4, "Between Privilege and Precarity: Performing Racialized Aesthetic Labour in China's modelling Industry", delves deeper into the precarity and instability of white privilege in China's fashion modelling sector by examining the lived experiences of foreign models working in the country. Drawing on participant observation and interviews with foreign models in Shanghai, I investigate how China's thriving fashion industry attracts these models and how the intersection of race and labour shapes their positions in China. This chapter demonstrates that China's desire for white bodies offers a few foreign models opportunities

for upward mobility. However, many face significant challenges due to an increasingly competitive market, restrictive migration policies, and language and cultural barriers. Consequently, while the advantages of white looks can provide immediate benefits, they are often short-lived, leaving many models vulnerable to competition, exploitation, and marginalization.

By analysing white foreigners under the multiple Chinese gazes of these different media forms, this dissertation uncovers the multiplicity of meanings and racialized social relations enacted by white identities in contemporary China. I show that the open-ended dynamics of racial formation in China not only pluralizes meanings but also stratifies social positionalities of whiteness. While white privilege exists in contemporary China, it is continually subject to contestation and adaptation.

Chapter 1

The Cultural Politics of Race in Chinese Cinema: Nationalism and the Changing Representation of Whiteness⁵

⁵ Part of this chapter is based on my published journal article, “The cultural politics of race in Chinese cinema: Nationalism and the changing representation of whiteness in *Big Shot's Funeral* and *Crazy Alien*”, as listed in the publication overview.

White superiority in cinematic representation has garnered a great deal of scholarly attention in the West. Departing from Middle Age European paintings to the present, Dyer (1997) analyses how cinema continues to work as one of the latest representational media that reinforces whiteness as a pervasive yet invisible cultural construct in the West. Shome (1996, 2000) explores the rhetorical strategies through which white characters are presented and positioned as cultural norms in American mainstream cinema. To destabilize what she terms “racial regime of looking”, Seshadri-Crooks (2000) examines films that denaturalize whiteness and encourage the audience to look differently. By studying how a series of white characters in Euro-American cinema reiterate white privilege, Foster (2003) points out cinema’s indispensable role in upkeeping and performing whiteness as a universal norm. These inquiries have effectively revealed the impactful role that cinematic texts play in formulating, perpetuating, and contesting white superiority in the Euro-American context. However, since they rarely lift their gaze beyond a Western horizon, their insights often revolve around whiteness operating as a dominant cultural norm in the West, which has limited analytical power to explain how it travels and transforms in cinema outside the West.

Whiteness in cinema has never been exclusively a Euro-American affair. Gehl-wat’s (2010) research on the evolving images of white women in Indian cinema shows whiteness has been, in tandem with Bollywood’s shifting cultural politics, coded as both the racial Other and an object of desire. Blizzard (2022) looks into the ubiquitous display of white characters in the Golden Age of Mexican cinema between the 1930s and 1950s and argues that whiteness was presented as a form of indigeneity to reconcile Mexico’s celebration of indigeneity and *mestizaje* and the colonized ideas of beauty and desire in that particular historical period. Both studies show the continuity of white superiority in a transnational context. However, far from merely imitating Euro-American cinema, whiteness in non-Western cinema is often differently articulated, appropriated, and challenged based on the local contexts.

Since the reform and opening up, a handful of Chinese films featuring white foreign characters have been produced. These films range from genres such as war/history (e.g. *Red River Valley*, 1999), melodrama (e.g. *Kissing Russia*, 1994) and action (e.g. *Wolf Warrior 2*, 2017), to Sci-Fi (e.g. *Wandering Earth*, 2019). The themes of these films and the white casts’ roles vary. Nevertheless, the portrayals of white foreigners in these films share two features. First, as discussed in the introduction of this dissertation, China has never been fully colonized and has no institutionalized structure to normalize white dominance. Due to the transformation of whiteness into a minority identity, the cinematic portrayals of white Westerners are subject to the Chinese gazes and often built upon the cultural imaginaries of the Chinese as the “normal” race. Second, China’s cultural sector, including the

film industry, has been strictly regulated by the state through a set of policies. Even though Chinese cinema has gone through a process of industrialization and commercialization in the reform era, filmmaking in mainland China has never wholly followed the logic of capitalism since the Chinese government is eager to utilize films to propagate the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (Fung, 2016). Consequently, the images of white characters in Chinese films often do not go against—and often complement—the Chinese state’s ideological work. This chapter will delve into cinematic representations of whiteness, focusing on the portrayal of Euro-Americans in Chinese post-socialist cinema. I will closely look at the films *The Black Cannon Incident* (1985, dir. Huang Jianxin), *Big Shot’s Funeral* (2001, dir. Feng Xiaogang), and *Crazy Alien* (2019, dir. Ning Hao). These are three well-received Chinese dark comedy films with Euro-American characters in leading roles. By conducting a comparative analysis of the three films, this chapter aims to show how the portrayals of Euro-Americans are employed to articulate Chinese identities and nationalist sentiments, and how whiteness evolves within the context of shifting Chinese nationalist sentiments. In doing so, I also provide a historical backdrop of whiteness in reform China, before exploring racial dynamics in Chinese social media and the fashion modelling industry in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

Articulating Chinese nationalism through the images of foreigners

Many scholars believe both nationalism and racism emerged in the same context of “internal European political and economic reorganization and external European expansion” (Demel & Kowner, 2015, p. 12). For instance, in Foucault’s (1976/2003) discussion of race, he notes that modern race since the 19th century has become a “technology of power” or a “mechanism” for the state to use to manage and control the population and to exercise its sovereign power (p. 258). For Balibar, racism is multifaceted and continually evolving. However, if we are to say there is a “broad structure of racism” (Balibar, 1991, p. 49), which is, firstly, rooted in a network of fantasies and then manifested through discourses and behaviours, then racism maintains an essential link with nationalism, since nationalism often fabricates and organizes a “fictitious ethnicity” (p. 49). However, he cautions against simplifying this connection, stating that this relationship is neither merely a causal link nor a superficial similarity. Rather, the connection between nationalism and racism for him is a matter of “historical articulation” (p. 50). In other words, how racism lends itself to the articulations and manifestations of nationalism, and vice versa, are contextually dependent.

The current analyses of racism and nationalism often draw on instances from European histories, such as European colonialism and fascism. However, the entanglement of racism and nationalism can also be observed in modern Chinese history. In pre-modern China, the Han people, the dominant ethnic group, primarily used the distinction between human and non-human to exclude and differen-

tiate the outsiders. Cultural imaginations such as demonization and animalization were actively mobilized to hierarchize the superior, inferior, and unfamiliar (Chen, 2010). At the time, white was also a Chinese identity since it was associated with the elite class and was considered refined, civilized, and beautiful. Nevertheless, the rise of exclusionary European racial whiteness has forced the Chinese into a yellow identity (Bonnett, 2000; Wyatt, 2012). European racial taxonomies in China first appeared in Qing medical and geographic scholars' scripts and publications around the mid-19th century (Barth, 2015). From the late 19th century, China encountered struggles against both Japanese and Western imperialist powers. To respond to these challenges, nationalism and racial constructions worked hand in hand to lead to a political distinction between Self and Other. Scholars, reformers, and revolutionaries appropriated the concept of race to fit their nationalist agendas (S. Zhao, 2004). For instance, reformist thinker Youwei (1859–1927) used the terms “human breed”/“human race” (人种), as well as “breed” and “race” (种族) to differentiate Westerners, Chinese, and Africans based on their physical attributes (1925/2019). The Chinese nationalist leader of the Republic of China (1912–1949), Sun Yat-Sen, used the term “yellow race”—as opposed to white and black—to articulate the modern Chinese identity in his *Three Principles of the People* (Sun, 1927). In the Mao Era (1950s–1970s), the state initiated an anti-imperialist agenda by building national friendships with developing countries and staged racism as a purely Western phenomenon (S. Lan, 2017). While the previous Chinese reformers and scholars outspokenly placed whiteness and yellowness above blackness in the previous era, the Chinese state in this era often differentiated the Chinese identity from whiteness through being non-racist and egalitarian.

Since the 1980s, in response to capitalist globalization, the Chinese state has been forced to switch from strict communism to more flexible political forms. Suisheng Zhao (2004) coins “state-led pragmatic nationalism” to describe Chinese nationalism in this period. As an ideological means to distinguish Self and Other, racial thinking has been blended into the articulations of Chineseness in an increasingly complex way. This is particularly evident in the images of foreigners in Chinese media. For instance, in analysing the Chinese advertisements of the 1990s, Johansson (1999) observes that while Chinese women tend to be portrayed in childish terms, white women are often depicted as sexually attractive and confident. These visual depictions imply a fetishization of the white female body with its pleasure and power, showing “the Chinese aspirations for becoming a modern, strong, rich, and potent country” (p. 387).

Since acceding to the WTO in 2001, China has made significant economic development. Its rise as a global superpower has been mediating the cultural politics of race. By examining the prevalent Chinese advertisements produced in the early

2000s, Li observes that such advertisements sold nationalism and transnationalism simultaneously to Chinese consumers. While employing Western bodies to promote Chinese products is an aesthetic choice, such a choice aims to assert “a larger share” of Chinese products in the global capital market (Li, 2008, p. 1157). In light of an increasing number of foreigners appearing on Chinese TV programs, Gorfinkel and Chubb (2013) analysed the televised Chinese language competitions for foreigners. Their analysis shows that these foreigners often wear traditional Chinese costumes, recite Chinese poetry, write Chinese calligraphy, and sing Chinese pop songs. The mixture of their foreignness and stereotypical Chineseness on Chinese TV works to foster the imagination of China being a proud, confident, and cosmopolitan country. Ever since the release of *Beijingers in New York* (1993), an increased number of Chinese TV dramas featuring foreign casts have been made. Song (2013) examines the representations of romance between foreigners and the Chinese in the melodramas *A Modern Family* (2002) and *My Natasha* (2012). The author shows that both dramas work to articulate “an officially sanctioned discourse of taking pride in being Chinese in transnational relations” (Song, 2013, p. 114). However, while the earlier drama *A Modern Family* implies a gendered and sexualized desire to embrace the foreign, *My Natasha* shows a desire to conquer the foreign. This changing attitude towards foreigners in Chinese TV shows is emblematic of China’s shifting self-perception of its role on the world stage.

Along with the enunciation of Xi Jinping’s political meta-discourse of the “Chinese dream”, the Chinese state has been using various types of resources to imagine and realize China’s great power status, dignity, and respect after a perceived century of humiliation (Peters, 2019). Shifting away from the previous perception that China needed to catch up with the West, many Chinese people have started to view Westerners not as the superior racial Other but as the parasitic beneficiaries of China’s economic development (Preferential Treatment, 2020). Meanwhile, the cultural representations of Africans in China and Sino-African relations increasingly position China as an example of modernity for Africans. In this context, China and the Chinese seem to have replaced whiteness and Western civilization (Castillo, 2021).

This chapter analyses the intersection of whiteness and Chinese nationalism articulated in *The Black Cannon Incident* (1986), *Big Shot’s Funeral* (2001), and *Crazy Alien* (2019). Several events reshaped the Sino-West relationship during the nearly 30 years between the three films’ releases. These included the 1989 Tian’anmen Square student protests, the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and the US-China trade war starting in the mid-2010s. In tandem with these larger changes, Chinese cinema has undergone a process of industrialization and commercialization. Whereas *The Black Cannon Incident* was produced by a Chinese

state-owned film studio, both *Big Shot's Funeral* and *Crazy Alien* were produced by private enterprises aiming for box-office popularity.⁶ A comparative analysis of the three films thus provides a historical perspective, shedding light on how the configuration of whiteness in these films is informed by larger shifts in economic and political dynamics and China's evolving self-perception.

The racial stereotypes of Westerners in Chinese dark comedy films

Generally, dark comedy begins with the same assumption as the literature of existentialism: the world is absurd (Pratt, 1993, p. xxi). Regarding narrative, dark comedy is often articulated through an anti-novelistic structure, persuading viewers to identify with its anti-heroic characters (H. Liu, 2018, p. 159). These features are evident in the three selected films: the worlds presented in the three films are illogical and absurd. The Chinese protagonists are established as economically and socially powerless Chinese men in contemporary Chinese society. Downplaying logical order, the characters' intentions, actions, as well as their consequences are often dislocated. Meanwhile, each film remains a dark comedy with "Chinese characteristics", in the sense that it embodies the unique sociodynamic in China at that time. In 1985, China was in the midst of its initial stage of transformation from a socialist to a market economy. With relatively lenient ideological control, *The Black Cannon Incident* serves as a poignant social critique of the inefficiencies inherent in the socialist system in China. Conversely, *Big Shot's Funeral* and *Crazy Alien* maintain a subtle balance between the Chinese state-imposed nationalist ideology, social critique, and commercial imperative (Liu H. 2018, p. 161). On the one hand, they do not shy away from revealing the underbelly of contemporary China's rapid social transformation. In doing so, they hold a cynical—if not critical—stance towards China's socioeconomic reform since the 1980s and its various social consequences. On the other hand, these critical elements tend to be quickly undermined by the film's excessive use of commercial cultural references and rhetorical elements such as irony and exaggeration, employed to conform with China's top-down state-led ideology and the capitalist film market (Fung, 2016).

Like in other Chinese films and TV dramas, the depictions of the Western characters in the three films are rather one-dimensional and stereotyped to articulate various Chinese characters' "subject positions" (Hall, 1997, p. 8). However, the three films differ from main melody films,⁷ especially those depicting China's

⁶ *The Black Cannon Incident* was produced by the Chinese state-owned Xi'an Film Studio. *Big Shot's Funeral* was co-produced by Columbia Pictures (the US), Huayi Brothers (China), and Taihe Media (China). *Crazy Alien* was produced by the Chinese private firm Huanxi Media.

⁷ "Main melody films" are propaganda movies that honour the Chinese nation, the Party, and the army. Since the turn of the 21st century, they have gradually become one of the dominant genres in Chinese cinema.

revolutionary history, in which the images of Chinese and Westerners often immediately run into the binary of moral heroes and foreign devils. None of the three films straightforwardly demonize whiteness while glorifying Chineseness. Instead, the images of whiteness in all three films are mediated by the interplay between pride and cynicism toward Chineseness. Thus, the three films offer a unique meeting ground to attend to the complexity of racial identities imagined in China's ideologically sanctioned media landscape.

Much research on the stereotypical treatments of racial minorities in cinema has focused on the social plausibility and mimetic accuracy of such treatment. It is crucial to highlight false representations that harm already marginalized groups. However, such a "corrective approach", as Shohat and Stam (2004) call it, runs the risk of essentializing race since it assumes a "self-evident" racial category based on which false representations can be easily discerned (p. 178). To avoid the trap of essentializing racial identities, they propose that we do not solely focus on the "mimetic adequacy and the sociological or historical truth" (Shohat & Stam, 2004, p. 214). Instead, we should also reflect on how different aspects of a film, such as its "image, sound, discourse, and perspective interplay with each other and formulate a personalized, authorial, and often conflicting voice regarding a given racial identity" (Shohat & Stam, 2004, p. 214). In response to their call, this chapter moves away from criticizing how foreign characters are inaccurately depicted. Instead, I focus on how these characters are employed to ascribe multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings to Chineseness and whiteness, and how Chinese nationalist sentiments are embedded in these meanings.

The Black Cannon Incident (1985)

Following Mao's death in 1976, China transitioned away from a totalitarian political system. In 1978, the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) was held, signalling China's move to open a market economy and a more open engagement with the outside world. While during most of the Mao period, no films could take place outside the parameters of Mao's ideological doctrine, in the 1980s, the Chinese could enjoy some degree of autonomy in their filmmaking for the first time in decades. In such a relatively tolerant political environment, a handful of young Chinese filmmakers experimented with cinematic possibilities and tested "the boundaries of the loosening of ideological control" (McGrath, 2005, p.95). Meanwhile, despite the relative cultural freedom, most films were still created within the socialist studio system during that period: filmmakers worked as salaried employees of the state, with their creative pursuits driven less by the quest for box-office earnings (McGrath, 2008, p. 3).

Chinese filmmaker Huang Jianxin's *The Black Cannon Incident* (1985) reflects these unique sociopolitical conditions. The film tells the story of a Chinese

state-owned company and a German engineer working together to install a machine called WD. The company has bought the WD machine from a German company and thus invite their engineer Hans Schmidt (*Gerhard Olschewski*) to come to China to help with assembling the machine. The Chinese company's engineer, Zhao Shuxin (Zifeng Liu), is appointed by the company leaders—the Chinese Communist Party representatives—to host and help Hans since Zhao has taught himself German. The cooperation between Zhao and Hans is smooth, bringing about an unlikely friendship between the two. However, from the perspective of the Party representatives, Zhao and Hans's relationship is not that simple. One day, Zhao goes to the post office to send a mysterious telegram. A suspicious postal clerk sees him and reports the case. From that moment, the Party representatives suspect Zhao and Hans are conspiring to smuggle Chinese antiques, and they remove Zhao from his role as translator and replace him with another Chinese-German translator, who is a tour guide. After an in-depth investigation, it turns out that both Hans and Zhao are innocent. The mysterious telegram is only Zhao asking his Chinese chess-playing friend to return his "black cannon" chess piece. Meanwhile, the new translator's inaccurate translation of what Hans says leads to an installation mistake. The German machine breaks down, and it almost causes the Chinese company to lose US\$ 1 million. The Party's lingering distrust of Zhao almost cripples this national modernization project.

Since its release, the film has captured academic and popular attention and was widely regarded as a poignant critique of the inefficiency of the socialist bureaucracy during the early stages of China's reform era. The film's satire of the company leaders, who are members of the Chinese Communist Party, is often read as a pro-reform Chinese intellectual disillusionment with the Chinese government and China's communist system (Pickowicz, 1994; Berry & Farquhar, 1994). The mockeries of the company leadership manifest in various ways in the film. One of the most telling examples is the scene where Chinese company representatives, all members of the Communist Party, gather to discuss how to handle Zhao and German engineer Hans's suspicious relationship. This scene is repeated twice, showing the party members dressed in white shirts, seated rigidly in a white meeting room, and engaging in lengthy discussions using jargon reminiscent of Mao's era. The meeting room is entirely white and meticulously arranged with precise symmetry; an absurdly massive black clock positioned prominently above the conference table further accentuates the stifling formality. According to film scholar McGrath (2008), this visual style provides a stark contrast to early socialist-realist films, mocking the seriousness of the socialist leadership by exposing their actions as mere window-dressing (p. 13). In McGrath's (2008) own words, the company leaders' counter-espionage effort "is highlighted as a performative operation rather than a descriptive one: the dangerous spy is generated by the performance of the ideological ritual instead of entering the social space as a presence from out there

to be dealt with through ideological opposition” (p. 12).

The depiction of German engineer Hans is generally in line with this cynical attitude towards the Chinese authorities. Hans’s first scene in the film features him dressed in a white suit and arriving at the airport in China. Upon spotting Hans, the company leaders promptly rise from the couch to greet him warmly. Once they all sit on the couch, they attentively listen to Hans and lean in to hear his thoughts. Hans happily tells them he wants to see his old friend Zhao. The company leaders, who have already suspected the relationship between Zhao and Hans, glance at each other and attempt to conceal the scepticism behind their forced smiles. By contrast, Hans looks entirely oblivious to the company leaders’ unease. Through this scene, the company leaders are revealed as paranoid and irrational. Meanwhile, Hans is staged as an innocent and benign foreigner who simply wants to maintain a friendship with an ordinary Chinese person. Such a depiction can be read as a mockery of the Chinese authority’s ambivalent attitude towards Western foreigners, as pointed out by Brady’s research on the Chinese state’s approach to foreign experts in the 1980s. While they view foreigners with suspicion and as potential threats to China, they also want to leverage their skills and influence to “help China establish a prominent position on the world stage” (Brady, 2003, p. 3).

The film’s depiction of the friendship between Hans and the Chinese protagonist Zhao further elaborates on the positive portrayal of white Westerners. In the film, Zhao is depicted as a middle-aged, lonely Chinese intellectual whose individual value is not appreciated by Chinese society. Zhao holds a university degree in engineering from Tsinghua University and speaks excellent German. He is responsible at work and kind to the people around him. However, these qualities do not give him a sense of belonging in his party-led company. He is clumsy at small talk and uninterested in his leaders’ ideological work. Having worked in the company for years, he is still a technician, while his contemporaries have already become part of the leadership. Corresponding to his honest yet somewhat timid personality, Zhao also has an expressionless face and walks with his head down, making his already thin body even tinier.

The initial arrival of Hans seems to bring Zhao some sense of value and joy. Before Zhao’s first meeting with Hans, the Party representatives borrow a decent suit for Zhao since they think Zhao’s clothes are too shabby to wear in front of this always well-dressed European white man. However, Zhao does not seem aware of the Party representatives’ intentions. When Hans meets Zhao, he compliments Zhao’s beautiful suit. However, Zhao replies shyly, “This is not mine. The company lent it to me.” The Chinese secretary, who knows that the Party representatives would not want Hans to know the story behind Zhao’s clothes, shuts Zhao up by telling him that Zhao “often does not know what he talks about.”

Yet, having already been wary of the Party representatives' duplicity, Hans loves Zhao's honesty and comments that Zhao "is the real person from 'the Orient!'" Hans's fondness for Zhao, this somewhat socially awkward but sincere and diligent Chinese man, leads their work relations into a period of friendship. During Hans's stay in China, he often goes to Western restaurants with Zhao and visits Zhao's home to drink Chinese wine. Zhao's excellent German language skills and passion for engineering impress Hans. They both seem able to let their guards down when they hang out.

Thus far, the film seems to ascribe all the desirable qualities to Western white identity. Hans is made to symbolize liberalism, openness, and social progress—the ideas that open-minded Chinese intellectuals sought to embrace when China opened its doors to the outside world in the 1980s. However, what is interesting about *The Black Cannon Incident* is that the film is unsatisfied with such a simplistic depiction of white Westerners. This becomes evident as the plot develops: when Hans and Zhao align and grow closer, their conflicts also begin to unfold.

This is exemplified in a scene where Hans enjoys drinks and peanuts at Zhao's home. As Hans reaches out to grab the peanuts with his hands, Zhao gently slaps Hans's hands and offers him a pair of chopsticks instead. As Zhao turns away, the camera quickly shifts to Hans, who awkwardly struggles to use the chopsticks, failing to pick up a peanut. Frustrated, he eventually discards the chopsticks and grabs a handful of peanuts to throw into his mouth.

Coupled with Hans's clumsiness, the film also illustrates Hans's sense of superiority in front of Zhao. In a scene where Hans and Zhao dine and chat at a Western restaurant, Zhao points out a calculation error made by Hans's German company and suggests they compensate for any resulting losses that could jeopardize the machine installation. Hans reacts defensively, feeling insulted by the suggestion. He asserts, "We (the German company) are the best engineers and designers in the world," refusing to entertain the possibility of an error. As Hans's voice grows louder, Zhao's face reddens in frustration. After a tense silence, Zhao erupts, angrily labelling Hans as "an idiotic pig". The tension between them lingers until Hans eventually re-evaluates his calculations and discovers his mistake. Realizing his arrogance, Hans approaches Zhao, apologizing and asking for forgiveness as he embraces him.

In addition, when Chinese leaders halt Zhao's collaboration with Hans following a questionable telegram, Hans empathizes with Zhao and attempts to advocate on his behalf. However, Zhao does not align with Hans's resistance. Whenever Hans asks Zhao why many arrangements in the company are so irrational, such as only purchasing expensive yet outdated machines, Zhao always replies timidly, "It is people above who decide it ... I have no say in it." Although Zhao disagrees with his leaders, he

remains reticent with Hans regarding his dissatisfaction with his Chinese colleagues and society. The film does not give Hans many possibilities to understand Zhao profoundly, let alone all the social problems China is experiencing due to the country's transformation from a socialist to a market economy. Besides becoming accustomed to mundane Chinese cultural habits, such as using chopsticks to eat peanuts, Hans has learned little about Zhao and China before leaving the country.



Figure 1 The company leaders discuss the relationship between Zhao and Hans (The Black Cannon Incident, 1985)



Figure 2 Zhao and Hans's joyful reunion (The Black Cannon Incident, 1985)

Apart from the narrative, the visuality of the film also contributes to the expression of the ambivalent attitude towards whiteness and the West. The film's cinematography breaks from realistic conventions by taking space and time to present still-life images of objects such as architecture and machines. The frequent use of contrasting colours produces a "hallucinatory ambiance" (X. Liu, 2019, p. 229). A notable instance of this is when Zhao visits a Catholic church. Religious practices, including visiting Catholic and Christian churches, were prohibited in Communist China. In pre-1980s socialist cinema, Western churches are often used to symbolize a perilous foreign influence and espionage within China (McGrath, 2008). However, *The Black Cannon Incident* includes the church scene, thereby distancing Western religion from this previous association. The church scene occurs after another arduous day at work for Zhao. After work, he randomly wanders around the city, running into a Catholic church and deciding to take a look inside. As Zhao enters the church, the camera meticulously unveils the serene interior, where numerous Chinese believers pray devoutly. This moment exudes a sense of transcendence, seemingly alleviating the frustrations Zhao experiences at work. Yet, the mood abruptly shifts as the camera focuses on close-up shots of statues depicting Jesus and Zhao. By alternating between these white religious figures and Zhao's face, these close-up shots disrupt the comforting ambiance, reintroducing a feeling of alienation. These visual elements mirror Zhao's dilemma: figures like Hans and the church offer solace amidst China's bureaucratic oppression. However, just as Zhao has to depart the church and Hans must return to Germany, the West does not provide a permanent refuge for pro-reformed Chinese intellectuals like Zhao. He remains without a true sense of belonging, neither within the state-owned company nor in his friendship with Hans, neither in present-day China nor in his idealized Germany.

Dai (2002) notes that despite the complexity of 1980s Chinese culture, it is still subject to common experiences related to integration into modernity based on a shared aspiration for progress, social democracy, social prosperity, and resistance to historical inertia and Mao's ideology. Clearly, China's reform and opening up had brought Chinese people a sense of excitement but also anxieties over finding alternative collective and individual identities, which had been confined or suppressed for too long during Mao's era. The image of Hans may be an expression of such an ambivalent position. Hans symbolizes an economically, politically, and technologically advanced world that Chinese intellectuals like Zhao had lost touch with during Mao's era. Hans's presence offers Chinese intellectuals like Zhao a sense of solace amidst the alienation and repression they have experienced in China. In this context, Hans represents a glimmer of hope, suggesting the possibility of a more modern, progressive, and democratic society in China—one that operates efficiently and is receptive to diverse opinions and innovation.

However, the film also highlights the differences between Zhao and Hans in racial terms and conveys a strong desire to preserve Chinese cultural identity. Hans is depicted as warm and responsible yet somewhat self-entitled and ignorant about China and the Chinese. Instances such as Zhao reminding Hans to eat peanuts with chopsticks and their quarrel over a calculation mistake suggest the film's intention to assert equality between Chinese intellectuals and Westerners. This portrayal of pride in Chinese culture may stem from China's traumatic historical encounters with the West and predominantly white people in the 19th and 20th centuries and a resurgence of interest in traditional Chinese values in the 1980s, as mentioned in the introduction.

In the following sections, I will demonstrate that this juxtaposition of admiration for and resentment towards whiteness continues to play out in the other two films. However, with China's rise as an economic powerhouse and the Chinese authorities' increasingly tight control over the media, there is an increased celebration of Chineseness over whiteness.

***Big Shot's Funeral* (2001)**

As I mentioned at the beginning of the previous section, the production of experimental films such as *The Black Cannon Incident* in the 1980s was partly facilitated by the socialist economy, as film studios during that period were not pressured to generate profits. However, since the 1990s, the landscape of Chinese cinema has undergone significant transformations due to shifts in modes of production, spectatorship conditions, genre diversity, filmmaking styles, and the increased availability and aesthetic influence of foreign films, as articulated by McGrath (2008, p. 169).

Being the first Sino-American production released after China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, *Big Shot's Funeral* reflects Chinese cinema's "corporate turn" (Zhang, 2008). The film is co-produced by Chinese and American film companies, and it tells a story full of wild speculation and twists about transnational film production. A world-renowned American filmmaker, Tyler (*Donald Sutherland*), together with his Chinese-American assistant Lucy (*Rosamund Kwan*), go to Beijing to film "The Last Dynasty" as the sequel to Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci's Oscar-winning film *The Last Emperor* (1987). Upon their arrival in Beijing, Lucy hires a local cameraman, Yoyo, to document Tyler's filmmaking process. During the shooting, Tyler becomes increasingly unsatisfied with Bertolucci's representation of China in *The Last Emperor*, yet runs out of inspiration to film a "real China". Faced with a highly commercialized contemporary China in which Western products and Chinese copies of them are ubiquitous in every aspect of life, Tyler is confused and stressed. Through Lucy's translation, Tyler turns to Yoyo, taking an interest in his "Chinese views" on life and death.

Later, when Tyler quarrels with his profit-driven American production team, he suddenly experiences a heart attack and is sent to the hospital. Having jokingly promised Tyler to hold a Chinese “comedy funeral” (喜丧) when he passes away, Yoyo decides to fulfil his promise. Since the Americans offer no funeral budget for Yoyo, Yoyo uses Tyler’s fame to auction and sell off advertising spots on the funeral to raise money. After the ferocious competition, many brands receive the right to advertise at the funeral. However, when everything is ready, Tyler miraculously recovers, jeopardizing Yoyo’s deals with the advertisers. Yoyo is faced with tremendous debt and put into an insane asylum full of lunatic investors. To save Yoyo, who is faking his madness to evade his creditors, Tyler resumes his position as the director of Yoyo’s “comedy funeral”.

Played by renowned Chinese comedian actor Ge You, Yoyo is portrayed as an early middle-aged Chinese man who is somewhat cynical yet kind at heart. As a freelance cameraman, he hovers between different temporary jobs, and working for Tyler is one of them. Like many ordinary urban Chinese who worked outside government organizations in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he is financially unstable and always looking for opportunities. Living on his wits, Yoyo and his Chinese friend are much more flexible and better at playing business games than the Americans. When there is no money to hold a funeral for Tyler, they sell Tyler’s fame and reputation to the advertisers. When they need to impress foreign investors, they pass themselves off as a big transnational corporation. The fantastical portrayal of characters such as Yoyo serves to mock the frenzy of consumerism in Chinese society: despite barely keeping their heads above water in the cutthroat Chinese society, their cunning and street smarts allow them to run rings around the American characters. To a degree, the portrayals of the Chinese are self-insulting. However, the portrayal of the American white man Tyler and the Chinese American woman Lucy have by comparison made the representations of the Chinese and China lovable.

Growing at a rate of 10% each year, China’s transition from a state-controlled to a market economy in the 1990s created a huge market potential for the West and attracted many multinational companies to invest in China. China’s economic boom has made China “more nationalist at home and more vocal abroad, especially in its dealing with the West”, and the belief that “the West needs China” has become increasingly prevalent (Xu, 2001, p. 160). Such enthusiasm about China’s rise is reflected in the film’s portrayal of the middle-aged white male American director, Tyler.

The first scene of Tyler features him sitting in the palace of the Forbidden City, where his American production team has hired hundreds of Chinese actors in costumes ready for his command. In the scene, he sports a traditional Chinese

suit-inspired vest (唐装) and wears an anxious look. Despite having a big budget to rent the palace and hire the people, Tyler is unhappy: contemporary China is far too different from Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* and the sequel he is making. And the representation of the highly "contaminated" Chinese culture in the film explains it all: far from being a culturally pure, unified nation, contemporary China is where the Chinese boy, who stars as the last emperor, Puyi, in Tyler's film, rests at the Dragon Throne, relaxingly drinking "Laughable Cola" —the Chinese copycat version of CocaCola. Moreover, it is also the place where crazy Chinese investors chat about hiring a British doorman with an "authentic British accent" to make their European-style housing properties look expensive. These social phenomena resulting from the economic success of reform China go far beyond Tyler's expectations and have made his filmmaking about the last Chinese emperor redundant.

Rather than simply positioning Tyler as an ignorant cultural outsider, the film sets up a number of scenes in which Tyler interacts with Yoyo and later imparts his wisdom. This can be exemplified in a scene where Tyler discusses *The Last Emperor* with his Chinese American assistant, Lucy. While pondering the discrepancy between his film and contemporary China, he tells her in English that *The Last Emperor* is a Western canonized work that simply turns the life of the last Chinese emperor, Puyi, into the story of "a man's liberation" that purposefully "appeals to Western audiences". When he asks Yoyo's opinion about it, Yoyo says, "Puyi's life is not sad at all. He had a lot of beautiful women surrounding him, and it was financed by the Qing [dynasty] government. I only had one woman, and she has already divorced me." Indeed, busy with making a living, why would ordinary Chinese care more about a 200-year-old emperor than their own day-to-day struggles? As the interactions between Tyler and Yoyo proceed, the character of Tyler learns, evolves, and eventually becomes someone who understands and appreciates Yoyo and his society.

The depiction of foreigners who are attracted to China has precedence. Since the 1980s, there have been many foreigners expressing through performances how they love China and Chinese culture on Chinese state-regulated media. In doing so, these performances give the Chinese audience a sense of patriotic joy for China's reemergence as a confident nation at the centre of the world stage (Gorfinel & Chubb, 2019). The image of Tyler is similar to the previous China-loving-foreigner images in the sense that he is also fascinated by China. However, whereas the representations of China and the Chinese by other China-loving-foreigners tend to be objectified, essentialized, and often imbued with a self-Orientalist mentality, the kind of China and Chinese presented through Tyler's perspective are more contradictory: they are mundane and problematic, yet also vivid and fun.

While the film idealizes a senior white male as an open, curious, and friendly foreigner, it does not extend the same level of gentleness to the image of Lucy. Lucy is portrayed as a young, good-looking, well-educated, Chinese American woman who embodies white American cultural norms. In the film, she speaks highly of Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* but knows very little about the so-called Chinese cultures: in the film, Yoyo often has to explain to her Chinese common-sense notions, such as the notion of "the Buddhist realms" (境界). This aspect of her character is also portrayed through Tyler's comments about her being someone who is "not quite Chinese" and "brought up in an American sensibility". Besides, at the film's beginning, Lucy is also depicted as a middle-class American who is suspicious of the Chinese. While Tyler is kind to Yoyo from the start, the film creates scenes portraying Lucy's arrogance and distrust towards Yoyo. She frequently quarrels with Yoyo over trivial issues and questions his motivations for being sweet to her and Tyler. However, throughout the filmmaking and funeral planning, Lucy gradually realizes how lovable this Chinese man is: he might be odd and different to her American peers, but he is humorous, spontaneous, and responsible. Such realizations eventually lead her to fall in love with Yoyo. To highlight the bliss of their romance, *Big Shot's Funeral* ends with a romantic scene in which Yoyo and Lucy, after all the farces and drama, kiss each other.

The desirability of Chinese masculinity for non-Chinese women is a frequently used trope to articulate racial dynamics in Chinese media.⁸ In Castillo's analysis of racialized and gendered representations of Africans in China, he points out that African women are often staged as wanting to marry Chinese men to "escape the traditions" at home and "enter modernity" (Castillo, 2021, p. 429). This image boosts the nationalist imagination of China and the Chinese as being advanced, open, and therefore implicitly superior to African countries and people. The persona of Lucy, a Chinese American woman who later finds true love in China, also evokes a sense of pride in being Chinese. However, in this case, nationalist sentiments derive from the interplay of the Chinese inferiority complex towards whiteness and the West.

⁸ Due to China's patriarchal tradition, the Chinese cultural discourse concerning interracial desires and relationships tends to celebrate the relations between Chinese men and foreign women. In these instances, foreign women's attraction to Chinese masculinity is often linked to the greatness of the Chinese nation.



Figure 3 Tyler asks Yoyo to hold a “comedy funeral” for him (Big Shot’s Funeral, 2001)



Figure 4 Lucy and Yoyo quarrel at work (Big Shot’s Funeral, 2001)

In Chow's (2002) reflection on the cultural politics of ethnicity, she suggests that the mainland Chinese often emit a sense of hostility towards the Chinese who "happen to have access to the West" and "[are] validated by the West" (p. 189). Coined by her as a "postcolonial *ressentiment*", this emotion results from the collective Chinese memory of their unequal and humiliating contact with the white world. While the Chinese are angry at the Western Other, the hostility can be re-directed to ethnic Chinese who have "made it" to the world of this powerful Other since the anger entails "a conscious and unconscious longing for the postcolonial ethnic community" (Chow, 2002, p. 190). Following her line of reasoning, one can say that the portrayal of Lucy in the film, on the contrary, fulfils a Chinese postcolonial longing for ethnic unification. As someone who has made her way to Hollywood and has become socioeconomically well-established in the white-dominated West, Lucy eventually returns to China. She is transformed into a "proper" Chinese person through the charm of a Chinese man. By celebrating the Chinese American women's racial sameness while downplaying the socioeconomic and cultural differences from the Chinese man Yoyo, the film evokes a sense of racialized and gendered joy found in the Chinese being equal to racial whiteness.

In Ahmed's (2014) writing on the cultural politics of love in the context of multiculturalism, she notes that "the idea of a world where we all love each other is a humanist fantasy that informs the multicultural discourse of love," and "those who do not love, those who do not get closer, become the source of injury and disturbance" (p. 140). After all, she argues, it is "out of love that a group seeks to defend the nation against others, whose presence then becomes defined as the origin of hate" (pp. 122–23). Her conceptualization of love may be particularly suitable for understanding the politics of white identity represented in *Big Shot's Funeral*. Through Tyler and Lucy's changing attitudes towards China and the Chinese, whiteness slowly becomes close to the Chinese. Under this condition, whiteness becomes lovable, transforming a seemingly once passive, bitter, fractured Chinese identity into something enchanting, charming, unified, and, most importantly, enjoyable.

***Crazy Alien* (2019)**

Directed by Ning Hao, *Crazy Alien*⁹ was released in 2019 when the US and China transitioned from a largely positive relationship to an increasingly antagonistic, mutually destructive set of relations (Swaine, 2019). Domestically, China's political environment had become less open to social criticism. Such a sociopolitical environment is discernible in *Crazy Alien*. The film narrates the bizarre story of an alien, an American superhero, and the grassroots Chinese. The story starts with the American government discovering another planet where aliens live.

⁹ *Crazy Alien* is loosely adapted from Chinese writer Liu Cixin's science fiction novel *A Village Teacher* (2012).

To establish a diplomatic relationship, the aliens demand a sample of a human gene from the Americans. After careful selection, the Americans obtain the gene from a white male bodybuilder with an IQ of 180. They claim that this is the gene coming from “one of us” (white American men), who is from the “most advanced nation on planet Earth” and “who can represent the human race”. Later, the American government sends an astronaut to outer space to deliver the gene. However, while they almost accomplish the mission, the white American astronaut Andrew’s (*Matthew Morrison*) silly behaviour—using the Chinese app Tiktok to take a selfie with the alien—accidentally disorients the alien and causes it to crash-land on Earth. The alien lands at a circus in a park in China, where Chinese monkey trainer Geng Hao (*Bo Huang*) lives and works. Geng and his wine merchant friend Dafei (*Teng Shen*) pick up the alien. The two Chinese men have no idea as to what the alien is. They mistakenly take the alien to be a rare species of monkey. Because of an injury to his own monkey, Geng devises a plan to train the alien, who he believes is a monkey, to perform in his monkey-trick show. After a long, intensive search using various modern technologies, the American team, led by white male John (*Tom Pelphrey*), finally finds the alien in the park. They come to the park with sophisticated devices to recapture the alien. Nevertheless, the alien resists cooperating with them. Instead, the alien decides to build a diplomatic relationship with Geng and Dafei since he has grown a taste for the Chinese wine they offer throughout the alien’s stay with them.

Appropriating the images of American superhero sci-fi films, the Americans and the US in *Crazy Alien* always look refined, sleek, and futuristic. The people’s faces are spotless. Always dressed in neat suits at work, they talk confidently, move firmly, and strongly believe they work in the service of righteousness and peace. Similarly, the nation of America in the film is clean, prosperous, and technologically advanced. By contrast, the Chinese Geng and Dafei lack these refinements. One can also always see the sweat, dirt, and other marks on their faces. They dress casually, talk and eat loudly, and act rashly. Geng lives and works in a world park, where many Chinese can visit foreign landmarks without leaving China. Surrounded by the replicas of the Eiffel Tower, the Great Pyramids, the World Trade Center, and the Kremlin, Geng’s monkey circus is a shabby square full of dust and cheap furniture. His friend Dafei’s shop, located on a chaotic street full of electro-mobiles and broken signboards, shares a similar atmosphere.

Although the film portrays the US as an economically and technologically advanced nation, the Americans, who are predominantly white in the film, are frequently mocked. Generally, the film employs the rhetoric of irony to contrast the Americans’ powerfulness and ambition with the Chinese protagonists’ powerlessness and casualness, particularly regarding their attitudes toward the alien. In the scene where the American team sends Andrew into outer space to connect with the

alien, the film appropriates the aesthetics of Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). While the futuristic visual effects and sublime music give this mission a sense of greatness and graciousness, the mission is eventually disrupted by their astronaut's obsession with selfies. By contrast, Geng accidentally finds the alien in his shabby storage room, where he has been trying to rescue his monkey, who had gotten stuck in the messy furniture. Geng first only sees the alien's foot and, out of curiosity, pulls the alien out from the dusty mess, showing a confused and surprised look. Unlike the white Americans, the film treats Geng's encounter with the alien as entirely random and unexpected.

Later, the film's portrayal of the interaction between Geng and the alien further enhances this irony. Unlike the Americans, Geng and his friend misidentify the alien as a rare monkey. While Geng wants to train the alien to perform more complicated tricks and popularize the already outdated "Chinese monkey-trainer culture" (耍猴), Dafei, the small businessman, wants to sell the alien to the curious rich. The alien is stubborn. Both Chinese protagonists frequently physically punish and verbally abuse the alien to tame him. However, when Geng and Dafei are on peaceful terms with the alien, they watch TV, eat hotpot, drink, joke, and play together. These mundane daily interactions seem to give the viewer the impression that, despite the Chinese protagonists not treating the alien with more respect than their American counterparts, their relationship with the alien is more authentic and sincere. Conversely, the Americans' approach to the alien is more inhumane insofar as the alien is not so much seen as a living, emotional being but as a tool to solidify the nation's power.



Figure 5 The Americans visit China to capture the alien (Crazy Alien, 2019)



Figure 6 After their fight with the Americans, the injured Geng and Dafei rest near a river while eating noodles (Crazy Alien, 2019).

In Western science fiction films, Asian stereotypes are often connected with a dystopian future, termed techno-orientalism (Roh et al., 2015). Asia as a place—especially metropolises like Tokyo, Hongkong, and Shanghai—is often portrayed as a technologically advanced, futuristic space. Meanwhile, Asian bodies—very often young Asian female bodies—are often racialized as sexually attractive yet emotionless robots or robot-like humans who need to be saved or educated by real humans from the West. *Crazy Alien* seems to subvert such a techno-orientalist depiction of Asianness by inserting an Occidentalist portrayal of a technologically advanced yet robotic and destructive America. In doing so, the film evokes a chuckle of delight deriving from a sense of Chinese superiority: “we” Chinese are far from perfect, but “they” Americans are worse.

Apart from the general depiction of the Americans as a group, the film also focuses at length on the American team leader, John. In the film, John is a conventionally attractive white male appointed to lead the Americans to catch the alien in China. Compared with Tyler and Lucy in *Big Shot’s Funeral*, whose characters develop along with the plot, the figure of John is one-dimensional and does not develop. Generally, he is portrayed as selfish, silly, and racist. Before the US government appoints John to catch the alien, he is in alcohol rehab. In the scene where people in the rehab get together to chat about their experiences, he frequently interrupts an Asian American man and later pulls out his gun to threaten him. After John returns to work, the film also uses a few seconds to portray how he makes fun of his black American colleague. Later, when John and his team ride massive submarines to Brazil to look for the alien, he, again, aggressively interrogates the dark-skinned locals and mocks them for their lack of ambition. This portrayal of the racist white male seems to criticize white supremacy in and outside the US. However, such an anti-racist stance remains dubious. While the white Americans’ racist perceptions towards non-whites is purposefully highlighted, the issues concerning racism against Africans and other racial minorities in China remain untouched in the film. The high visibility of criticism against white supremacy, along with the invisibility of the reflection on racial issues in contemporary China, are thus complicit with the official Chinese and popular nationalist narratives that racist problems only exist in the West.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed the representations of white identities in the Chinese dark comedy films *The Black Cannon Incident*, *Big Shot’s Funeral*, and *Crazy Alien* through the prism of Chinese nationalism. I show that the benign yet ignorant characteristics of white foreigner Hans in *The Black Cannon Incident* create a sense of “we” Chinese straddling between the aspiration to enter into Western-led modernization and antagonism towards the white Other, who is considered to have mistreated the Chinese. In *Big Shot’s Funeral*, white American filmmaker Tyler and

Chinese American assistant Lucy are portrayed as ignorant cultural outsiders who later transform into lovable foreigners who “truly” appreciate and understand China and the Chinese. In *Crazy Alien*, white Americans are depicted as ambitious and socioeconomically superior, yet clumsy, arrogant, and machine-like. While the Chinese protagonists are also full of flaws, they are portrayed as warm-hearted, authentic human beings who are superior to the white Americans.

At first sight, the films’ display of the Chinese protagonists’ failures, limitations, and flaws seem to give the audience the impression that Chineseness is not much better than whiteness. However, as the uniqueness of Chineseness vis-à-vis whiteness slowly articulates as the plots develop, all three films evoke a sense of pride in being Chinese. It is worth noting that, unlike many official Chinese films and TV shows that straightforwardly demonize whiteness while glorifying China and its people, the kind of Chinese nationalism articulated in all three films is covert and coded within their self-mockeries.

In addition, the three films’ different depictions of white stereotypes demonstrate that, far from a static entity, whiteness in Chinese cinema is multiple. It has been changing, along with China’s shifting status on the world stage. In the 1980s, when the country was transforming from a planned to a market economy and the state’s primary policies were based on learning from the West, the white German engineer was sacredly valuable to China’s modernization project in the film *The Black Cannon Incident*. When *Big Shot’s Funeral* was released in the early 2000s, China was experiencing rapid economic growth and was becoming an indispensable part of the world economy. Informed by this emerging status in the global capitalist market, the portrayals of the relationship between the Chinese and the white American filmmaker imply a yearning for the West’s understanding and recognition. Contrastingly, *Crazy Alien* was produced when China’s rise as a global superpower became widely discussed, and the relationship between China and the US was increasingly articulated in terms of conflict and competition. Mirroring the geopolitical climate, the relationship between the Chinese and white Americans is framed in terms of rivalry. The three versions of white stereotypes are, therefore, symptomatic of the prevailing nationalist sentiments at the time.

In Castillo’s (2021) analysis of black representations in China, he describes “the replacement of whiteness” as “a discursive effort to replace white bodies with Asian/Chinese bodies in a geopolitical scheme.” (p. 436). In other words, Chinese media is increasingly adopting tropes and rhetorics of racial superiority such as “Chinese men saving African women” to articulate a hegemonic Chineseness superior to Blackness. However, Castillo also argues that, globally, whiteness still holds incomparably more privilege than emerging hegemonic Chineseness. Thus, such a “replacement of whiteness,” according to Castillo, is not yet preva-

lent but has emerged as a pattern (2021, p. 436). From the three films, especially *Big Shot's Funeral* and *Crazy Alien*, we can also clearly see the attempt to replace whiteness with Chineseness. Employing black humour rhetoric, they seek to compete, subvert, and overcome white superiority. Nevertheless, these cinematic efforts to draw attention to whiteness instead of other non-Chinese racial identities implicitly confirm that white identity remains an identity of power in the Chinese context.

In the following chapter, I will further explore the negotiation of white identity on Chinese screens. Departing from the analysis of traditional media, I will delve into the racial dynamics within the evolving landscape of the platform economy in recent years. Specifically, I will examine the self-representations of white masculinity on the Chinese video-sharing platform Bilibili during the COVID-19 pandemic, investigating how Western male influencers and their Chinese followers navigate and shape the discourse of white male identity in an increasingly xenophobic environment in China. As the chapter will continually emphasize, understanding the meaning-making of white identity within Chinese visual culture demands an approach that integrates the Chinese interpretations of self and perceptions of the Western other.

Chapter 2

Performing Ideal Foreigners: White Western Male Influencers' Self-Representations on Chinese Social Media during the COVID-19 Pandemic¹⁰

¹⁰ Part of this chapter is based on my published article, "Transnational white masculinity on Chinese social media: Western male vloggers' self-representations during the COVID-19 pandemic", as listed in the publication overview. e.

Fulafu (伏拉夫), a white Russian man born in 1995, studied at Beijing Language and Culture University after finishing high school in Russia in 2012. After graduation, he took on several casual jobs in China, assisting Chinese companies with branding and advertising on Chinese social media. In 2018, he registered his account on the Chinese video-sharing platform Douyin, the domestic Chinese equivalent of TikTok, and began posting self-made videos about his daily life in China. In 2019, he gained sudden online fame through several videos featuring him enthusiastically shouting in Mandarin, praising the greatness of Chinese food and culture. These videos rapidly gained popularity, receiving millions of views and being turned into internet memes by Chinese netizens. His sudden rise to fame has sparked a widespread debate. On the one hand, many Chinese viewers appreciated Fulafu's efforts to learn Mandarin and his positive portrayal of China. They saw his enthusiastic embrace of Chinese culture, seeing him as a bridge between China and foreign people. On the other hand, many argue that his repetitive catchphrase "I love China" is nothing more than what Chinese netizens call a "fortune password" (财富密码), suggesting that he is exploiting Chinese people's patriotic sentiments to gain fame and financial benefits. While many have criticized Fulafu for what they perceive to be empty and superficial performances, many other white male influencers from Western Europe and the US are praised for creating interesting and sincere content.

The online controversy over Fulafu exemplifies the complex dynamics of foreign influencers navigating Chinese social media. Since 2015, vlogging, or posting videos on social media, has undergone professionalization and institutionalization. Estimated to be worth over 3 trillion CNY in 2020, vlogging has become a crucial economic foundation for the Chinese internet in recent years (Guanyan, 2020). With an increasingly diversified group of foreigners migrating to China as international students, English teachers, and freelancers (Pieke, 2012; Leonard & Lehman, 2019), some have also "migrated" to Chinese social media and thrived as a niche in the Chinese influencer scene. Like thousands of Chinese influencers, foreign influencers' central imperative is to gain viewer traffic and, in many cases, monetize viewer traffic through viewers' tips, platform rewards, and advertising. These foreign influencers are highly proactive in exploring the rewarding opportunities that China's vlogging economy offers. Nevertheless, unlike the elite foreign migrants in China who receive institutional support, these influencers' statuses in China's vlogging economy rest heavily on their own reputation. To advance their career in such a competitive environment, foreign influencers often play with their foreignness vis-à-vis Chineseness to attract a Chinese audience. Chinese or foreign language learning, daily life in China, and the cultural differences between China and foreign countries are the most common themes in their vlogs. Interestingly, although "the foreign" in this case signifies a diverse group of influencers and countries, white male influencers from Euro-American

countries have so far been the most visible and popular group.

Research has shown that white males from North American and European countries often experience upward mobility when migrating to China. Affirmative meanings in the Chinese context, such as modernity, financial affluence, and sexual attractiveness, are often ascribed to their racial and gender identity (Farrer, 2011; Stanley, 2012). However, recent research also suggests that this pattern has been disrupted following the recent changing power relations between China and the major Western countries, resulting in white Western male migrants' increasingly contradictory positionalities in China (Farrer, 2019; S. Lan, 2022). Building upon these insights, this chapter explores the changing meanings ascribed to white male identities in China by analysing white Western male influencers' self-representations and the Chinese audience's reactions to them on Chinese social media during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a surge of nationalism and xenophobia across the world. Under the Chinese Communist Party's rule, China's state-regulated media successfully boosted Chinese national pride during the pandemic by strategically "praising China, blaming the US, and lecturing the EU" in various news reports (Yang & Chen, 2021, p. 110). In line with these narratives, Chinese netizens not only applauded the CCP's stringent measures to flatten the curve of COVID-19 infections but also looked down upon Western countries' "sloppy" responses to the outbreak, as is apparent in social media (De Kloet, Lin & Chow, 2020). In addition, stories in Chinese media about misbehaving foreign migrants during the pandemic stirred up Chinese people's xenophobic sentiments towards foreign migrants in China. One of the most telling examples is the wide circulation of a comic on Chinese social media, in which foreigners in China, referred to as "foreign trash" (洋垃圾) who do not follow the quarantine rules, are thrown into garbage bins by Chinese people in hazmat suits (Jinliqingnian, 2020). Interestingly, while the West and foreigners in China have been stigmatized on Chinese social media, a handful of white Western male influencers on Chinese video-sharing platforms have not seemed to be negatively affected. During the pandemic, influencers such as Scor (Germany), Teacher Mike (US), Nathan Rich (US), Guo Ruijie (US), Shaun Gibson (UK), Noel (Spain), and Thomas (Germany) actively posted videos and gained more followers. In their videos, they brand themselves as just, compassionate, and ordinary Western men who stand for China and the Chinese against the virus and the West's negative views of China. In doing so, many have successfully transformed the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic into an opportunity to boost their online fame in China.

This chapter will analyse how these white Western male influencers actively navigate the geopolitical and cultural tensions between China and Western countries. I will elucidate how, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these

influencers typically depicted themselves as amiable, empathetic, and respectful foreign migrants within China. However, following the outbreak, they have displayed increased sensitivity towards the growing Chinese nationalist sentiments, striving to position themselves as fair-minded and compassionate supporters of China and its people in order to enhance their online popularity. While many Chinese audiences applaud these foreign influencers, there are others who question their credibility as genuine allies of China.

Echoing the previous film analysis of whiteness and Chineseness in the previous chapter, this chapter further demonstrates the continued fluctuating nature of white superiority in China: although white male identity remains a prevalent racial and gender category in Chinese media consumption, the interpretations and significance attributed to this identity have become increasingly contested amid the COVID-19 crisis.

Whiteness through the lens of transnational Western masculinity

Transnational migration is, to varying degrees, both a process of racialization and a gendered phenomenon (Lundstrom, 2014). Earlier studies focusing on men show that the kind of masculinity that defines white, middle-class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men can often be hegemonic in a transnational context since it may marginalize non-white men in Western societies and prove advantageous to white men in non-Western societies. Studies of Western males in China and other East Asian societies show that white Western men are often positively associated with Western modernity. Kelsky (2001) reads educated and ambitious Japanese women's desire for Western men as their way of transcending traditional gender regimes in Japan. In this sense, white men are fetishized as part of Western modernity and a means of Japanese women's liberation. Such racialized fascination is exemplified in some conversational English schools in Japan, in which Western male English teachers are heavily branded to attract Japanese female students (Appleby, 2013). In the case of China, Stanley (2012) uses the term "superheroes phenomenon" to describe how Chinese women consider Western men more sexually attractive and financially affluent than Chinese men. Similarly, Farrer's (2011, p. 756) study of Shanghai nightlife shows that white Western men in China often have easy access to sexual intimacy with Chinese women since their masculinities are often associated with "glamour and sex appeal" and economic prestige in the local context.

Concurrent with recent shifting power relations between Asian and Western countries and the acceleration of transnational flows of people, objects, and ideas, more recent scholarship shows a declining status among white men in China and other Asian countries. In researching how "Asian ascendancy and Western decline" manifests in Ho Chi Minh City's sex industry, Hoang (2015) shows how

non-white clients such as local Vietnamese male elites and other Asian businessmen who frequent the city's upscale sex clubs emulate a pan-Asian masculine ideal that challenges longstanding hegemonic white masculinity. Echoing Hoang's findings, Farrer's (2019) updated research suggests that white Western men no longer hold the highest sexual status in Shanghai nightlife, given the rise of a new class of wealthy Chinese men. Notably, along with the increasingly prevalent narrative of China's rise as a global superpower, Chinese people's social imaginations of Western males have been diverging. While white males continue to be associated with modernity, progress, and cosmopolitanism, they are also stigmatized as badly behaving "foreign trash" who are "losers" in the West yet become socioeconomically and sexually better off in China because of their whiteness (Fulankeqi, 2021).

Building upon this research, this chapter further investigates the changing meanings of white male identity on Chinese social media. Following Hall's (1994) conception of cultural identity, this chapter treats white male identity not as an essence but rather as a positioning evident in Western male influencers' claims about who they are and the Chinese audience's responses to these claims on Chinese social media.

As both agents and objects of their representations, Western male influencers have considerable autonomy to perform who they are and decide how they want to be seen on Chinese social media. However, like foreigners who are active on China's TV programmes,¹¹ foreign influencers who wish to stay visible and popular in Chinese social media need to perform in a way that harmonizes with China's top-down state-led ideological work. On the one hand, the state encourages foreigners in China to make patriotic videos about China by organizing video-making competitions for foreigners, such as "Looking at China in the Third Eye" (Xinhua, 2020). On the other hand, the state's information-control regime (Zhu & Fu, 2021) strictly censors foreigners who verbally attack the CCP. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese authorities banned German internet influencer Christoph Rehage (老雷) and American entertainer Lele Farley from Chinese social media due to their criticisms and mockery of the CCP. Thus, Western male influencers' self-representations are subject to the power of the Chinese state's

¹¹ Since the 1980s, Chinese television has produced many programmes with foreign participants. Most of these are similar in content due to strict regulation by the China National Radio and Television Administration. In these programmes, foreigners typically express a sense of fondness for China and Chinese culture, helping to solidify in viewers a Chinese national identity under the CCP's rule. Canadian entertainer Da Shan (a.k.a. Mark Henry Rowswell), who was invited to perform in comedy routines on China Central Television's New Year's Gala in 1988 and later became active on a variety of Chinese TV programmes, is one obvious example of this.

gaze. Beyond this, vlogging is a form of self-commodification and self-branding. To sell themselves on social media, influencers not only need to strategically promote their “authentic self” but also have an “always-on” work mode, which entails their constant vigilance and monitoring of their self-images to appeal to their audience (Khamis et al., 2017). Western male influencers on Chinese social media must anticipate and meet various Chinese people’s tastes and expectations to gain attention and likes. Thus, the Chinese audience also plays a crucial role in disciplining Western male influencers’ self-representations.

This chapter employs textual analysis and semi-structured interviews to analyse Western male influencers’ self-representations on Chinese social media and their experience of making these self-representations. The textual analysis method is employed to closely read Western males’ self-representations on Chinese social media. I foreground this part of the research on the Chinese video-sharing platform Bilibili, one of the most popular social media platforms where foreigners post videos and interact with their Chinese audience. Established in 2009 as a video-sharing community, Bilibili has been famous for ACG (animations, comics, and games) content. In recent years, Bilibili has developed into a site providing multiple forms of entertainment content, including documentaries, TV programmes, films, user-generated videos, and live streams to attract a wider user base.¹² Like many other video-sharing platforms, Bilibili allows influencers to monetize their online fame by offering them financial rewards.¹³ Influencers can also collaborate with a third party to advertise its products on Bilibili. There is a comment section under each vlog for Bilibili where users leave remarks. It also features a “danmaku” interface that allows users’ comments to appear as streams of scrolling subtitles overlaid on the video. Such “pseudo-synchronicity” (Zhu, 2017) has allowed me to observe users’ “real-time” reactions specific to certain details in influencers’ videos.

To carry out this research, I located 30 white foreign male influencers with over 10,000 followers on Bilibili (see *Table 1*). I followed them on Bilibili between June 2020 and October 2020, watched all their vlogs, and read users’ comments published between August 2019 and August 2020, roughly six months before and after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. I also watched some influencers’ vlogs published before August 2019 to familiarize myself with their online personas and styles.

¹² According to Bilibili, there were 1.72 billion active user accounts in 2021, with 78% of users between 18 and 35 years old (Zongshen, 2020). Thus, it is likely that most Western male influencers’ audiences are young Chinese.

¹³ Specifically, Bilibili rewards users who create original content with CNY 3 for every 1,000 views they receive. In addition, content creators can gain economic benefits from viewers’ tips or by inserting advertisements into their content.

This chapter presents a selected visual-textual analysis of Mike and Noel's published videos. Mike is an American English teacher in his early 40s based in Shanghai. He is married to a Chinese woman and has a one-year-old son. As Mike mainly focuses on freelance English teaching, most of his videos involve English-learning tips, which help him promote his self-organized English courses. By contrast, Noel is a young student from Spain who was studying at a university in Beijing at the time of this research. His relationship status is unclear, but he has never shown any romantic partners in his videos. His motivation to be an influencer on Bilibili remains ambiguous. The reason for presenting the cases of Mike and Noel among the 30 influencers I followed is twofold. On the one hand, the cases of Mike and Noel offer a glimpse into the diversity of Western male influencers on Bilibili in terms of their age, country of origin, occupation, and vlogging style. On the other hand, these cases reflect the homogeneity of these Western male influencers regarding how they present themselves as foreigners in China. Like most of the influencers I have followed, Mike and Noel make great efforts to integrate into Chinese society, such as speaking fluent Chinese in their vlogs and making jokes specific to their local contexts. Additionally, the two influencers' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, including vlogging about anti-Chinese racism in the West, controversy over China's measures to contain the COVID-19 virus, and xenophobia in China, correspond with the most common themes in the vlogs produced by the 30 Western male influencers in this period.

In addition to conducting a textual analysis of Mike and Noel's videos, I also carried out semi-structured interviews with three Western male influencers in China from 2021 to 2022 (*Figure 2*). Recruiting these Western male influencers in China proved challenging, as I lacked personal connections within the group. I reached out to them via social media, introducing myself and my research project. Given their large followings, many of these influencers received numerous messages from their primarily Chinese female followers daily, resulting in low response rates to my inquiries. Fortunately, three influencers—Max, John, and Paul—did respond and agreed to participate in my research. However, due to their busy schedule, I was given limited time for interviews. I was able to conduct informal, hang-out, and chat-type interviews with participant Max for two afternoons, during which we walked around downtown Guangzhou. The interview with John was conducted in a café in Shanghai. The interview with Paul was conducted via voice call on WeChat. All three participants could speak fluent Mandarin. Max and Paul insisted on talking in Mandarin, while Paul spoke to me in English. I explored their perceptions of their positions within China's vlogging scene during the semi-structured interviews. Although the three participants seemed to be friendly and honest during our meetings, they also needed to maintain a certain public image due to their profession.

Performing friendly foreign men on Chinese social media: the cases of Mike and Noel¹⁴

Teacher Mike

“Real Teacher Mike” (Real麦克老师) has been active on Bilibili since the beginning of 2016 and has more than 900,000 followers. As his name suggests, most of his videos are about English teaching tailored to the Chinese market, with advertisements that promote his private English classes. Unlike the formal English courses in Chinese schools and universities, Mike’s English learning videos are highly entertainment-oriented. Many feature comments on Chinese celebrities’ English skills and “fun facts” about cultural differences between China and the US. With his excellent command of English and Chinese and rich local knowledge of contemporary China and the US, his English teaching videos speak to the daily lives of Chinese youth.

Besides using his knowledge of the Chinese language and local pop culture, Mike is, echoing his name, a “real” man. He illustrates this point by blending his fatherhood into the videos and sometimes referring to himself as “nanny daddy” (奶爸). For instance, in November 2020, Mike posted a short video about his one-year-old Chinese-American son Xiaomai, which received 23,000 views (“Xiaomai beautified”, 2019). In the video, he carefully cuddles Xiaomai on his home balcony in China and teases Xiaomai with a loving tone. Song and Hird (2014, p. 215) note that in line with recent trends in Western parenting debates, “the caring, engaged father” has become a prominent ideal among the Chinese middle class. Echoing this trend, many followers celebrate Mike’s image as a caring father and comment that baby Xiaomai and Mike are a cute “father and son”(父子). By displaying his fatherhood, Mike constructs a positive image of an English teacher that involves promoting his intellectual skills and a presentation of who he is in daily life: a breadwinning, loving father married to a Chinese woman.

Mike took his son Xiaomai to visit his parents in the US in early January 2020. During the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, they were stuck at his parents’ house in the US. From February to August 2020, Mike continued to post videos from the US on Bilibili. Compared with his videos posted from August 2019 to January 2020, there are two noticeable changes. First, Mike’s role as a “caring family man” becomes increasingly visible. In February 2020, Mike posted a video just before Valentine’s Day (“Why I have a Chinese wife”, 2020). He compares Chinese and American views on marriage and romantic relationships while walking in his parents’ American middle-class neighbourhood. This video received 200,000 views and nearly a thousand comments. For the first time, he explicitly speaks about the challenges and cultural barriers in intercultural romance. In addition, he also expresses his admiration

¹⁴ Mike and Noel’s videos are public. Anyone can access the videos I discuss in the chapter without Bilibili membership. The links to Mike’s and Noel’s videos are in the bibliography.

and respect for his wife. By portraying himself as what he calls a “conservative family man”, Mike successfully distances himself from the stereotypical images of Western men who embrace a “hedonistic lifestyle” in China, casually picking up Chinese girls in nightclubs (Stanley, 2012, p. 217). In addition, there are also several videos centred on his son Xiaomai. Among these, the one with the most views (440,000) is of him filming himself taking his sick, crying son to the hospital (“We are in the emergency room”, 2020). In the video, he carefully holds his son in his arms and tells him funny stories to cheer him up. Seeing Mike’s tired face behind his facemask, his followers respond sympathetically: “Please take care of yourself” and “I hope Xiaomai gets better soon!”

Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Mike posted fewer light-hearted English teaching videos and more “serious” videos featuring him sitting in front of the camera at home and sharing his concerns over the social problems caused or intensified by the pandemic. His joyful English-teacher look is replaced by a calm yet somewhat worried and helpless face in these videos. For instance, in a video published in early February, he sends regards to the people of Wuhan (“Free courses for Hubei students”, 2020). He states that to help with the situation in Wuhan, he is willing to offer his “fellow students” in Wuhan English classes free of charge. Many of his followers leave comments to thank him.

In another video with 100,000 views, titled “Let’s talk about the issue of racism” (2020), Mike expresses his concerns about racism in both the US and China. His followers’ responses are somewhat mixed. Mike criticizes racism towards the Chinese and Asians in the US, which evokes his followers’ approval. They describe Mike as a very “sober” and “understanding” man. However, when he criticizes Chinese racism towards foreign migrants in China during the pandemic, his followers’ comments are less uniform. While some agreed with Mike’s view, many questioned the validity of Mike’s criticism. Some followers explained the reasons behind the Chinese discriminating against foreigners by saying, “But foreigners do not wear masks”; “If they had followed the Chinese government’s measures, we would be nice to them”; and “Do you really think you can blame us—how can we always be nice, be a ‘Virgin Mary’ (圣母)?” A few followers blame American politicians by suggesting that Mike “ask Trump to stop bashing China first”. In addition, some attack Mike’s social position in China by asking if he has experienced privileges in China. They seem to imply that as long as foreigners enjoy certain advantages in China, they are not entitled to criticize China and Chinese people.

Student Noel

Noel (苏诺伊) is a Spanish male influencer who has been active on Bilibili since July 2018 and has some 460,000 followers at present. Noel did his bachelor’s degree in East Asian studies and Chinese language at a Spanish university and

later moved to Beijing for further education. Like Mike, Noel mostly speaks Chinese and uses various popular Chinese songs and slang elements in his videos. However, in contrast to Mike, whose primary purpose for vlogging is to promote his English-teaching business, Noel's motivation to vlog in China is ambiguous. According to Noel, vlogging helps him gain insights into Chinese culture and make friends with Chinese people. Although a few of Noel's videos indirectly promote food brands such as Chinese instant noodles and Australian oranges, most of them centre around Noel's daily life, such as his school and leisure activities in China and Spain. The settings in Noel's videos are familiar to many Chinese youth. Often, Noel films himself taking classes, eating food at the canteen, drinking bubble tea on the street, and chilling with his cat at home in his pyjamas. In doing so, Noel presents himself as a "boy next door", easy to befriend.

Noel embodies the recent niche male ideal of "little fresh meat" (小鲜肉) in China with his cute and delicate physical appearance. In the Chinese context, the term "little fresh meat" describes men with young and attractive faces and bodies who seem innocent and pure due to a lack of experience (Li, 2020). This type of man is prevalent in Pan-East Asian pop cultures and is known as a "pretty boy" (*knot minim*) in South Korea and a "flower boy" (*bishonen*) in Japanese. In one video viewed 66,000 times titled "What does it feel like to have a foreign boyfriend?" (2019), Noel stages himself as that "foreign boyfriend" and performs several dating scenes in front of the camera. Noel invites viewers to imagine themselves as his romantic partner by applying a second-person perspective. In the video, Noel sends warm WeChat messages to the imagined, second-person girlfriend/boyfriend, taking her/him to eat ice cream and letting her/him rest on his shoulders. His voice and body movements are gentle and elegant, showing a lack of aggressiveness and sexual dominance. Noel's self-portrayal echoes what Jung (2010) calls "pan-East Asian soft masculinity", a kind of male image that is "exceptionally feminine to Western eyes" but is highly visible and celebrated in pan-East Asian TV romances (Song, 2016, p. 3).

In China, qualities of self-discipline, hard work and perseverance are widely believed to be what a man should have. Echoing this gender norm, many of Noel's other videos demonstrate that he is not only a playful "flower boy" but also a hard-working, modest, and warmhearted young man. He says he worked hard to receive a scholarship to study in China and frequently shares the knowledge he claims to have learned in his Chinese university. In addition, Noel films himself inviting his Chinese neighbour, an older woman living alone, to a cinema to watch the recently released patriotic Chinese movie *My People, My Country* (2019) during a national holiday ("My Grandma Neighbor", 2020). After the movie, Noel shares that both he and his neighbour burst into tears while watching the film since Chinese people's "deep love for the[ir] country" is incredibly "touching".

This warm side of Noel's character became more clearly foregrounded in his videos after the Covid-19 outbreak. Unlike Mike, Noel stayed in Beijing during the COVID-19 outbreak. Nine of the 26 videos he posted in this period touched upon the social problems brought on by the pandemic. In these videos, Noel often criticized Spain while praising China. In March, Noel published a video titled "I wrote to the most prominent Spanish newspaper to protest against racism towards Chinese" (2020), which received around 500,000 views. In the video, Noel informs his Chinese followers that the Spanish newspaper *La Vanguardia* decided to publish his article condemning the biased reports about China and Chinese people in Spanish media. He firmly looks at the camera and says that he hopes people in Spain will stop being racist towards the Chinese. He also praises Chinese people's seriousness and solidarity in facing the crisis by saying, "Chinese people strictly follow the quarantine rules to protect their family, their country, and the world." Almost all the comments left by his followers are positive, mainly showing their gratitude towards Noel's efforts to speak up for the Chinese.

In a video posted in April and watched 93,000 times, Noel compares the Chinese and Spanish governments' measures to contain the virus ("The severe situation abroad", 2020). He suggests that compared to the Chinese government, the Spanish government reacted too slowly and that its measures were not comprehensive enough to effectively contain the spread of the disease. Many Chinese commenters express their worries about Spain, and some point out the superiority of the Chinese system. A few Chinese comment that they are glad to see that Noel is rational and does not blame China for everything.

In another video titled "Chinese netizens asked me to leave China" (2020), viewed 1.6 million times, Noel talks about Chinese people's xenophobic attitudes towards foreigners. The responses to this video are mixed. In contrast with Teacher Mike, Noel avoids talking about how foreign migrants, especially black people, are discriminated against by the Chinese authorities and Chinese people during the pandemic. Instead, Noel shows a disappointed face and emphasizes that he has stayed in China to fight against the virus together with China and the Chinese. In addition, instead of directly confronting the Chinese for their racist speech and behaviour, Noel turns his blame to the so-called "foreign trash" in China and claims that they defame good foreigners like him and his classmates.

Many of his followers feel sorry that Noel is hurt by both "xenophobic Chinese" and "foreign trash". Some comfort Noel by writing that good foreigners like Noel are always welcome, unlike those who refuse to follow the rules in China. However, some commenters are suspicious of Noel. For instance, some claim that it is "too artificial" that Noel tries to distinguish himself from other foreigners. Others state that

they are afraid that Noel might be a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” who shows his love for China on Bilibili but “speaks ill of us behind our back”. These comments reflect the Chinese audience’s sceptical attitudes toward foreign influencers. On Chinese social media, there is growing suspicion among Chinese audiences that foreign influencers are using praise for China as a profitable strategy to gain online attention and make money. This sentiment is captured in the emergence of the internet slang term “fortune password”, as noted in the introduction of this chapter. At the same time, they also condemn those who make money by “defaming China” (抹黑中国) on Western social media platforms such as YouTube and Twitter (Yingguobaojie, 2019). A similar mistrust is shown in these more critical Bilibili users’ responses. To them, Noel’s vlogging is perceived as a profit-driven performance to gain benefits in today’s economically prosperous China.

The cases of Mike and Noel show how influencers have sought to cultivate images of ideal Western male migrants in China in the eyes of their Chinese audience. Mike presents himself as an English teacher who is humorous and knowledgeable, as well as a breadwinning, caring, and hardworking family man. Noel shows that he is a handsome “soft boy” and a hardworking, respectful student. By performing these gendered roles that are widely celebrated in the Chinese context, both influencers evoke positive reactions from their Chinese audience.

Furthermore, both influencers have gained Chinese viewers’ favour by emphasizing their equality with Chinese people. Mike does not overtly show his prestigious status concerning his affluent social class and American citizenship. Instead, he presents himself as an ordinary migrant who tries his best to learn about Chinese society and make a living in China. Similarly, underlying Noel’s narrative about how he has worked and studied hard to be able to come to China is the subtext that his comfortable position of being a well-financed international student in China is by no means unearned. After the COVID-19 outbreak, both influencers displayed their struggles and worries in facing crises stirred up by the pandemic, highlighting their vulnerability as foreigners in China. By doing so, the two influencers have sought to avoid being seen as what Kimmel (1994) calls “a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power” (p. 125). A white male identity here is thus not positioned as a privileged “superhero” but rather as an ordinary resident in China who faces challenges just as Chinese people do (Stanley, 2012).

In addition, both influencers actively perform images of foreigners who are politically correct in China under the CCP’s rule. Before the outbreak, both influencers adopted a foreigner-love-China attitude by showing their fondness for China and Chinese culture. This attitude parallels many Chinese TV programmes featuring foreign guests, in which they wear Chinese clothes, recite Chinese poetry, practise Chinese calligraphy, and sing Chinese pop songs.¹⁵ The hybridity of

their foreignness and stereotypical Chineseness boosts the Chinese imagination of China being a proud, confident, and cosmopolitan country (Gorfinel & Chubb, 2019). After the COVID-19 outbreak, the two influencers retell the Chinese authorities' narratives about China's success and the West's failure in containing the COVID-19 virus and, in doing so, highlight their roles of being compassionate, just allies of China and the Chinese.

While many Chinese react positively towards the two influencers' views, some viewers remain suspicious of the two influencers' stances and intentions when it comes to politically sensitive issues such as Chinese racism. Mike's critical view of the mistreatment of foreigners in China has received mixed responses. While some followers appreciate the "sobriety" and "objectivity" with which he approaches social problems in China, others accuse him of being a condescending, privileged outsider who does not truly understand the complexity of Chinese society. Similarly, blaming foreigners' misbehaviour on anti-Chinese racism does not help Noel avoid criticism from members of his Chinese audience; his pro-China attitude is viewed by some Chinese as inauthentic and profit-driven.

In the context of the film analysis of whiteness discussed in the previous chapter, the online self-representation of influencers signifies both a continuation and a new chapter in the meaning-making of whiteness within Chinese visual culture. Across both media forms, the meanings ascribed to whiteness as a racial category are heavily influenced by Chinese nationalism, shaped not only by state censorship and regulation but also by the popular Chinese perceptions of self and others. However, unlike films, where depictions are shaped by Chinese filmmakers, social media platforms like Bilibili enable direct interaction between the Chinese audience and white influencers, creating a space where the meanings of white identities are constantly made and remade, subject to the current political dynamics. In addition, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has marked a notable shift in the dynamic between China and the West. While the nationalism depicted in the three films analysed in the previous chapter tends to be conveyed somewhat covertly, the expressions of popular Chinese nationalism evident in the comments of Chinese followers on social media platforms can be more overt and direct.

Thus far, I have mainly focused on the issue of the cultural meanings of whiteness. However, to produce these meanings, white influencers must also spend time and effort crafting their online self. It thus raises questions: What perspectives do white performers hold behind these online self-representations? In this

¹⁵ TV programmes of this kind include *The Competition for Foreigners to Sing Chinese Songs* (Beijing TV), *Competition of Foreign Talents* (Beijing TV Station), *Avenue of Stars* (CCTV), and *Popular Chinese Songs* (Jiangxi TV).

case, how do Western male influencers perceive their positionalities in China? In the following section, I will delve into my participants' narratives about themselves to shed light on the complex dynamics of white male identity on and off the screen, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Positioning oneself in China's influencer scene: Western male influencers' self-narratives *Beyond whiteness?*

In January 2022, I went to Guangzhou to meet Max, a 34-year-old single German male influencer. Having moved to Guangzhou from a German village in 2017, Max was already quite familiar with the city. Strolling through the bustling streets of the city's old town, Max fluently conversed in Mandarin, introducing me to his favourite local eateries and streets while sharing his experiences as an influencer on Chinese social media. When passing through an "urban village" (城中村), Max pointed to a fifth-floor, narrow-looking building where he had lived during his first year in the city. Max remarked happily, "*This was my first home in Guangzhou. The rent here was affordable, and the nearby eateries were budget-friendly and incredibly delicious!*"

After completing his bachelor's in business management at a German university, Max moved to Guangzhou to work for a Chinese company. After two years, he quit his job and became a freelance musician. From the beginning of 2019, he had begun sharing videos and photos of himself on Chinese social media platforms, often showcasing his music-making and providing commentary on his daily life in China. Although he hadn't ventured into advertising on his platform by the time I met him, he had managed to generate some income based on online engagement metrics such as likes and views of his new posts. While this income could not fully cover his monthly expenses, it did alleviate some of the burden by contributing towards his rent and grocery purchases.

When I asked whether he thought his white Western male identity may have contributed to his online popularity among the Chinese audience, he nodded, "*Certainly! People are more curious to know my opinions about China because I am a foreigner.*" He further elaborated that most of his followers were Chinese females. He often received messages from them on the platforms, with most featuring "*sweet*" and "*kind*" words on his music-making and opinions on China. He also noted, "*There were some messages from girls asking me out. But I did not meet any of them unless it was about collaborations.*"

However, while acknowledging the advantage he could have due to his Western male identity, Max also emphasized that although his identity may have prompted the attention of the Chinese audience, it did not guarantee his being a successful influencer. He told me,

What you really need is to be smart. If you really want to continue to be respected and liked by your audience, you have to create interesting content that really speaks to Chinese people's experiences...You need to do that by learning the language, the culture, the people, and the society. Otherwise, you just end up becoming like Fulafu. (Max, 2021)

Paul is a 32-year-old American man who moved to China when he was 16 years old. Since 2018, he has been active on Chinese social media and gained a substantial amount of followers. When I asked whether it was advantageous for him when vlogging in China, he downplayed the advantages brought by his identity by highlighting the challenges he had encountered,

People in China tend to say that you are privileged because of where you are from and who your family is, but to be honest, my life is not as easy as it seems. My parents moved to China when I was a teenager. I had to study Chinese and make friends with new people. I did my bachelor's in Chinese with Chinese classmates. It was pretty difficult ... Now, when you start working in Chinese social media, you know how to be sensitive to the culture here so that people will accept you. People (foreigners) who do that and perform better (cultural sensitivity) can stay in China longer. I am obviously very sensitive and caring for the culture, so I am able to do this cross-cultural business better than other people. However, it's still a challenge. (Paul, 2021)

In Stanley's (2012) examination of the experiences of Western male English teachers in Shanghai vis-à-vis their white masculinity, all participants acknowledged their privilege in the context of romance and sex life. While they appreciated the advantageous sexual dynamics in Shanghai, they also seemed to grapple with the ethical implications of their "hedonistic" behaviours. However, in the context of China's platform economy, Max and Paul viewed their white male identity as providing scant advantage. Instead, they attributed their vlogging success to their hard work and intelligence. Indeed, based on the online videos analysed in the previous section, having white skin does not guarantee Western male influencers online fame and capital in China. Faced with Chinese youth audiences who are increasingly suspicious of white foreign migrants, these influencers had to make efforts to learn the Chinese language and be sensitive to the (geo-)political dynamics in order to present a likeable self. Their success thus stemmed from an assemblage of their skin colour, personality, knowledge of Chinese culture, and political correctness within the Chinese context. The efforts they made to craft this assemblage also partly justify why our conversations regarding white privilege often swiftly shifted toward the challenges they encountered and the strategies they employed while navigating the intricate

social media landscape in China.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that given both influencers still, to some extent, benefit from their white looks and Western backgrounds in attracting the Chinese audience, their attitudes reflect a lack of awareness of the broader implications of race. Specifically, they overlook the societal consequences of their racial positioning and fail to acknowledge their unearned advantages. Michael Kimmel's (2002) writing about whiteness in the US perhaps best captures these influencers' unawareness of their racial privilege. As he beautifully puts it,

To walk or run with that same wind at your back is to float, to sail effortlessly, expending virtually no energy. You do not feel the wind; it feels you. You do not feel how it pushes you along; you feel only the effortlessness of your movements. You feel like you could go on forever. It is only when you turn around and face that wind that you realize its strength. Being white, or male, or heterosexual in this culture is like running with the wind at your back. (p. 42)

One could say that in attracting Chinese audiences online, these white Western male influencers were also running with the wind at their back. Meanwhile, one also needs to recognize that, within vlogging, the power of this "wind" is confined since these influencers are not "in this culture" (2002, p. 42) but in a foreign culture. White male privilege does not protect them from being marginalized as cultural outsiders in Chinese society. The online fame of these influencers is linked not only to the allure of their white bodies but also to their adaptability to Chinese society.

Navigating the geopolitical tension between China and the West

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, all three influencers experienced a rapid surge in the popularity of their social media. Simultaneously, they also recognized a growing sensitivity regarding their presence on Chinese social media, particularly as political tensions between China and the West increased and the Chinese became more suspicious of foreigners.

John, a 44-year-old white British man, embarked on his first visit to China in 2006. Initially introduced to an English summer camp by a friend, he found himself captivated by the lifestyle in Shanghai and extended his stay from two weeks to two years to teach English to Chinese children. Upon returning to the UK in the midst of a financial crisis, John, with only a bachelor's degree in design and technology, struggled to secure employment. He then pursued a teaching degree in the UK and eventually relocated to Shanghai to continue teaching English. In late 2018, John left his position as an English teacher at a local international school and estab-

lished his own English teaching company. After going into business with a Chinese friend, he leveraged Chinese social media platforms to promote their business through video content about his daily life in China. His efforts bore fruit, particularly during the years 2020 and 2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in online views and student recruitment at his company.

However, despite the commercial success, John found himself navigating new challenges as China's online environment had become increasingly nationalistic. This shift limited his creative freedom, as he felt compelled to address current events and societal issues extremely carefully. Despite his desire to create more meaningful content beyond humorous English-learning videos, he hesitated due to the potential risks associated with expressing honest opinions in the current political and social climate. During the interview, he expressed his concerns to me:

I do have some opinions which are probably not in line with a lot of everyday Chinese opinions. I made one video about ... oh, you remember Trump banned TikTok. I said something like, "It's ok for the Chinese to ban the US companies but not the US banning the Chinese companies--that's a bit hypocritical." Then they (the Chinese followers) responded like, "Oh, you don't understand those companies, Google and..." Anyways. You say one thing, they (the Chinese followers) disagree, and it's like an explosion. (John, 2022)

Similarly, Max also experienced such a general shift. He told me that since the COVID-19 pandemic,

Chinese people's attitudes have changed a lot. It's good to not "worship the West" (崇洋媚外). But they really aren't that friendly anymore. During the pandemic, some people don't get African people to enter the community compound they live [in Guangzhou] You [the Chinese] don't have to be too friendly, but you also don't have to discriminate against foreigners, right? I think the Chinese always like to criticize other people's sense of superiority (优越感). But now, they [the Chinese] have a sense of superiority. (Max, 2021)

However, unlike John, who had struggled to produce meaningful content, Max appeared to be at ease with the shrinking space for discussion on Chinese social media. To give an example, he told me that in one of his videos he had told the Chinese audience that he had "a Chinese heart" (中华心). He consciously chose "a Chinese heart" over its synonym, "a Chinese-nation heart" (中国心), aiming to make it clear to his audience that he was only talking about the culture instead of the politics. "That's why people like me." He then explained confidently,

Basically, I am aware of what I can and cannot say. Within the terrain of what I

can say, I usually like to say it clearly and objectively. Usually, I give the Chinese a different angle from which to look at things. This made me different from most of the foreigners on Chinese social media. They either keep kissing the ass (拍马屁) of China or say something that obviously would be banned. (Max, 2021)

John's narrative highlights the intricate balance between achieving commercial success and manoeuvring through an increasingly nationalistic online environment in China. While initially successful in leveraging Chinese social media platforms for his English teaching venture, John encountered limitations imposed by the growing suspicion towards foreigners and the risks associated with diverging from mainstream Chinese viewpoints. His reluctance to delve into deeper content creation reflects the challenge he has in maintaining originality while evading controversy within a politically charged atmosphere. In contrast, by strategically crafting content that emphasizes his appreciation for Chinese culture while sidestepping political discussion, Max positions himself as more adaptable to changing dynamics on Chinese social media. Despite their divergent approaches to representing themselves during this period of time, both John and Max share narratives that underscore their awareness of the constraints imposed by China's increasingly politicized and sensitive online environment. Amidst this backdrop, they recognize the fragility of their online popularity in China and thereby employ cautious strategies to navigate sensitive topics and steer clear of potential controversies on Chinese social media platforms.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the online self-representations of Mike and Noel as well as the self-narratives of John, Max, and Paul. In doing so, this chapter explores how white male identities in China were negotiated through Western male influencers on Chinese social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. It shows that despite China's relationship with the West becoming increasingly strained and the online environment becoming increasingly hostile and politicized, Western male influencers continued to receive attention and likes on Chinese social media. Peering into these influencers' online self-representations, one notices they often represented themselves as just, compassionate opinion leaders who support China and Chinese people. Using Chinese language skills and cultural sensitivity cultivated by years of lived experience in China, these Western male influencers have carefully navigated the tensions between China and the West.

Nevertheless, despite their efforts, their identities as transnational white males continue to face scrutiny. This is evident in the reactions to Mike and Noel's videos, where their positions amidst geopolitical tensions frequently draw criticism from Chinese audiences. In the midst of this heightened sensitivity, influencers like John find themselves experiencing fatigue, as the creative aspect of their

vlogging seems to give way to worries and boredom, which highlights the vulnerability of Western white male identity within this specific context.

Similar to Chapter 1, this chapter emphasizes that white privilege is fragmented and contested in the Chinese context. The continuous and increasing online attention given to these influencers by their Chinese audience indicates that the Chinese youth indeed long for Western males' recognition and appreciation of a progressive, rising China. However, this racialized and gendered identity not only acts as a category of attraction but also arouses suspicion. This supports the argument that the position of white males in China is diminishing (Farrer, 2019). In particular, informed by the larger geopolitical dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic, white male identity appears to be neither recognized by the Chinese as purely superior nor as purely inferior in relation to Chinese identity but rather fluidly shifts between these poles depending on the situation. Similarly, white skin alone cannot bestow advantages on white Western male influencers. Instead, white skin can only be transformed into capital when combined with other skills and qualities, such as proficiency in the Chinese language, cultural knowledge of Chinese society, and sensitivity to political correctness in the Chinese context.

In the following two chapters, I will further illustrate how the instability of white privilege not only manifests in the presence of Western Euro-Americans in Chinese cinema and social media but also mobilizes white Eastern European and Russian fashion models to migrate to China as precarious aesthetic labourers.

Chapter 3

**Trading Beauty, Making Race:
Whiteness in China's Fashion Modelling Industry**

On a sunny autumn morning in 2021, I entered the reception room of “Fame”, a fashion modelling agency nestled in downtown Shanghai. The walls immediately caught my attention: they were adorned with hundreds of photos featuring fashion models. These models, captured in various styles, formed a captivating montage. Some of the images had clearly aged—their papers had a yellow hue. However, a common thread ran through these images: the absence of Chinese faces and the presence of Caucasian faces: the photo gallery predominantly exhibited fair-skinned, light-haired, and blue- and grey-eyed white models.

Since 2005, Fame has been an active player in the Chinese modelling industry. The agency was run by Chris, a middle-aged Chinese man. He had completed his bachelor’s degree in advertising in the 1990s and hovered around several advertising jobs in the early 2000s. Through study and work experience, Chris saw an opportunity in foreign modelling: in 2002, China entered the World Trade Organization, and many Western brands entered the Chinese market to manufacture and sell clothes and other products in the Chinese market. The Chinese brands, including many previous state-owned enterprises, sought to reinvent their brand images to cope with the increasingly tense competition. White models are desired by all types of companies to represent and promote their products. Anticipating a surge in demand for white models in China’s fashion and advertising sector, Chris founded Fame in 2005 to import foreign models and sell their appearances to Chinese clients. The business experienced significant growth. Initially, Chris transformed his residence into an office to accommodate foreign models who moved to China to work. Over the years, Chris has upgraded to a two-floor office in downtown Shanghai, employing around a dozen Chinese staff members as model bookers to support his expanding enterprise. The agency has collaborated with numerous foreign models—the photo wall in the office’s reception areas only showed a small number of them.

As mentioned earlier in the introduction of this dissertation, fashion is more driven by aspiration and desire than practicality. It serves as a medium for individuals to convey their belongings to a specific class, lifestyle, or exclusive group, thereby establishing social distinction. Fame’s story showcases how whiteness possesses a dynamic premium value that potentially enhances consumer engagement in the Chinese context. It thus prompts several questions regarding the cultural production of whiteness in China: why do modelling agencies like Fame predominantly work with white models? What knowledge guides them when they select and import foreign models, and then sell their appearances to local clients amid the changing market dynamics? How do they mediate the racial hierarchies in this process?

Guided by these questions, this chapter explores what kind of work is needed to produce aesthetic value from foreign models, as well as how racial hierarchies

are mediated through these processes. The current studies on the intersection of race and Chinese fashion advertising have revealed that whiteness holds a dubious position. On the one hand, whiteness often functions as a covert form of domination over the Chinese, as white bodies in Chinese advertisements frequently symbolize desirable ideas such as modernization, cosmopolitanism, and sophistication. On the other hand, whiteness is also marginalized, as white models are often fetishized and sexualized as exotic Other in Chinese advertisements to prompt consumption (Johansson, 1998; Bonnett 2000; Li, 2008). These analyses of the politics of representation have insightfully clarified the complexity of advertising imagery's role in reflecting, reworking, and reproducing racial categories and hierarchies. Furthermore, given that advertising images are indeed centred on symbols and affect, it is understandable that such studies about representation have primarily focused on interpretations and meanings. However, this approach has limited its analysis to representation itself. The imagery of white faces and bodies in Chinese advertisements is ultimately a consumer object. In fashion modelling studies, Mears (2011) has termed this object a "look". According to Mears, structured like other industries, the modelling industry produces "looks" imbued with embodied aesthetic value. Being a product, it takes the efforts of multiple actors in the fashion and advertising industries to produce it.

This chapter thus focuses on how white models' bodies are transformed into images of glamour and desire in Chinese media and how this process involves the modelling agency's efforts. Drawing on the notion of "aesthetic value" (Entwistle, 2002; Mears, 2010), this chapter examines the considerations, know-how, and decisions involved in the daily work of Fame, which centres upon channelling the influx of white foreigners and deploying them in the racialized labour market. By doing so, this chapter aims to shed light on how perceived racial differences play an indispensable role in the valorization of foreign models in China.

Background: China's foreign modelling industry

Echoing Fame's business expansion elaborated in the introduction, China's foreign modelling business has significantly expanded and professionalised since the late 1990s. In the mid-2000s, Fame was one of only a handful of agencies engaging in the foreign model business in Shanghai. The scene had transformed by the late 2010s, with approximately 30 established foreign model agencies and over a thousand foreign models¹⁶ active in the city. Over the past two decades, this industry has extended its reach beyond big cities like Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Hangzhou to other second-tier Chinese cities such as Chengdu,

¹⁶ Given the absence of official documentation, the figures for the number of agencies and models provided here rely on insights gathered from interviews with over ten experienced bookers and models in Shanghai.

Nanjing, and Wuhan. Although there is no official record specifying the number of foreign models in China, a survey conducted by Alibaba in 2018 estimated that there were over 10,000 non-Chinese nationals employed as models in the country, with more than half of them coming from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus (Sohu, 2018). This figure indicates the substantial market demand for white bodies and Western aesthetics in China's fashion and advertising sector.

Agencies like Fame primarily engage in activities centred around selecting foreign models, facilitating their migration to China, and marketing their appearances to local clients, including various brands and advertisers. These agencies typically connect with various modelling agencies abroad, referred to as “mother agencies” (母公司) in the industry. Mother agencies hold long-term contracts with foreign models, and the Chinese agencies are updated about models suitable for and willing to work in the Chinese market. Upon identifying a model they wish to work with, a Chinese agency signs a short-term subcontract with the model. Securing models with potentially high aesthetic value can be competitive: Chinese agencies often offer models attractive salaries. This salary, known as the “guarantee fee” in the business, constitutes an additional monthly fee paid to models on top of their per-client commission. The guarantee fee can vary from a few hundred to a few thousand US dollars per month, depending on the model's standing in the fashion industry and the negotiations between the Chinese and the overseas mother agencies.

Upon the models' arrival in China, Chinese agents embark on the task of promoting the models' appearances to local clients. Such promotion includes creating updated and visually appealing comp cards⁴⁷ for the models, marketing them to a wide range of potential clients, and engaging in negotiations regarding their rates in China. Actively engaging on social media, the Chinese agencies frequently share models' images on Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat and Little Red Book, accompanied by enticing comments highlighting each individual model's selling point, such as “sweet stunner” (甜美尤物) or “mature, business-looking man” (成熟商务帅哥), aiming to capture the attention of potential clients spanning various business entities such as brands, shops, photographers, production companies, casting companies, and intermediary agents.

Once a model is chosen and booked, the bookers need to ensure that the model performs well on the catwalk and in front of the camera, which involves overseeing their poses and facial expressions to meet clients' expectations. Further-

⁴⁷ A comp card—short for “composite card”—serves as a model's business card to present to clients. It usually includes multiple photos of the model, along with details like nationality, measurements, and other physical attributes such as eye and hair colour.

more, model bookers also manage the daily lives of foreign models in Shanghai. On the one hand, they help models navigate Chinese society, providing guidance on where to eat and shop and how to use Chinese apps and public transportation; on the other hand, they monitor models' activities with the agency's interest in mind, ensuring they follow work schedules and maintain a desirable physical appearance (e.g. weight management).

In Shanghai, the rate for photoshoots involving foreign models typically falls within the range of CN¥1,000 to CN¥2,500 per hour (approx. US\$150–350 per hour). For fashion shows, clients generally pay between CN¥3,500 and CN¥5,000 per day (approx. US\$500–715 per day). While the hourly rate in Shanghai is, on average, lower than that in global fashion capitals like Paris, Milan, New York, and London, models in Shanghai often secure a higher volume of jobs per season.¹⁸ Typically, over 50% of the clients' fees go to the modelling agencies. Models may end the season with earnings ranging from US\$0 to US\$15,000 or more, depending on the type and quantity of jobs they get. Estimating the average income for models is difficult due to significant variations from person to person.

Under the Detailed Rules on the Implementation of the Law on the Entry and Exit of Aliens (1994), the Chinese state's migration policy did not recognize modelling as work between the 1990s and early 2000s. However, the border control of foreign migration to China was relatively lenient. At that time, most of the agencies asked models to apply for tourist visas to enter China. However, as the modelling industry in China continues to grow apace, the Chinese state has become increasingly keen on regulating the industry, as reflected in the stricter immigration policies for foreign models. Since 2012, the Chinese authorities have implemented a new Exit and Entry Administrative Law, officially recognizing modelling as formal employment in China. Consequently, foreign models working in China are required to apply for model visas, which constitute a subtype of the Z visa. The Z visa allows foreign models to legally work in China for a maximum duration of 90 days. Upon the end of the period, foreign models must exit the country and are only eligible to reapply for the same type of visa 90 days after their exit.

This requirement contributes to the industry's professionalization as it establishes a formal framework for employment, affirming the legitimacy of models' work. However, the strict visa mandate, such as the requirement for legitimate Chinese modelling agencies to sponsor models to apply for visas, creates a series of barriers for models seeking entry into China and limits the Chinese agencies' access to foreign labourers. This was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic between

¹⁸ Compared with other Asian countries, mainland China, together with Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, is viewed as the more "advanced" market in Asia. These markets not only have significantly higher rates but also more "fashionable" photos than other Asian markets such as India, Indonesia, and Turkey.

2020 and 2022, when the Chinese state imposed stringent travel restrictions.

Racialized aesthetic value in fashion modelling

Modelling as an industry is intricately intertwined with the development of modern consumer culture. With the opening of markets and the increased accessibility of commodities to the public, the modelling industry has experienced significant expansion since the mid-20th century, demanding more models to showcase consumer goods and make them look appealing. As Wissinger (2009) wittily puts it, whether it is the glamorous images in *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*, their shared aim is to “seduce the public into believing that hope could perhaps be found in a jar, and true love and happiness might be possible if one just made the right purchases” (p. 278).

Despite its high visibility in popular media, fashion modelling has not yet received much scholarly attention. Based on empirical research conducted in the modelling scene in London, Entwistle (2002) explores how aesthetic values are created in fashion modelling. She shows that, as a commercial practice, modelling shares all the characteristics of the cultural economy in that it is highly dependent on cultural knowledge. Especially with a rapid turnover in product and labour force, fluctuations and instability in the market demand that modelling agencies understand the differentiated and changing tastes of clients.

Entwistle's analysis relies heavily on Bourdieu (1983) and Blumer's (1969) theoretical insights. According to Bourdieu, the structure of the field of cultural production is based on “two fundamental and quite different oppositions” (p. 333). More specifically, cultural producers tend to either embrace or reject immediate economic rewards (Bourdieu, 1983, as cited in Mears, 2010). Those who produce to please the mass consumers in “large-scale production” embrace the pursuit of “short-term economic profits” (p. 335). Those who produce for the exclusive group in “restricted production” reject the pursuit of immediate economic gain and focus on the accumulation of prestige. Prestige is valuable because it enables one to “make a name for themselves” (p. 338) and grants authority to consecrate good taste (Bourdieu, 1983, p. 333). In Entwistle's (2002) inquiry into the production of aesthetic value in fashion modelling, she also recognizes a similar pattern within the aesthetic economy of fashion. According to her, different “circuits” exist across the range of modelling practices. According to her, the main circuits are the “editorial” and the “commercial” circuits. The editorial circuit looks for models who look edgy and avant-garde. This type of model is usually booked for work that is low-pay yet prestigious, such as editorial pages in fashion magazines and catwalks for luxurious brands. Meanwhile, a model with a conventionally beautiful look is usually booked for well-paid yet less prestigious work, such as catalogues and TV commercials.

Besides the analysis of fashion-for-art and fashion-for-commerce, Entwistle also draws on Blumer's (1969) analysis of the "collective selection" of fashion. According to Blumer, the transformation of collective taste in fashion results from "the diversity of experience that occurs in social interaction in a complex moving world" (1969, p. 281). Players in the field of fashion are "parts of a collective process that responds to changes in taste and sensitivity" (p. 281). Entwistle's (2002) analysis of the modelling scene in London, mirroring Blumer's observation, highlights a key similarity in how industry insiders select models' appearances. As model bookers and other insiders in the fashion world "move within the same networks," they develop what Entwistle terms the "eye" to detect emerging trends and identify models with potential (p. 333).

Since the evaluation of human appearance is always embodied, such a practice is often informed by the existing race-, gender- and class-based norms and hierarchies. Building upon the previous theorization of the aesthetic economy of modelling, Mears (2011) further examines how the intersection of race, gender, and class is played out when fashion professionals evaluate models' bodily aesthetics. According to her, given that a look's aesthetic value is subject to "constant fluctuation" (Entwistle, 2002, p. 317), these fashion gatekeepers, such as modelling agencies, must work with a high level of uncertainty. To reduce the financial risks, workers in the industry collectively rely on race-, gender-, and class-based conventions and hierarchies to select and employ a model. Through this rationalized and collective process, fashion players such as modelling agencies keep "invoking and reworking our shared cultural history of racism when looking for the right look" (p. 42). Echoing Entwistle's findings, Mears (2010, 2011) also highlights the difference between editorial and commercial modelling. According to her, commercial modelling consists of a slightly higher racial diversity since its advertisements aim to appeal to a wider spectrum of consumers. Editorial modelling remains more exclusively the domain of white models since the cultural meanings of racialized bodies render models of racial minorities distant from the socially shared ideas of luxury and exclusivity.

Both Entwistle (2002) and Mears (2010, 2011) use the notion of aesthetic value to insightfully explain the practices of valorization in fashion modelling. However, such a framework is not without a problem. First, their emphasis on the distinction of editorial and commercial circuits, if they accurately characterize today's fashion modelling scene, is primarily based on observations from the Western context. All cultural fields are embedded in transnational center-peripheral systems; however, studies such as these on fashion production tend to focus on centres, leaving the periphery under-theorized (Kuipers et al., 2022). In the field of fashion modelling, Paris, New York, London, and Milan hold considerable influence and authority, given their abundance of prestigious trendsetters such

as fashion weeks, designers, and magazines. In comparison, Shanghai (along with other metropolises in China) holds a relatively peripheral position. In the Chinese context, the divide between editorial and commercial modelling does not appear as the most salient since most modelling work in China is commercial. In China, in contrast, what is more crucial is the distinction between the business of Chinese models and foreign models. Consequently, what is more at stake here is how fashion professionals involved in the modelling industry in China navigate and capitalize on the perceived racial differences.

Furthermore, Entwistle (2002) and Mears (2010, 2011) both conceptualize aesthetic value as revenue, namely, as the pinnacle of income. Such conceptualization prevents us from seeing a fuller picture of the operation of the modelling industry: models are not free resources for other fashion professionals to simply use to create looks; modelling agencies incur expenses when hiring models and bear financial risks when placing them on the market. In other words, a modelling agency's decision to work with a model is not determined solely by the aesthetic appeal of the model's appearance. Instead, it involves balancing that aesthetic appeal with the costs of selling it, such as expenses related to the model's labour and migration. Therefore, rather than focusing only on the aesthetic appeal of white models in the Chinese market, this chapter considers aesthetic value as a balance between revenue and cost. It thus examines how Chinese modelling agencies seek white models with high aesthetic appeal who come with low labour costs. In doing so, this chapter addresses the intersections of race-, class-, and nationality-based hierarchies inherent in the agencies' commodification of white bodies.

Let me rephrase the research questions asked earlier. This chapter aims to interrogate: What leads modelling agencies like Fame to prioritize working with white models? What kind of work needs to be done to produce aesthetic value from white bodies? What role do agencies play in mediating racial hierarchies?

This chapter is based on my seven-month participant observation and interviews conducted at the modelling agency Fame, coupled with interviews involving 13 potential clients in Shanghai from 2021 to 2022. My methodology at Fame employed a practice-theory-driven approach to gather insights into the daily work of Chinese model bookers. According to Reckwitz (2002), the term "practice" in practice theory is "a routinized type of behaviour in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described, and the world is understood" (p. 150). Moreover, the practice here is not only understandable to the agents who perform and carry it out but also to the potential observer. Adhering to this approach, I conducted participatory observation at the Fame agency by learning and helping with their daily work. This included attending the monthly staff meetings to discuss business strategy, preparing documents

for models' visa applications, selecting new models, and accompanying models to their jobs. I conducted semi-structured interviews by asking my participants work-related questions and sometimes by simply chatting with them at work, dinners, and parties. In parallel with my fieldwork conducted at Fame, I also interviewed 13 potential clients for foreign models in China. These potential clients included Chinese fashion designers, artistic directors of brands, fashion magazine editors, and advertisement producers who were based in Shanghai. Most of them were in their 30s and 40s, and more than half had study and work experience abroad. My questions for them mainly focused on their perspectives regarding the aesthetic appeals of predominantly white foreign models within China's fashion and advertising scene. For instance, I asked whether they had hired or intended to hire white foreign models, why, and whether their choices aligned with the broader fashion trends in Shanghai or China.

Why white models?

On a nearly daily basis, Chris, who maintained connections with numerous modeling agencies abroad, routinely shared photos of models from different countries with other Chinese staff at Fame, seeking their opinions on potential collaborations. The bookers discussed these candidates' commercial potential in the Chinese market. Despite the company labelling itself as a "foreign model agency" (外模公司), the photos Chris presented to other bookers were of predominantly white models. Occasionally, when Chris introduced images of models from places like Pakistan or India, the Chinese jokingly remarked, "*Really? Chris, I didn't know that you had such eclectic taste!*"

Bookers' responses to Chris echo not only the high proportion of whiteness on the company's photo wall but also the demographic of foreign models working with Fame. During my seven-month research at Fame, the agency worked with 20 foreign models. Among them, 18 were white models from countries like Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Serbia, Montenegro, Brazil, and France, and two were black-looking models. When I inquired with Chinese booker Sara about the market preference for white models, she corrected me, explaining that

*in fact, over the past five years, the Chinese clients have become more receptive to non-white models. However, the market for white models is still significantly larger, so from the perspective of the modelling agencies, working with white models is generally **safer**.*

Such a preference for white foreign models also manifested in the agency's lack of cultural and aesthetic knowledge of non-white foreign models. When bookers occasionally looked at non-white foreign model candidates, they often relied on racial stereotypes in fashion—such as picturing black models in sportswear—to

see whether their looks have any potential in the Chinese market. In an interview with Chris, he confessed his confusion in this regard:

*I once imported a black American male model. He sold well in the US. Also, in my personal opinion, he looked pretty good. So, I decided to give it a go and let him come to Shanghai. However, he didn't get as many jobs in China as I expected. I know the Chinese market is becoming more open to dark-skinned models, but I think it is still not yet ready [to embrace dark-skinned models]. I do not feel like **risking** it, especially now [during the COVID-19 pandemic], when getting a model to come to China is already costly enough. Also, I feel that I have better sensitivity for white models than models of other skin colors. It does not mean that I do not make mistakes. However, since I have years of experience, I know whether a white model would be liked by Chinese clients as soon as I see their pictures and measurements. But for non-white models, I am not that confident. (Chris, 2021)*

The words “safe” and “risky” used by Chris and Sara describe the company’s primary consideration when evaluating a foreign model’s appearance. The act of working with a foreign model carries inherent risks, involving investments in visas, flight tickets, accommodation, portfolio, and so on. Additionally, predicting whether a model will be hired frequently in the Chinese market remains uncertain. In navigating financial risk, the agency places significant emphasis on perceived racial categories such as white, black, and brown. To minimize potential financial losses, Chinese model bookers tended to exclude most non-white foreign models, especially when the market became turbulent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fame’s employment of the two Black-looking models during my fieldwork followed the same rationale. Unlike the white foreign models at Fame, most of whom were full-time contract workers, both Black-looking models worked only part-time. Tom, a 25-year-old male from Madagascar, had studied tourism at a university in Guangzhou. Modelling served only as a transitional endeavour for him, allowing exploration of various opportunities within the Chinese job market. His collaboration with Fame was brief since he soon found a job as a basketball teacher at a school in Beijing. The other black model was Adela, a 24-year-old black-looking female model from Tanzania. At the age of 19, she came to China to study engineering. In 2020, she decided to try her luck in China’s modelling job market. Like Tom, she had never been a professional model before Fame. Nevertheless, they were shrewd investments for Fame. The agency did not need to pay commission to a third party, nor did it have to make efforts to secure visas for these two models.

As I went along with Adela to various castings, I got a fuller picture of the mar-

ginal positions of non-white foreign models in the market. In most of the castings, the clients did not consider Adela an option. On some occasions, the clients simply asked all the white models to show their poses while letting Adela stand nearby and watch. Within six months, Adela only got about ten jobs. These jobs mainly featured streetwear catalogue shootings and fashion shows, where clients wanted to mix different skin colours to present an international, culturally diverse image. Once, at a British fashion brand's show, a young Chinese female make-up artist asked me with a degree of embarrassment in the dressing room,

Does your black girl (黑人女孩) have her facial powder with her? Could you ask her for me? I feel sorry, but right now, I don't have dark colours in the palette to match her skin. Nobody told me there would be a black model doing this show.

In the end, the production team decided to let Adela walk on the stage without makeup since, according to them, nobody would “notice the difference”.

These occurrences indicate that whiteness is normalized and considered “second nature” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 129), while blackness and brownness are often viewed as exceptions, potentially less profitable or risky. More importantly, they reveal that white privilege, in the eyes of Chinese modelling agencies, is not oppressive but generative and enabling, functioning as a technology to generate financial gain. In the following section, I will further elucidate the commodification of white bodies in China's modelling industry by showing how Chinese modelling agencies select and import the most profitable white foreign models for the Chinese market.

Selecting white models: navigating the declining aesthetic value of whiteness?

Alongside my research at Fame, I also had the opportunity to socialize and engage in conversations with Chinese fashion professionals who were potential clients for foreign models in Shanghai, asking about their perceptions of foreign models in China.

Chang is a fashion producer who has owned a shooting studio in suburban Shanghai for over a decade. In an interview in his studio, he told me that over the past 10 years, there had been a growing “sense of pride in Chinese ethnicity” (民族自豪感) and a reduced inclination towards “worshipping the West” (崇洋媚外) among the ordinary Chinese people. This transformation is evident in the pricing for Chinese models. Chang recalled his experience:

Five or six years ago, it was not like this at all. If you offered just RMB 200 per day for a show, numerous relatively fine Chinese models would still be lining up at your door, hoping to get selected. (Chang, 2021)

Certainly, while the rates for foreign models have shown relative stability in the past decade, there has been a notable increase in the rates for Chinese models. Upon entering the field in 2021, I also observed that the majority of Chinese models affiliated with prominent agencies in Shanghai commanded rates similar to or even higher than those of foreign models.

Shui, a fashion editor and stylist for a prestigious fashion magazine, told me that although his choice of models depended on the overall aesthetic effects they wanted to achieve, they mostly employ Chinese models and Chinese celebrities. Indeed, browsing through the Chinese editions of *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Bazaar*, and *Número* in the past three years, I found that most of the covers and editorial pages featured Chinese bodies and faces. When it comes to white foreign models in Shanghai, Shui said in a rather joking tone,

*I am a bit reserved about them--not that I have a prejudice against them as individuals. It's more like, for us [the elite Chinese fashion professionals in Shanghai], white models are for **the masses, the ordinary Chinese**, such as those who sell and buy in cheaper shops on Taobao and who live in second-tier Chinese cities. (Shui, 2021)*

Shui's narrative emphasizes that some elite Chinese fashion professionals see themselves as more than just intermediaries between European and American fashion. They prefer Chinese bodily aesthetics over white ones, setting them apart from average Chinese fashion workers and consumers who often follow Western standards and trends, which value whiteness highly. Interestingly, this view was not only shared by Shui, whose work mainly targeted middle- and upper-middle-class Chinese consumers but also by several potential clients whose products were aimed at ordinary Chinese consumers. As mentioned earlier, since fashion industry players often move across the same social networks, their tastes in model aesthetics tend to converge (Entwistle, 2002). Although this research does not aim to gather a large number of opinions from clients in Shanghai and across China, it is not too speculative to argue that the preference for Chinese over white models will increase in the coming years.

In addition to the growing scepticism surrounding the aesthetic of white bodies, there are practical concerns about using white foreign models in the age of the platform economy, where fashion influencers are gaining increasingly prominent positions. Donna held the position of public relations representative for a price-friendly Chinese fashion brand named R, which specifically caters to the demographic of trendy, urban, and youthful Chinese consumers. She shared with me that during the 2021 F/W Shanghai Fashion Week, they ended up paying CNY¥80,000 (\$11,250) to a male Chinese fashion influencer to work as the open-

ing model for their womenswear show. Donna explained to me that occurrences like this were unlikely for an average foreign model in Shanghai:

Foreign models may have good body shape, but they are merely good clothes hangers (衣架子). The Chinese would not remember their faces. With the growing importance of e-commerce, you have to find someone who is well-known to Chinese consumers and who is topical in China, as they can attract customers' online attention. (Donna, 2022)

The willingness to spend high fees on Chinese models was not unique to brand R. Sitting in Fame's office; I often heard the Chinese bookers chatting about the high fees charged for Chinese models by other modelling agencies who worked predominantly with Chinese models. According to them, a Chinese model with a relatively high status (though not at the very top) in China's modelling scene could easily demand a daily fee ranging from CN¥30,000 to 60,000 (\$4,180–8,360) per day, which could scarcely apply to any foreign models working in China.

Given the vast array of potential clients in China, Shui and Donna's perceptions and experiences may not accurately represent the preferences of all potential clients. This chapter also does not assert a general decline in the aesthetic value of white models. After all, during my fieldwork, foreign models at Fame remained busy with castings in the city of Shanghai. Nevertheless, the viewpoints expressed by the two participants suggest that not all Chinese clients perceived white models as embodying greater aesthetic value compared to their Chinese counterparts. Earlier research has indicated that the images of white models in Chinese advertisements go beyond physical attributes and embody a cultural desire for Westernness (Johansson, 1998; Li, 2008). However, I suggest that this desire is not fixed or all-encompassing since the Chinese perceptions of whiteness are multiple, open-ended, and subject to change. In particular, as China continues its gradual ascent on the global stage, there has been a noticeable improvement in the financial status of (elite) Chinese individuals. The new generation of Chinese fashion professionals, who have had more opportunities for international exposure, are reshaping, if not diminishing, China's cultural aspirations associated with whiteness.

How did modelling agencies navigate such changing values of white bodies in the Chinese advertising business? Being experienced players in fashion modelling, the Chinese staff at Fame were well aware of the Chinese clients' changing and increasingly diversified perceptions of white models. When I asked Chris about how his business had evolved over the course of two decades, Chris recalled, in his words, the "golden age" in the late 2000s with a nostalgic tone. At that time, Fame was one of the only modelling agencies in Shanghai that specialized in

foreign models. It was so new that Chris had to call various clothing companies and factories to explain what his service was about. To save on the budget, Chris combined their office, home, and his business and private life. It was not a very professionalized business, but Chris enjoyed it: it was “*fun and full of adventures*” —and more importantly, it was easier to make profit. As he explained to me,

In the 2000s, when we told clients how good some foreign models looked, the clients would simply believe us. They were a bit gullible because they didn't know how to look at foreigners ... The major shift was caused by Taobao—the rise of e-commerce [in the 2010s]. From then, the foreign modelling industry in China quickly became professionalized. A lot of new agencies and a lot of Russian and Eastern European models came in. This shift was not to my taste; I found the industry became a little toxic (乌烟瘴气) because everyone just came in for money. In the past two years, Chinese people have become more and more culturally confident (文化自信), and clients have become increasingly picky and sharp. It's a good thing, but since many no longer believe white faces have more value than Chinese faces, to earn money in today's modelling business, you need to have really well-qualified (高质量) foreign models. (Chris 2021)

To work exclusively with white models who embody higher aesthetic potential, Fame has been refining its “aesthetic sensibility” (Entwistle, 2002, p. 333) to read the current trends and identify those who have high potential to be booked by the increasingly picky Chinese clients. This effort was in part translated into their increasingly strict requirement for the degree of youthfulness of a model's look, especially for female models. Sitting in Fame's office and accompanying the bookers to evaluate female model candidates' pictures, they often used phrases such as “*too old*” (太老了), “*too mature*” (太成熟了), “*too auntie*” (太大妈了) to criticize a model's look. When asked why, they explained that most of the Chinese clients, particularly those who are in e-commerce such as “*Taobao clients*”, prefer models who look “*tender*” (嫩) and “*girlish*” (有少女感).

The fashion industry has always primarily focused on portraying clothes on slim bodies, only hiring young female models who fit into the category of having such measurements. In general, ageing has never been perceived positively in the fashion industry. Such ageism in fashion advertising is more evident in China. In Yang's examination of how female beauty is mobilized to develop China's beauty economy, she points out that the liberation of women's bodies since the early 1980s has been perceived as a form of therapy to redress women's fatigue stemming from their participation in the labour process in Mao's planned economy (Yang, 2011, p. 340). This liberation leaves the body available to be freely adorned and exploited, consequently fueling the trend of youthful femininity in Chinese consumer culture.

This trend, in turn, caters to the taste and pleasure of a male-dominated hierarchy in China. Chinese bookers also actively incorporate such a beauty ideal to emulate the aesthetic appeal of white models. In the process, white bodies also come under scrutiny within the framework of gender norms specific to the Chinese cultural context, indicating the increasing power of China asserting standards towards white foreign labourers.

Furthermore, the efforts of Chinese bookers to uphold the aesthetic appeal of white models were also reflected in their reserved attitudes towards models who embody “*Eastern European*” and “*Russian*” features. When I asked the bookers to elaborate on the physical aspect of these features, they found it challenging to pinpoint facial and bodily features that were essentially Eastern European or Russian. However, when it comes to the cultural meanings revolving around Eastern Europeanness and Russianness, they could without any hesitation: “*too Eastern European*” (太东欧)—according to the bookers—refers to models who appear to look “*too rural*” (太土), “*not sufficiently high-end*” (不够高级), or “*excessively sexy*” (太性感). These were qualities believed to lack aesthetic value or only appeal to consumers of lower-class status in Shanghai’s modelling market. Conversely, bookers generally held positive views on white models who may resemble “*North-ern Europeanness*”, “*Western Europeanness*”, or “*North Americanness*”.

Much scholarship has pointed out that within popular discourse in Western Europe, Eastern Europe has commonly been perceived as the margin of civilization and modernity in Europe (Narkowicz, 2023). In racial terms, Böröcz (2021) coins “*eu-rowhiteness*” to describe a “pristine, untainted ‘White’ subjecthood” in the European Union, which distinguishes itself not only from the non-white but also from the “less immaculate, either diasporic or ‘eastern’ variety of whiteness”, or what he calls “*dirty white*” (p. 1129). Within this context, the Chinese model bookers’ avoidance of Eastern European looks, and by extension, the cultural meanings of Eastern European bodies, is interesting. On the one hand, the preference for Western European over Eastern European white bodies reinforces the existing discourse of intra-European hierarchy. On the other hand, it also reveals an increasingly common perception of the racialized position of the Chinese self in consumer culture: while the white Western European identity still embodies the glamour and high-classness that “we” Chinese wish to embrace and become, the white Eastern European identity is seen as something “we” Chinese have surpassed, rendering the looks of Eastern European white bodies less relevant and valuable.

Importing models: calculating migration costs

The previous section shows that Chinese model bookers considered Russian and Eastern European looks to be aesthetically less desirable. However, more often than not, it is Eastern European and Russian models who have moved to China

and performed the desirability of Western Europeanness in the past decade. Alibaba's investigation into foreign models in China reveals that 38% of them originate from Russia, 22% from Ukraine, and 8% from Belarus (Sohu, 2018). These three countries account for over half of China's total foreign model population. Chinese booker Ian explained his consideration and calculation,

Models from wealthier countries like France and the Netherlands are less likely to move to China to work. Especially those young ones whose parents are reluctant to send their kids to such a faraway place to work. However, for young Eastern Europeans, many of their families are poor and less likely to find a well-paid job in their home countries. With the money they earn in China, they can live a better life and may be able to support their family back home. Also, the guarantee fee for Eastern European models is, on average, lower, especially for those who are inexperienced. So, for us, it is really about finding treasures among Eastern European [and Russian] models. (Ian, 2022)

Ian's explanation implies that the perfect workforce, or what he refers to as "treasures", is characterized by individual models inhabiting a paradoxical position: on the one hand, they need to embody elements of refinement and sophistication, which is often expressed through the idea of Western European and North American whiteness; on the other hand, they must maintain a lower socioeconomic status that makes them exploitable. Models from economically deprived countries like Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine were perceived as promising labour sources due to their availability and affordability. The physical appearance of an Eastern European model is advantageous due to its aesthetic proximity to a Western European body. However, they are simultaneously positioned as cheap substitutes and, therefore, inferior to Western European whiteness. Eastern European and Russian whiteness, in this sense, occupies what Narkowicz calls a "complex in-between", "white but not quite" position (Narkowicz, 2023, p. 1547).

Given the broader geopolitical context, however, modelling agencies like Fame find themselves with limited autonomy to act according to their preferences. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022, the Chinese state imposed stringent travel restrictions. Then, on 24 February, 2022, Russia initiated a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These events resulted in a suspension of Fame's importation of foreign models from Russia and Ukraine due to the lack of available labour and the challenges associated with Chinese visa applications. Faced with these circumstances, the agency shifted its attention to models from European Union (EU) countries, where the visa application process was relatively manageable.

In contrast to his experiences with Russian and Eastern European models, owner Chris seemed to grapple with more inner conflicts when considering hiring West-

ern European models. During my fieldwork, he complained several times about the French modelling agencies he was working with:

These agencies still hold the old idea ... when this owner [of a French modelling agency] talked to me, I could feel that he thinks they are superior to the Chinese ... but I know that, deep down, he is aware that China is one of the best places where he could send his models to earn money right now. (Chris, 2022)

Despite his complaints, Chris still signed a sub-contract with Theo, a French male model from that agency.

Well, I voluntarily bought a business-class flight ticket for Theo. It cost US\$15,000! Ah well, I just hope the flight will not be cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As long as he can enter China, I am sure everything will be fine. He has a perfect European man's face(一张完美的欧洲男人的脸)—he will get many jobs in China. (Chris, 2022)

As Chris had hoped, Theo managed to arrive in semi-lockdown Shanghai and, eventually, brought substantial profit to Fame. However, the Chinese model bookers did not always successfully profit from the white foreign models they imported. Since the aesthetic evaluation of a model's look is subjective, not all the white foreign models' looks resonated with clients' preferences. This difficulty is also exacerbated by the winner-take-all nature of the industry, where only a small number of white foreign models have the opportunity to achieve substantial success. Model bookers were, therefore, used to the fact that some white foreign models they imported from abroad would not bring them sizeable profits. Chinese model booker Dave succinctly expressed, "*To be honest, agencies typically rely on those few top-selling models to generate profits. The majority of models are not as profitable—they can be counted as 'also-ran' (陪跑的).*"

As mentioned in the background section, since 2013, foreign models have been legally allowed to work in China for a maximum of 90 days at a time. After the 90-day period, Chinese agencies are not allowed to submit a new application for the same model for another 90 days. The regulatory framework imposes pressure on agencies to expedite the promotion of foreign models within a restricted time-frame. Booker Sara elucidated such pressure by comparing contrasting strategies used by model agencies in China to market foreign and Chinese models in China:

For Chinese models, ideally, you would be selective and careful about who you work with. You'd prefer to let them work with good brands and photographers in China. Then, you can present these photos to other clients and

ask for a higher price. But foreign models have only been here for several months. So, there is no point in doing that [be selective about the clients]. Selling foreign models is really about quantity rather than quality. It would be ideal if they worked every day in China. (Sara, 2021)

In such circumstances, whenever Chinese bookers encountered a top-selling white model, they expected the model to be resilient and hard-working, taking on as many jobs as possible within the Chinese market. As I will elucidate in the next chapter, this business strategy of capitalizing on white bodies often leads to significant levels of estrangement and fatigue for white foreign models despite their privileged access to the Chinese job market.

Managing foreign models: pride and prejudice

It was a cold December afternoon. In the office at 6 p.m., Chinese booker Orange took the cake from the fridge and decorated the office table with a white cloth and some candles. Dave ordered a few bottles of wine and beer. At around 6:30, Fame's models arrived at the office. It was the Brazilian male model Gabriel's birthday, and the agency was about to celebrate the special day with him. Gabriel was always passionate and expressive. This time, he came in almost in tears, "*Oh dear Chris, I love you so much! I told my mom Fame was my family in China. I love you guys, really.*" Dave hugged Gabriel and said, "*Hey bro, I love you too.*" Chris remained calm, as always, but one could see the joy lingering on his face. Everyone else smiled and thanked Gabriel. People opened the wine and beer bottles and chatted with each other. Besides Sara and Chris, the rest of the Chinese staff did not speak fluent English, but that did not prevent them from chatting with these young foreigners about their work, hometowns, and life stories. The atmosphere was relaxed and cheerful. And by 9 p.m., everyone appeared to be a bit tipsy in the warm candlelight.

Having read the Chinese bookers' racialized calculation of models' aesthetic values in the previous sections, one might find such a joyful scene absurd and hypocritical. At the same time, one might as well recognize the complexity of transnational person-to-person encounters here. To navigate and profit from white bodies in China's media consumption, Chinese bookers iterate and reproduce racial norms in their work setting all the time. However, this type of business also involves more than just selling abstract notions of beauty and race. On one level, foreign models are bought and used as aesthetic commodities. On another level, however, there is the person-to-person business relationship between the foreign models and the Chinese model bookers. One can be a profit-driven beauty trader but still have personal bonds with the beauty that one trades. This complexity and messiness are particularly evident when the Chinese bookers manage the foreign models who have moved to Shanghai to work with them.

The most frequently used Chinese word to articulate different aspects of their managerial work of models is *guan* (管). Guan in Chinese means either to control, to discipline, or to provide and guarantee. It often describes the relationship between the government and its citizens, employers and employees, teachers and students, and parents and children. The term often evokes a patriarchal sense of intervention, caring yet controlling. In the context of Fame, the Chinese bookers *guan* models by monitoring their weight, hairstyles, postures, and dressing styles to ensure their sales during their stay in China. At the same time, they *guan* models by taking care of their daily lives and helping them navigate Chinese society.

The conflicting practices inherent in the notion of *guan* can be best exemplified by the Chinese booker Jacob's description of his experience of accompanying models to fashion shows. At one lunch break, I asked how he felt about being a mediator between the foreign models and the Chinese clients. While eating noodles, he replied,

*Foreigners are so used to being free (自由惯了). Their personalities are often a bit too **lazy and lack self-discipline**. When we arrived at the location, they often ran away to do their own things, wandering around and going outside to smoke or buy coffee, like kindergarten kids. So, one big part of my job is to keep them in my sight or to catch them and convince them to go back to work. All in all, we need to manage (*guan*) them well ... However, Chinese clients often believe that since they pay for these models, they are entitled to fully control them during those hours. I understand that they [the clients] are eager to work efficiently, but letting models stand there for seven or eight hours is also very inhumane! I try to ensure models are not too bored or tired at work. Basically, it is about finding a balance between the two sides: to let models work well but also ensure their well-being ... honestly, I often find myself in an awkward position because it is hard to please both sides simultaneously.*

By saying foreign models are “lazy” and “lack self-discipline”, Jacob reinforces the idea that foreign models are apart from “us” Chinese, who are diligent, hard-working, and self-disciplined. Jacob's perception of the foreign models is not unique. In the office, the Chinese bookers' discussions about the models often easily ran into a binary of “we” Chinese and “they” foreigners. Especially when there were conflicts of interest between the Chinese and the foreign models, the boundaries between Chineseness and foreignness could suddenly become solidified.

Anton was a 21-year-old white male who was moving from Ukraine to Shanghai to work with Fame. He was considered as the bestseller at the agency for his boyish,

youthful look. Despite the fact that the bookers were happy with the commercial potential of Anton's aesthetic appeal in the Chinese market, he was often seen as trouble since there had been a few incidents where he had upset the clients by being late or uncooperative. Behind Anton's back, bookers often employed race- and class-based stereotypes to complain, or rather make sense of Anton: *"All the Eastern Europeans are here for money. These gold-diggers—they have no big ambitions."* *"He is so young and naive. He thinks he's a big star now, but once he returns to Ukraine, he will be no one."* *"Let me say something straightforward: only these kids from the poor families of Eastern Europe would come to China."*

Another popular target in the office was Julia, a 26-year-old white female model from Poland. In contrast to Anton, Julia was considered to be a polite, mature, and responsible girl. However, since she moved to China, she had gained some weight due to stress problems. A few clients had filed complaints, claiming that she looked different from the images in her portfolio. While the bookers had great expectations of the deals Julia could bring to them, in reality, Julia got few jobs. The bookers thus often commented on her look in the office: *"So fat, like Winnie-the-pooh."* *"She looks so auntie."* *"Is this a model? I can't believe it."* To make sense of the reason she lost her *"beauty"*, bookers' often explained in a musing tone, *"Well, many models gain weight because the Chinese food is too delicious. Poland food, no, no, no. They [the Polish] are so happy to be in Shanghai."* *"I have seen many models in the past years. Once they arrived in China, they ate a lot of food. Hotpot, Korean BBQ..."*

However, echoing Jacob's conflicted perceptions of foreign models working with Chinese clients at fashion shows, the Chinese bookers' racialized remarks about two models in the office were only part of the story. On 24 February 2022, Russia launched its military invasion of Ukraine, which later escalated to a full-scale Russian-Ukrainian War. The next day, every booker in the office was worried about Anton. Some bookers sent Anton messages to ask how he was. *"He only said 'thanks, bro'. Hmmm."* *"As long as he is safe and good, it's fine. Poor kid."* In the following two weeks, Anton was absent from work: he neither picked up calls from the bookers nor went to jobs according to the agency's work schedule. Anton's absence caused business problems for the bookers: not only were all the bookings cancelled, but some clients also became upset with the bookers. On one morning, Chinese booker Benjamin had been forced to call the client to apologize. He complained about Anton's attitude towards work again. Unlike before, when the other bookers usually would follow up on the complaints, the office room remained quiet. Booker Sara broke the silence: *"Ah, please, Benjamin, put yourself in his shoes. You are being a bit harsh now."*

Similarly, the Chinese bookers' perceptions of Julia were not only about her eat-

ing habits and body shape. Having accomplished her bachelor's in economics at a Polish university, Julia applied for a master's programme at a Chinese university while working in China as a model. During the application process, part of the information she needed was only available in Chinese. Besides, when the application proceeded to the point where she had to pay the application fee, her bank card did not work. Since Julia knew few Chinese besides the bookers, she turned to booker Ian for help. When Ian received Julia's message, he frowned.

"What's up?" I asked. While shaking his head, he said, "*These models often think I am their housekeeper... but things like this are not part of my job. They've asked me to fetch parcels for them, asked me this and that...eh!*" He then went back to his phone to type. However, after a while, I saw him opening that university's website. "So, are you gonna help her?" I asked. "*Hmmm, yes, hehe. I am just a little too soft-hearted ... Well, it's a good thing that Julia wants to study because modelling is eating from one's youthfulness (吃青春饭), not sustainable.*"

In both cases, the popular perceptions of the Chinese Self vis-à-vis foreign Others are embedded in the Chinese bookers' comments. Their complaints about Anton's lack of discipline and respect reinforce the class-based racial stereotype that Eastern European opportunists exploit China's booming economy. In doing so, the bookers also enact the popular perceptions of the Chinese as economically and morally superior to the Eastern European Other. Similarly, the bookers' perceptions of Julia further activate a sense of Chinese cultural superiority over its Western counterpart. However, although the Chinese bookers' daily practices are far from independent of the global and local racial norms, they are not fully conforming to them every moment. While they stigmatized Anton as a fortune-seeker who took advantage of his white look, they also saw him as an unfortunate young person who had to experience unbearable sorrow caused by the war. Despite the discrimination against Julia for her body shape, they also appreciated her as a kind, ambitious girl. These instances show that in recognizing social boundaries made by race, it is essential to take into account different social settings and perceive race not as an object "out there" but as a "relational entity" enacted "in here" (M'Charek, 2013, p. 421).

Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how racial hierarchies are mediated and negotiated on the production side of culture, in this case, in fashion modelling in China. Conceptualizing models' aesthetic value as a combination of the aesthetic potential of a look and the associated costs of selling that look, this chapter has elucidated how modelling agencies select, import, and market predominantly white foreign models in the Chinese market. I show that to navigate the turbulent market, modelling agencies carefully balance a foreign model's aesthetic potential and labour cost. Leveraging prevalent racial and gender norms within the

Chinese context, the Chinese model bookers strategically chose white models who embodied Western European aesthetics. Concurrently, they actively sought cost-effective labour to expedite sales, constructing the ideal foreign models as cheap, resilient, and hardworking labour migrants who are ready to be exploited. Interestingly, Russian and Eastern European white models, in this case, stand out as the ideal labour source due to their aesthetic proximity to a Western European white body and their lower labour costs.

Shifting away from analysing the cultural representations of white identities, this chapter has explored white formation through the commodification of foreign models with white embodiment in China. On the one hand, I have examined the intersection of whiteness, class, and nationality, highlighting the role of China and Chinese business people in mediating inequalities and perceived hierarchies without and within the white population. On the other hand, I have revealed that white privilege in China does not solely confer material advantages to individuals racialized as white. Within the context of the market economy, the Chinese who run the model agencies and trade the foreign models also financially benefit from the allure of white bodies in China.

As I will show in the following chapter, which is also the last empirical chapter of this dissertation, the tension between white privilege and precarity and the commodification of white bodies in China's market economy is evident not only in the work of Chinese model agencies but also in the lived experiences of foreign models who migrate to China to work.

Chapter 4

Between Privilege and Precarity:

Performing Racialized Aesthetic Labour in China's Modelling Industry

In 2021, the UCCA gallery in Beijing showcased Chinese fashion photographer Li Xiaoliang's photo series "Peking Apartment". Created between 2015 and 2019, this series offers a glimpse into the everyday lives of foreign models residing in Beijing. Through Li's lens, foreign models, primarily white female models, are captured in their rented apartments, offering a sharp contrast to the glamorous imagery often associated with their profession. Instead of the polished façade of advertisements, Li's photos reveal a sense of weariness and isolation in the models' expressions as they relax in their apartments. The depicted apartments lack luxury. These spaces are marked by rumpled bed sheets and walls decorated by images torn off from magazines, reminiscent of the feel of university dormitories in China.

The existing literature exploring the intersection of whiteness and employment often asserts that people who are categorized as white tend to benefit from privileged access to job opportunities and experience better treatment in the workplace. In other words, white privilege is ingrained within the capitalist economy's labour system. However, Li's "Peking Apartment" series presents an intriguing counternarrative to this argument about whiteness. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the migration of foreign models to China is largely driven by the perceived advantages of being white within the modelling industry in China. In essence, white models possess an unearned advantage since their embodiment of whiteness enables them to profit within the Chinese market compared to non-white models. Nevertheless, characterized by low-skilled and temporary employment, the ability of white models to leverage their white bodies into substantial advantages is questionable. Despite the allure of white bodies within the industry, the transient nature of modelling work often fails to provide white models with the opportunity for long-term prosperity.

In the preceding chapter, I outlined the demarcation of racial boundaries and the perpetuation of white superiority within the operational practices of Chinese modelling agencies. In this chapter, I examine whiteness from the perspective of the lived experiences of foreign models, teasing out the multifaceted nature of the intersection of whiteness and work. This chapter asks: How do white bodies benefit foreign models in their workplace? And how do these models' foreigner statuses disadvantage them? Put differently, I will analyse white models' work experiences in China and how these experiences are intricately linked with their racialized positions. I show that while the benefits of whiteness may initially seem promising, they often prove transient. Despite the immediate advantages afforded by their racial identity, white foreign models often find themselves grappling with the challenges inherent in a competitive and exploitative job market. The promise of better opportunities is overshadowed by the harsh realities of navigating a workforce where their white privilege does not shield them from exploitation and marginalization. White privilege in this context is immediate yet fleeting.



Figure 7 & 8 Li Xiaoliang's photo series "Peking Apartment" (2015 to 2019)

Racialized aesthetic labour

According to Du Bois, race is as fundamental a notion as class in understanding the emergence and development of capitalism. From the Atlantic coerced labour in the plantations to the East India Company's domination of the cotton and spice trade in Asia, the intertwining of racism and capitalism has channelled its profits into industrial expansion in Europe. Racism paved the way for the emergence and expansion of industrial capitalism as it justified various forms of exploitation and expropriation of non-whites (Du Bois, 1903/1994, as cited in Prasad, 2023). Following Du Bois, Cedric Robinson (1983) coins "racial capitalism", articulating how race and capitalism have co-created the modern world. According to him, capitalism is by nature racial because capital can only accumulate by moving through the unequal relations between different social groups. The antinomies such as "capitalists/workers" and "creditors/debtors" mean that capitalist accumulation, in his words, "requires loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value" (1983, p. 4). Thus, racism "enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires" (1983, p. 4). Despite a gradual transformation from overt racism to covert racism since the Second World War, the global labour system is far from being a colour-blind system that treats workers as "equally disembodied and exploitable masses" (Bonacich et al., 2008, p. 352). Instead, capitalism has remained dependent on racialization, rooted in a system of white supremacy, to thoroughly exploit labour (Bonacich et al., 2008).

Much research has explored how capitalism has been pivotal in shaping white people's positionality and experiences at work. Roediger (1991/2007) uses the term "the wages of whiteness" to describe how, during the antebellum period, white identity granted working-class Americans in the North a sense of superiority over black workers. This psychological wage helped offset their sense of exploitation at work while discouraging any solidarity with black workers. Lipsitz (2006, as cited in Prasad, 2023) suggests that, in contemporary US society, whiteness often functions as symbolic capital in that it reduces a variety of economic competitions for white players in capitalist games.

Recent research on people who are racialized as white in migratory contexts indicates whiteness also confers advantages in employment opportunities beyond the West. However, with whiteness transforming from a majority to a minority, foreign identity, whiteness in this context complicates the prevalent arguments about whiteness as "always-and-only privileging" (Moosavi, 2022). For instance, P.C. Lan's (2011) research shows that white Western English teachers enjoy a set of racialized material and symbolic advantages in the field of English teaching. However, due to the transformation from a major to a minority, foreign identity, it is difficult for this group of people—who often have few skills in other fields—to move to jobs unrelated to their English proficiency. This difficulty in

valorizing whiteness in professional fields other than English teaching is termed “territory-bound” whiteness by P.C. Lan (2011, p. 1669). Hof (2021) researches the intersection of race and skill in the knowledge economies in Singapore and Japan. She suggests that while self-identified white migrants still accrue benefits from their whiteness, this racial privilege is often superficial and inactive, termed by her as “passive whiteness”. In writing about English teachers’ racialized positions in China, S. Lan (2022) distinguishes the term “white privilege” from “white skin privilege” by suggesting that the former describes the structural marginalization of non-white identities in Western societies. “White skin privilege” in China, in contrast, is based on the “racialization of white foreigners as a visible minority under multiple Chinese gazes” and operates as “a form of embodied racial capital” in China (Lan, 2022, p. 5). Similarly, Moosavi’s (2022) autobiography about his work in East Asian academia shows that whiteness is often desired due to being imagined as symbolizing “the epitome of advanced intellectual ability” (p. 114). White academics then tend to be given more respect and better job opportunities than non-whites. However, despite it being more common for one’s whiteness to afford advantages, being a white academic may also result in him or her experiencing marginalization and discrimination.

Interestingly, despite research shedding light on the multiplicity of whiteness, few scholars have used the term “labour” to describe and conceptualize white people’s work experiences. Roediger (1991/2007) could be said to be one of the only scholars who have explicitly teased out the racialized exploitation of white workers. In reflecting on the lack of examination of the white population as migrants in non-Western countries, Lundström (2017) suggests that while the non-white population’s migration to the West always falls neatly into the theme of migration, white people have often been studied as tourists, expatriates, guests, and by extension, non-migrants. This tendency, on the one hand, suggests a racialized implication in the ways we approach the notion of migration. On the other hand, it prevents us from further investigating the power asymmetries enacted through the movements of the racially privileged group (Lundström, 2017, pp. 80–81). I suggest that the lack of scholarly attention to white labour and white labour migration in particular could be similarly critiqued. Understandably, the lack of attention to whiteness through the notion of labour is largely due to the urgency to attend to other racially and ethnically more precarious groups. However, the assumption of transnational labour as non-white also overlooks the social stratification of the white population at large and how, in the context of this research, the racialized white bodies within the market economy can also be employed and exploited to extract surplus value.

This chapter explores how whiteness affords people advantages and disadvantages in the workplace by looking at white models’ performances of aesthetic

labour in China. The notion of aesthetic labour suggests how the desired “corporeal dispositions” and “embodied attributes and capacities” are used as “a source of competitive advantage” in the workplace (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007, p. 107). Much research on aesthetic labour analyses firms’ management of workers’ embodied capital in upscale restaurants and bars, luxury retail, tourism, and entertainment (Sherman, 2007; Warhurst et al., 2000; Witz et al., 2003), retail (Pettinger, 2004, 2005) and airline flight attendant service (Tyler & Taylor 1998, as cited in Mears, 2014). Aesthetic labour in this scholarship often describes a company’s recruitment, control, and regulation of workers’ looks.

Based on the previous conception of aesthetic labour, Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) and Mears (2011) have further enriched the concept by employing it to describe the kind of labour fashion models perform. According to them, fashion models are also a type of aesthetic labour insofar as their work centres upon displaying their bodies. However, the kind of aesthetic labour models perform is different from service workers. First, compared with service workers, models’ bodily aesthetics play a much more crucial role and are the main factor based on which models get hired. Second, unlike the aesthetic labour performed by service workers, the top-down control and regulation of a worker’s look is nearly absent in fashion modelling. Models must craft a desirable body and personality at the workplace based on shifting aesthetic norms (Mears, 2014).

Modelling as aesthetic labour is inherently precarious. Models have little agency to negotiate and optimize their career opportunities in the job market besides managing and caring for their looks and emotions. This is because models’ labour value almost entirely depends on the market evaluation of their physical appearances (Wissinger, 2009, 2012; Holla, 2018). Besides, models also only get paid when they are hired for jobs. A good deal of time is spent on work such as castings and travel that is unpaid. Models’ incomes are also subject to substantial deductions in the form of commissions (Mears, 2011). In short, modelling work is “unpredictable, poorly paid, and without benefits” and “in sociological terms, a ‘bad job’” (Mears, 2011, p. 65).

Despite these crucial insights, scholarship about the precarious conditions concerning modelling work is still predominantly Western-centric. It does not have much to say about what happens when white models move to China to work and how labour and race are intrinsically linked. As the previous chapter has pointed out, China stands uniquely in the global modelling job market. Unlike the global fashion centres of New York, Paris, London, and Milan, China’s modelling industry holds a (semi-)peripheral position in fashion. The Chinese market contains little prestigious work that could potentially bring fame to foreign models and advance their modelling careers elsewhere. Nevertheless, China is widely regarded

as an excellent destination for financial accumulation. The rate of foreign models in China usually ranges from CN¥800 to 2,500 (\$110–350) per hour. To attract “high-quality” foreigners, some Chinese modelling agencies also pay foreign models with higher status in fashion modelling a fixed fee regardless of the number of jobs they get in China. Besides, China stands out for offering significantly more job opportunities due to its large market size. Modelling agencies in predominantly white countries, such as those in Europe and North America, often send their white models to China to increase their financial capital.

This chapter uses racialized aesthetic labour to describe and look at white models’ work in China. The term highlights the racialized nature of these models’ work in two ways. First, by using racialized aesthetic labour, I emphasize how foreign models’ labour migration to China is embedded in racial inequality. The over-representation of whiteness in Chinese fashion advertisements is symptomatic of the persistence of global white supremacy. That is, white bodies persist to be imagined as advanced, beautiful, and attractive, which, in this case, is translated into a substantial demand for white aesthetic labour in China. Put differently, white models hold a structurally more privileged position than black, brown, and, on some occasions, Chinese models. Moreover, by racialized aesthetic labour, I also highlight that the precarity of white foreign models in China is inherently racial. White models’ labour migration to China involves a transformation from a major, normal, dominant identity in their home countries to a minority, foreign identity in China. Their minority, foreign status in China renders them subject to more thorough exploitation due to the lack of citizenship rights and other forms of social protection. Besides, as foreign, low-skilled labourers, white models are also vulnerable to multiple racialized gazes in their daily interactions with the Chinese people at work.

This chapter is based on my seven-month ethnographic fieldwork undertaken from 2021 to 2022 in Shanghai, one of the major fashion capitals in China. According to the foreign models and model agents in Shanghai, about 30 foreign modelling agencies and 1,000 foreign models were active in the city in 2019, prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, during my fieldwork, the Chinese state implemented restrictive border controls to tame the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The event had a significant impact on my research population. According to the experienced bookers and models, by the time I entered the field in 2021, only about 200 foreign models and ten foreign modelling agencies were active in this business. Besides, the tightening of border controls also reshaped the demographic of foreign models. Before the pandemic, most white models working in China were Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarussian nationals. However, since it was more difficult for these nationals to obtain work visas during the pandemic, more than half of the models who could get Chinese visas and travel

to Shanghai during my fieldwork were from EU countries and countries of former Yugoslavia. This shift in the demographics of white foreign models, driven by China's preferential treatment toward EU citizens, also reinforces the hierarchy within the white population.

As I have mentioned earlier, the modelling industry largely excludes outsiders. However, my research at the modelling agency Fame enabled me to work closely with foreign models, spending time with them in various work and daily settings. During my fieldwork, I recruited 32 foreign models as research participants. I accompanied them to castings and jobs, observed their reactions to various situations, and engaged in daily conversations. Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with them, covering topics such as their life histories, perceptions of working in China and with the Chinese, and their plans for the near future.

Experiencing privileges

In 2018, Hana, a 19-year-old college student from Montenegro, caught the eye of a model scout while enjoying a day at the beach with her family near her hometown. The scout, vacationing in Montenegro, approached Hana and extended an offer to her to collaborate with his agency in Paris. Intrigued by the opportunity, she accepted and relocated to Paris. Her debut on the Parisian fashion scene was nothing short of extraordinary, as she landed a catwalk opportunity for one of the most esteemed luxury brands, Chanel. Following her successful stint with Chanel, Hana quickly gained attention from numerous designers and commercial brands in Paris, solidifying her status as a sought-after model.

Amidst her flourishing career in modelling, Hana faced a significant setback when the COVID-19 pandemic swept through Europe in early 2020. Like many others, Hana found herself grappling with few job opportunities as a result of lockdown measures and economic recession. In response, her mother agency in Paris made the strategic decision to send her to China in 2021, aiming to maximize her profitability. In China's fashion modelling scene, with few internationally renowned foreign models active in the market, Hana stood out as one of the most prestigious kinds. Branded by her agency in China as "the Chanel girl", Hana's portfolio captivated numerous Chinese fashion professionals, who often praised her appearance as "*expensive, high-class, and strong* (气场足)".

During her stay in China, she was busy with work almost daily. Unlike many other foreign models who often attended numerous castings hoping to be selected by Chinese clients, Hana found herself in a much more advantageous position: Chinese clients frequently booked her directly upon reviewing her portfolio, showcasing her measurements and the images taken with European luxury brands. Sitting at a bar for a quick coffee three hours before her next work trip

to Guangzhou, she told me,

I liked my studies at the university [electrical engineering], but to be honest, I don't know if I would earn enough money if I found a job related to my major in Montenegro. Modelling pays a lot more. And it's so much more fun. You can travel. It's also a very creative job when you are on the set.... My parents are school teachers [in Montenegro]... Their salaries are about €500 [each] per month ... I find it difficult to compare with them... I mean, within one day, I already earn more than them... I am not allowed to tell you how much I earn per month because I have an agreement with my agency here to keep it confidential... But I can tell you that I am really happy with it [income]. I'm a lucky person.

The narrative emphasises how foreign models like Hana benefit from white embodiment in terms of career advancement. Hana's white look, coupled with her work experience with previous clients in Paris, propelled her to possess a symbolic asset that is highly coveted and scarce in the Chinese modelling scene. In comparison to her previous life goals, which involved studying and working in a local company in Montenegro, her modelling work in China was significantly more financially rewarding. This was also evident in Hana's personal experience and perception of her work in China: she found fulfilment in being valued and appreciated in her work environment, praising the Chinese fashion professionals she met as “sweet” and “professional”.

While Hana's “Chanel girl” status may have granted her a particularly privileged position in China's modelling sphere, her upward mobility trajectory shares similarities with some other white foreign models in China. Take Theo, a 28-year-old French male model introduced in the previous chapter, who had been actively involved in modelling since the age of 21 and had made nearly ten trips to China over the past seven years. According to Theo and his Chinese booker, during his most recent four-month stay in Shanghai, he earned \$50,000, which allowed him to lead a financially comfortable life for some months back home in Lyon, France. During an interview, Theo shared insights into his background, admitting that modelling in China improved his economic status:

I was very lucky. My family in France is just average... a bit below average. My mom didn't have money to pay for my rent and tuition for university... I don't even care about fashion. But thanks to modelling, I have travelled around the world and experienced so many things ... To be honest with you, I don't like China and wouldn't want to live here, but I always like coming here to work for a few months every year. You have great clients here.

Interestingly, unlike many other fields where success is often credited to competence and skills, both Hana and Theo attributed their achievements in modelling to “luck”. This choice of words suggests that they perceive their success in the industry as somewhat arbitrary. Despite their success in the Chinese modelling market, they struggle to fully understand why Chinese clients so highly value their white appearance. In Chapter 2, I demonstrated that the success of white Western male vloggers could only be achieved by combining their white appearance with other skills, such as proficiency in the Chinese language, knowledge of Chinese culture, and political sensitivity. In contrast, the white privilege experienced by white foreign models seems to be more straightforward and immediate as it is primarily based on their white embodiment.

Despite Hana and Theo finding it challenging to explain their success, they both adopted a more resolute tone when discussing the industry’s preference for foreign models who look white. They convincingly argued that this perceived “luck” would not extend to non-white foreign models due to the racial prejudices against dark-skinned models within the industry. This perspective is further reinforced by contrasting the experiences of black African models in Shanghai.

Adela is a 23-year-old from Tanzania. When I met her in Shanghai, she was studying engineering at a Chinese university and had just signed a three-month contract with Fame. Adela confessed that she had always been curious about modelling, as those around her often praised her slender, model-like body. Although she had never considered solely making a living out of modelling, she did anticipate modelling might be a “*fun, creative experience*”. However, the reality was much harsher than she had expected. The Chinese clients generally showed no interest in her at the castings I accompanied her to. The indifference and discrimination towards Adela were blatant during one casting session I attended with her. Upon entering the client’s studio, all the foreign female models in the room were asked to put on their shoes and show their walks. When every foreign model was taking off their bags and winter jackets to be ready to queue for the walk, the client came to me and said in Chinese, “*You are her booker, right? She doesn’t have to do it. Thanks.*” The unspoken reason hung heavily in the air: Adela was the only model with dark skin in the room. After the casting, she turned to me, visibly upset. She asked, “*Why? Why did they [her agency] send me to this casting? Shouldn’t they let the client look at our photos before we come here in person?*” I felt her anger, but unfortunately, I couldn’t offer Adela a satisfactory answer to her valid concerns.

Having spent several months working closely with Adela’s agency, I became aware of their indifferent attitude towards her feelings of rejection. It was clear that the Chinese model agents prioritized quantity over quality and profit over feeling

since they preferred to send Adela to all castings in the hope that a client might appreciate her look and offer her a job. Having repetitively experienced rejection for a few months, Adela's attitude toward modelling in China gradually soured. Although Adela never explicitly mentioned race-related issues in our discussions, her disappointment with the industry was evident. When we talked about her plans for the future, she firmly asserted that modelling was not her "*real dream*" and emphasized that she wanted to use the knowledge she had learned at the university to find a "*real job*" in a company later.

The varying experiences of Adela, Hana, and Theo exemplify the influence of white privilege on their perspectives of what constitutes a "real dream" and a "real job", as articulated by Adela. Bonacich (2008) observes that different skin tones are positioned unequally within a hierarchical structure of labour exploitation. Reflecting broader global patterns of white supremacy, models with light skin, like Hana and Theo, often encounter more opportunities and job prospects compared to dark-skinned models like Adela.

Financial instability

From the previous section, readers might assume at this point that whiteness is, to borrow Moosavi's (2022) words, "always-and-only-privileging" (2022) in China's modelling industry. The following sections intend to complicate such an argument by showing the limitation of white privilege in China's modelling scene. In particular, I will focus on the experiences of models whose white embodiment did not afford them substantial advantages in China. This type of model makes up more than half of the white models I encountered during my fieldwork.

Boris, a 24-year-old Russian male, relocated to Shanghai in 2020. Physically, he matched a commonly used Chinese depiction: a "handsome man with golden hair and aquamarine eyes" (金发碧眼帅哥). With fair skin, blonde hair, a tall frame, and a slender build, Boris epitomised the stereotypical image of an attractive white male, which resonated with many ordinary Chinese individuals. However, despite embodying this ideal, Boris struggled to secure enough jobs to make a living in Shanghai throughout 2020 and 2021.

In January 2022, I observed Boris shooting for a Chinese suit brand's catalogue. Boris dedicated approximately six hours to the job, resulting in him and his agency receiving a total of RMB 9,000 (US\$1,268) from the client. Despite the relatively high fee, the working process was not smooth. The job took place in the brand's boutique store in the business centre of Jiang'an district, Shanghai. Upon arrival, it was evident that the brand had a preference for white models, as evidenced by the predominance of white males in their past catalogues showcasing the brand's shirts, pants, and blazers.

However, upon entering their office upstairs, which had been converted into a temporary shooting studio, I observed a Chinese male model already sitting there and doing make-up. The brand's owner, a middle-aged Shanghainese woman, greeted us and told us that Boris would be doing the photoshoot with the Chinese model. I chatted with the owner during the photoshoots about why they hired a Chinese model this time, given their previous preference for foreign models. In a candid manner, she explained that her personal preference leaned towards exclusively Chinese models. However, since some of her employees believed Boris' hairstyle and facial features complemented their clothing, she opted to accommodate their viewpoints.

As Boris completed his make-up and began posing for the camera alongside the Chinese model, I noticed a hint of concern on the owner's face. She intermittently paced around the studio, casting glances at both Boris and the Chinese model. After some time, the owner began commenting on their appearances. She praised the Chinese male model who looked "handsome" in their suits. However, for Boris, she complained in Chinese that he did not embody the "right feelings" (感觉不对) and his facial expressions and poses were "unnatural" (表情和姿势都不自然). During the break, when the photographer showed the photos he made to the owner, she commented that Boris' photos looked like "a little countryside" (有点土). The Chinese photographer agreed with the owner, and, together, they joked about how to edit the images of Boris to make it look less "countryside" (气质不够, P图来凑). Later on, she also chatted with the production team, saying that

The quality of white models is getting worse and worse these years. Many white models who come to China have little ambition (没什么大志向), and the ways they hold themselves are also not nice (气质不行). It is really hard to find a good foreign model.

Although Boris couldn't understand every negative word spoken in Chinese about him, he undoubtedly sensed the tense atmosphere and appeared nervous throughout the process. As the team concluded the shooting, Boris seemed upset. He told me that he hoped that the client wouldn't lodge any complaints with his modelling agency in Shanghai.

The above scene depicts the inherent powerlessness experienced by Boris despite his white embodiment granting him access to the modelling job market in China. Despite white embodiment allowing Boris to enter China's modelling job market, he remained a powerless player within the industry. His white embodiment did not offer him the power to negotiate favourable working conditions: Boris had little control over the chance for him to get hired; he did not dispute

the Chinese client's negative opinion of him when he was at work; after finishing work, he harboured concerns about potential repercussions on his relationship with his Chinese agency due to the client's perceptions of him.

Such a lack of control over career trajectory was a shared experience among many of my model participants. Conversations in the van during their daily travels to various castings often revolved around the challenges of securing employment in China's modelling industry. Some attributed the difficulty to seasonal fluctuations, noting that certain times of the year were busier than others, such as during fashion shows or before the Chinese New Year. Others lamented that their looks were perceived as too unconventional or not commercially appealing enough for the average Chinese client's tastes. Additionally, there was a sense that the popularity of foreign models had waned in recent years, with Chinese models becoming increasingly competitive in the market.

It is challenging to pinpoint the exact reasons why these white models were unable to secure as many jobs as they had expected. However, as the previous chapter has outlined, several structural factors are worth considering. First, the available jobs are disproportionately distributed. Due to the modelling industry's winner-take-all structure, the number who can make a fortune has always been tiny, regardless of models' skin tone. During my fieldwork, I noticed that models who were considered to have the best looks by fashion professionals, such as Hana and Theo, were continuously and frequently hired; meanwhile, models who were perceived as average by the Chinese agencies and clients often ended up getting jobs only occasionally. Second, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the fashion industry faced a challenging business climate due to the economic recession and the lockdown. For instance, Shanghai Fashion Week Fall/Winter in 2021 was held online due to the pandemic. Numerous brands and shops in Shanghai were inactive in that year due to cash-flow problems. As a result, there was a general decreased market demand for models, including white models. Third, as elaborated in Chapter 3, the aesthetic value of white models in China has been increasingly contested, if not declining. Many Chinese players in the fashion business, including Boris's client, no longer believe white bodies are aesthetically superior to East Asian bodies. While white embodiment may still grant foreign models privileged access to China's racially influenced job market, the Chinese clients are becoming increasingly powerful in determining which and whether white bodies are desirable, subjecting white foreign models to stricter scrutiny. However, regardless of the reasons behind the shifting market dynamics, models often find themselves with limited influence, as the value of a model's aesthetic labour is primarily determined by the market's assessment of their physical appearance (Wissinger, 2012).

Since the majority of my model participants struggled to secure a substantial number of jobs, they faced financial instability while living in China. Similar to the modelling industry in other countries, foreign models were responsible for covering various expenses associated with their relocation and stay in China. These expenses included visa application fees, travel costs, rent for accommodations, and daily living expenses. Typically, Chinese agencies would advance these fees and later deduct them from the model's total earnings at the end of their contracts, which typically lasted for three months. However, models only received their earnings upon the completion of their contracts, leaving them reliant on the weekly "pocket money" provided by Chinese agencies to cover their daily expenses. This allowance, typically CN¥ 300 per week (US\$42), was often inadequate, particularly in Shanghai, one of China's most expensive cities. Models with limited savings from previous jobs could only afford to shop and dine at cheap shops in Shanghai. On several occasions, my participants reached out to me and other more financially stable models and asked for small loans ranging from CN¥50 to 200 (approximately US\$7–28) to help them make ends meet until the end of the week.

The relatively low incomes of foreign models significantly impacted the social spaces they could access in Shanghai. During their leisure time, my participants often engaged in cheaper activities such as strolling around the city with a cup of coffee or cooking together in their shared apartments. Unlike Western transnational elites and upper-middle-class Chinese, who were able to frequent the upscale bars and restaurants (Farrer, 2019), such places were rarely visited by my participants.

During my outings with the models at night, they typically opted for clubs where they could gain free entry and access to alcohol, or they would purchase snacks and beverages from convenience stores and congregate in streets and parks around Shanghai. The glamour associated with high-end social spaces was largely absent from their experiences and lifestyles. For white models who did not attain the status of "the Chanel girl" in the eyes of the Chinese, Shanghai remained an expensive and exclusive cosmopolitan city that was beyond their reach.

Dubious legal status

On a sunny February morning in 2021, I received a message from one of my model participants, Alina: "*Ke, I can't meet you this Sunday. I am going back to Poland the day after tomorrow.*" The message took me by surprise, as just two weeks before, during our coffee meeting, she had mentioned her intention to visit several museums in Shanghai in the following weeks. I messaged her to ask if everything was fine, but I received no reply from Alina.

It was only several days later that I heard from other participants in the field that the Chinese authorities recently caught the owner of a migration brokerage for fabricating documents to help foreigners with visa applications. Alina's modelling agency had a longstanding partnership with this brokerage. When law enforcement sealed off that migration brokerage, Alina and a few other foreign models' passports were still in the office of that agency. Since she possessed a student visa rather than a model visa, her agency in China was fined. Alina and three other foreign models from her agency were compelled to leave the country immediately after they got their passports back.

In Sier's (2022) analysis of white migrants in China, she introduces the concept of "white mobility capital" to explain how white privilege stems not only from being perceived as white but also from the advantages that white people enjoy when moving across borders. As she puts it, this specific form of privilege "allows people to cross borders with ease and live in foreign countries while continuing to enjoy citizenship rights in powerful countries with strong welfare states" (p. 175). This observation largely applies to white Western Euro-Americans who occupy relatively high socioeconomic statuses. However, in the field of fashion modelling in China, not all white foreign models possess white mobility capital. Instead, the ease with which they can cross the Chinese border is significantly influenced by their nationalities and Chinese immigration policies.

As I have elaborated in the previous chapter, since 2013, the Chinese state has enforced the new Exit and Entry Administrative Law, officially recognizing modelling as formal employment in China. The introduction of the Z visa allows foreign models to legally work in China for a maximum duration of 90 days (China Consular Affairs, 2019). Upon the end of the period, foreign models must exit the country and are only eligible to reapply for the same type of visa after 90 days from their exit. Such a policy has not been conducive to the interests and benefits of foreign models, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic, when cross-border travel became arduous and costly. As a result, in numerous instances, my foreign model participants preferred to prolong their stay in China beyond the 90-day limit to explore opportunities further. To extend their visas, they had to rely on (semi-)illegal migration brokers to help them with visas. For those whose looks were perceived as having a high aesthetic value, modelling agencies invested substantial efforts in finding them migration brokers, helping them fabricate their documents, and facilitating their submission of applications for visa extension. As for foreign models who were perceived as less profitable in the eyes of the modelling agencies, they were faced with the challenge of navigating China's intricate network in the hope of obtaining another type of visa.

During my fieldwork, the struggles over visa extension may be counted as the most

popular topic among foreign models. I can still vividly recall my first experience assisting at a photoshoot, where I helped dress a female Russian model. Throughout the session, she was constantly on the phone, discussing her visa extension with friends and her agency while changing outfits. As I got to know foreign models better, I learned that to extend their visas, foreign models often travelled to various cities and submitted visa extension applications at different branches of the Exit and Entry Administration Bureau. This is because some branches are believed to be more lenient than others. For example, if someone fails to convince the Shanghai office to grant them a student visa, they might prepare another set of (fabricated) documents to apply for a work visa in Guangzhou.

Among my participants, Boris was particularly keen to chat with me about his legal status in China. Boris grew up in a small town near Moscow. In 2018, his friend in Moscow introduced him to a local modelling agency that collaborates with modelling agencies in China. He signed a contract with the Russian agency, and in the same year, he was introduced by the Russian agency to a Chinese modelling agency in Chengdu. He moved to Chengdu and worked as a foreign model there for three months. However, due to Chengdu's low rate for models (approx. CN¥300–500 per hour) he did not earn a lot of money from that trip. Nevertheless, the lively music scene, the tasty food, and the warm people in the city of Chengdu were mesmerising to him. Carrying his sweet memories in Chengdu, he moved to Shanghai in 2020, right before China closed its border due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This time, he hoped to earn some decent money in Shanghai. However, as mentioned in the previous section, Boris only got a few jobs in Shanghai from 2020 to 2021. By the beginning of 2021, it became clear that his Shanghai agency did not want to help him extend the visa due to his low profitability. However, Boris wanted to stay, especially since his country's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

Boris had limited leverage to extend his Chinese visa. He lacked proficiency in English and had no higher education degree, making it challenging for him to find a corporate job that would help him obtain a Chinese work visa. Boris thus had to explore alternative options to extend his Chinese visa. After some inquiries, one of the few feasible solutions was to travel to Hainan Island and get help from what he referred to as his “Russian friend”, a (semi-)illegal migration broker. This “Russian friend” offered to apply for a one-year student visa for Boris, costing CN¥ 30,000 (US\$4,229). While this sum might be inconsequential for affluent Chinese or foreigners in Shanghai, it constituted nearly all of Boris's savings. Meeting him for a coffee at bustling Yongkang Road, he told me helplessly,

What can I do... I don't want to leave China. I am not even sure if the student visa [applied through the Russian broker] will work. So, I'm exploring

the options of Turkey and Nepal, just in case [I do not get a Chinese student visa]. There are many Russians there, too.

While saying it, he showed me a WeChat group in Russian where many Russian-speaking migrants across Asia shared tips and strategies about living abroad. In late March 2021, right before Shanghai went into total COVID-19 lockdown, Boris flew to Hainan to apply for the visa. He eventually obtained a one-year student visa from his “Russian friend”, but what the future held remained unknown to him.

Racialized exploitation and its discontent

Irrespective of financial and legal precarity, transnational modelling may seem fun and adventurous from afar, offering a perception of coolness and glamour. Moreover, it provides the opportunity to embark on frequent international travels and encounter individuals from diverse backgrounds at a young age. According to my participants, these initial sentiments of fulfilment were all true. However, they proved to be momentary and fleeting. What seemed to be the more enduring feeling, instead, was a sense of loneliness and fatigue.

Natalie was a 21-year-old female model from Belgrade, Serbia. She entered the modelling industry at the age of 20 and worked in Belgrade and Istanbul, Turkey before she came to Shanghai. I met her for the first time in October 2021, when she had just arrived in Shanghai and completed 14 days of compulsory quarantine in a hotel near the Fame offices. Chinese booker Jacob and I waited for her outside the hotel. When she came outside, she ran to us and shouted, “I am finally outside! I am so happy to see you!” In the following days, she kept telling me that she had always wanted to live in Shanghai and planned to stay here for at least half a year. When we walked around downtown Shanghai, her eyes were filled with surprise and excitement.

Natalie had blonde hair, blue eyes, and pale skin. According to the bookers, she looked “*youthful yet classy*” and had great potential to get jobs from numerous clients in China. And she demonstrated that her look had a high aesthetic value in Shanghai: during her three-month stay, Natalie got an average of three to four jobs per week. In January 2022—three months later—she told me she could already cash out nearly CNY 300,000 (US\$41,800). Having benefited from her aesthetic value, her agency, too, tried to convince her to stay and work a few more months. However, despite all this, she was determined to book the flight to return to Belgrade.

In the van driving Natalie to the next client, Natalie leaned her head on the window and explained why she had decided to leave China:

I am exhausted ... Since I came here, I have worked almost every day and cried almost every day. I only wanted to sleep for my days off because I had no energy left. I didn't have much chance to travel around and explore the city... I am just very happy this is over soon. I want to go home.

Working as a part-time model agent to learn about the field, I usually stood with Natalie to help her with fitting and English-Chinese language translation at her jobs. I could not but empathise with Natalie's exhaustion: after standing in a studio for seven or eight hours with her, I often arrived home with little physical and emotional energy to do anything besides lie on the couch. It was undoubtedly more intensely felt by models like Natalie: as an ethnographer, I had the privilege to pick my field by only going to the jobs I found interesting. However, foreign models had no choice but to follow the work schedule that agencies made for them, which was designed to make the highest profits as quickly as possible. Often working on consecutive days in different Chinese cities and only restoring her energy in the van and on the aeroplane, a lack of sleep and an empty stomach had become the norm during Natalie's three-month stay in Shanghai.

Natalie's experience is not unique. Although my participants held different work attitudes—and some were better at coping with the physical demands of modelling work—they all described China as the most “*difficult*” and “*intense*” workplace. “*If you can work in China, you can work anywhere*” is a famous saying within the social circle of foreign models in China. This saying does not suggest the Chinese market's status in the global fashion industry is higher (e.g. “*If you work for Chanel, you can work anywhere*”); rather, it attests to the physical and mental challenges models collectively face in the Chinese job market. Moreover, performing such a form of racialized labour, white models may quickly feel marginalized and alienated. The models waited at work for almost half of the working time. At castings, models spent most of the time waiting for the clients, who often ran late. At photoshoots, models often sat for hours to wait for make-up artists to do their hair and faces or stood in the freezing air with a summer dress to wait for the stylists and photographers to adjust the details of clothes, lights, and mise-en-scène. At the backstage fashion shows, similarly, models were either waiting to be dressed up or waiting for rehearsals.

One may expect the long waiting time at work to create the opportunity for foreign models and Chinese people to develop mutual understanding. It was not often the case. Most of the Chinese working in the field appeared to be indifferent to foreign models. This attitude was often derived from their negative perceptions of foreign models as low-skilled labourers. In some other cases, the Chinese in advertising and fashion were just as overworked as models (if not more)

and had little energy to show curiosity to anyone not immediately relevant to their commercial interests. More importantly, most of the Chinese spoke very little English and did not have sufficient intercultural social skills to communicate with foreign models in a polite manner. Often, both sides ended up perceiving each other as arrogant and discriminatory. Even if the Chinese intended to show their warmth to the foreign models, communication between the two groups remained minimal, often limited to a few work-related words: “*Hello.*” “*Close your eyes.*” “*Put on this.*” “*Time for lunch.*” “*Please smile.*” “*Relax your shoulders.*” “*Great. Great.*” “*Thank you.*” Such a working atmosphere often made my participants feel negative about their work. “*I am bored*” was one of my participants’ most frequent complaints at work. A few also shared with me how “*uncomfortable*” and “*weird*” they felt when the Chinese production team openly commented on their facial features, body shapes, and postures in the Chinese language.

Nevertheless, the white foreign models were not merely passive agents fully subject to exploitation. Instead, they resisted the feelings of alienation and exclusion by disobeying the Chinese clients’ commands. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the Chinese model bookers found it frustrating that some models would sometimes argue for small breaks or run away from the photoshoots for a smoke and a coffee. During my fieldwork, there were indeed many instances where I, performing the role of the model booker, had to run around inside and outside the studios to find them and ask them to return to work. However, witnessing the challenges they experienced at work, I understood that these short escapes were truly necessary—in the sense that they were the brief moments when the models could take a breath of fresh air and break free from their Chinese employers’ gazes.

Besides the acts of disobedience, several participants also often expressed their dissatisfaction through complaints. Almost every day at work, when foreign models sat together in the van or were waiting for their clients, I could hear them chatting in English about various issues concerning working as a foreign model in China. Their negative comments on China and the Chinese were common: “*The Chinese don’t know how to smile. They only work, work, work—like robots.*” “*The studios in China are so chaotic. People do not know what they are doing.*” “*Chinese fashion is very strange.*” “*That pose is very Chinese, hahaha.*”

In Roediger’s (1991/2007) historical analysis of the working-class white population in the US, he points out that the pleasure of belonging to the racially dominant group often functions as a psychological wage for white workers to distinguish themselves from black workers. In his own words, “status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for the alienating and exploitative class relationship” (p. 13). While enacting such psychological comfort, whiteness also undermines the class unity between white and black workers and prevents

their direct confrontation of labour exploitation. Although his work focuses on the US context in the last century, his identification of whiteness as a form of psychological compensation for white workers is still relevant for understanding the white foreign models' complaints here. In the rhetoric of the quotes above, the white foreign models also portrayed Chineseness as backward and inferior compared to Europeanness. By presenting themselves as more fashionable, more reasonable, and more human, they gained emotional comfort and momentarily escaped feelings of exclusion and exhaustion. Belonging to the white European group thus engendered not a practical, material benefit but rather a joyful feeling of superiority. This racialized joy of being white, similar to the racialized pride in being Chinese discussed in the previous chapters, not only reinforces racial divisions but also diminishes the motivation to challenge, in this case, the monopolistic and exploitative structure of the fashion modelling industry.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how China's prosperous fashion industry propels predominantly white foreign models' transnational migration to China and how the intersection of race and work shapes these models' experiences and positionalities in China. I show that the aspiration and desire for white bodies in China's fashion advertising offers a small proportion of white foreign models opportunities for career development and upward mobility. However, looking white does not promise every foreign model a stable, prosperous life. As a result of the increasingly competitive market, many foreign models struggle to obtain stable financial status. Under the Chinese state's restrictive migration policy, many foreign models have to spend a great amount of time and money to obtain legal status in China. Moreover, faced with cultural and language barriers, white foreign models often feel a sense of alienation and fatigue during their time in China.

The findings of this chapter highlight the delicate interplay between white privilege and precariousness in China. In S. Lan's (2022) examination of white English teachers in China, she emphasises the fluid nature of the boundaries between white privilege and precarity within the realm of English teaching (p. 127). Similarly, my study illustrates that white privilege is precarious and transient in the domain of fashion modelling in China. When a foreign model migrates to China, her white look may elevate her to celebrity status within her profession. However, if she falls out of favour with the ever-evolving market, she may also face the risk of descending into the ranks of low-stratum migrants who grapple with poverty and uncertain legal status.

Finally, as previously mentioned, the case of fashion modelling in China underscores the need to study whiteness through labour studies and to explore aesthetic labour beyond the fashion epicentres in the West. Examining whiteness

through the lens of work and labour provides a more in-depth understanding of how the market economy redistributes resources along racial lines and offers a more nuanced perspective on white privilege. Meanwhile, this case study illustrates that there may be diverse ways to value aesthetics and different modes of aesthetic labour relations in non-Western contexts. As shown in this chapter (and in Chapter 3), when considering foreign models in China, it becomes clear that simply applying Western theories of aesthetic labour in fashion modelling is insufficient. What is considered aesthetic, and thus valuable or advantageous, is deeply intertwined with the fragmented nature of white superiority in the Chinese context.

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the dynamics of the meaning-making and practices around white embodiment in the Chinese context, illuminating the multifaceted negotiations of white formation within Chinese visual culture. This dissertation approaches whiteness through Omi and Winant's (1994) conception of racial formation. According to them, race is a concept that "signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (p. 55). Racial formation thus describes the "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (p. 55). From a racial formation perspective, race concerns both cultural representation and social structure. The process of racial formation is "simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamic, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (p. 56). Similarly, this dissertation employs whiteness as an analytical tool. On the one hand, my examination of Chinese cinema, social media, and fashion advertisements has elucidated the meaning-making surrounding whiteness and the cultural attributes of white identities within the Chinese context. On the other hand, my ethnographic account of the practices involving both Chinese and foreigners in this field has unveiled a complex web of racialized social relations enacted by whiteness. In short, racial whiteness is approached as a discursive system that not only permeates ideological and cultural realms but is also embedded in everyday interactions and practices. To achieve this comprehensive understanding, this dissertation has combined textual analysis and ethnographic methods to examine the tangible material aspects and the symbolic significance of whiteness in contemporary China.

Across the four empirical chapters, I have tried to answer the following questions. First, how is whiteness perceived and imagined by the Chinese? In particular, how have the rising Chinese nationalism and the increased geopolitical tension between China and major Western countries in recent years shaped the Chinese perceptions of white bodies? Second, to what extent does white embodiment afford symbolic and material advantages to foreign labourers in Chinese culture? Third, how does race intersect with other structures of power? Specifically, how do the axes of nation, class, and gender organize white experiences and positionalities in the Chinese context?

My analysis has demonstrated that, as all racial identities are relational, comprehending white formation in contemporary China necessitates a substantial consideration of the cultural construction of Chineseness. Moreover, white formation in China cannot be fully understood without accounting for the changing nationalist and capitalist ideologies and practices within China's reform era since the 1980s. Through my empirical chapters, I have demonstrated that white privilege and hegemony continue to recur in contemporary Chinese visual culture while at the same time constantly facing adaptation, mutation, and con-

testation. Primarily, the tension between the recursiveness and contingency of whiteness in China can be examined and explained through the following three aspects:

1. The Chinese ambivalent perceptions of the West and white people
2. The discrepancy between white privilege in China's media consumption and the sociopolitical and economic vulnerability of white labourers
3. The social stratification within the white population

In the forthcoming sections, I will detail each of the three dimensions and conclude with a summary of my contribution, its limitations, and the potential avenues for future research on whiteness.

The Chinese ambivalent perceptions of the West and white people

The open-ended dynamics of racial formation in contemporary China have generated multiple meanings concerning whiteness. As emphasized in the Introduction of this dissertation, popular culture serves as a vital arena for understanding, imagining, and negotiating our identities and subjectivities. Through my examination of the multiple Chinese gazes upon white bodies in Chinese cinema, social media, and fashion advertisements, I have unravelled the meanings attributed to white identity. Within the spectrum of portrayals of white individuals under the gazes of the Chinese, ranging from glorification to criticism, admiration to contempt, I argue that a consistent theme tying these diverse perspectives together is the intricate interplay of superiority and inferiority in Chinese engagement with Western countries across different periods in the reform era.

Chapter 1 delves into the significant impact of shifting power dynamics and evolving Chinese nationalism through an analysis of the portrayals of white characters in Chinese postsocialist dark comedy films in different eras since the reform and opening up. In the 1980s, as China embraced a market-oriented economy and Western models, white characters were often depicted as admirable and advanced. However, with China's economic growth and global influence in the 2000s, white characters have been increasingly portrayed as ignorant and in need of enlightenment from China and its people, implying an imagination of China and the Chinese overcoming the powerful Western Other. Against the backdrop of the rise of China as one of the global superpowers and the ascent of the platform economy since the 2010s, Chapter 2 looks into the representation of whiteness in Chinese media by examining the performances of white Western male influencers on the Chinese video-sharing platform Bilibili. Unlike in cinema, where Chinese filmmakers have full autonomy to shape the narratives surrounding white identities, the platform affords a collaborative construction of white identities. As both the agents and objects of their representation, Western male influencers have considerable autonomy to determine how they want to be seen

by Chinese online audiences. However, they have to take into account state censorship and Chinese people's cultural tastes and national pride. I show that, on the one hand, despite rising nationalism and xenophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic, these influencers' white identities continue to hold the power to attract young Chinese online audiences, showing how West and white Westerners continue to be essential points of reference among ordinary Chinese. On the other hand, under the nationalist gazes of the Chinese, these influencers are compelled to present themselves as amiable foreign migrants who side with China and its people. In the realm of fashion advertising, as detailed in Chapters 3 and 4, white bodies have been predominantly linked with notions of beauty, cosmopolitanism, urbanity, and middle-class status since the 1990s in China. However, insights from Chinese fashion professionals collaborating closely with white models suggest a gradual decline in the appeal of white models over the past five years. This trend aligns with the progressions within Chinese fashion and the burgeoning ethnonationalism observed in China's consumer culture. Furthermore, there has been a growing stigma attached to white model labourers in China, with them often perceived as being lazy, low-skilled migrants who benefit from China's economic growth.

In all three cases, the gazes cast upon whiteness vis-à-vis Chineseness are frequently framed by the continual self-comparison with the West, evaluating the Chinese proximity and potential to exceed Western standards and values. As a result, the meanings ascribed to the images of white people—whether in cinema, social media, or fashion modelling—are often fraught with contradictions: on the one hand, whiteness is often associated with positive meanings such as modernization, progress, and socioeconomic advancement, cosmopolitanism; on the other hand, white bodies are also contrasted with Chinese bodies, accommodating the cultural tastes and feelings of nationalism among ordinary Chinese.

The discrepancy between white privilege in China's media consumption and the sociopolitical and economic vulnerability of white labourers

As I discussed in the introduction, practices and ideas of exclusion and discrimination have traditionally been central to understanding racism. However, when reevaluating racism within the framework of capitalism, particularly in the 21st-century global capitalist market, some scholars consider how racism and perceived racial differences enable capitalist expansion and accumulation. In whiteness studies, various scholars have explored how whiteness holds a specific exchange value. The common thread is that the power and persistence of racism often assign symbolic and material value to individuals who are racialized as white.

The visibility of white bodies in Chinese visual culture since the 1980s, as explored in my empirical chapters, encompasses not only the negotiation of cultural mean-

ings of whiteness but also the extraction of surplus value from racialized bodies. By examining the intersection of racism and commodification in this context, I have demonstrated that the significant symbolic value attached to white bodies ensures that whiteness remains prominently visible in China's media landscape. My findings echo Brady's (2003) exploration of the untold history of the CCP's system of "making foreign things serve China" (p. xxi). In her research, she details that since the late 1970s, the increasing presence of foreigners and foreign organizations has been a key element of China's state strategy to establish China's prominent position on the global stage. The foreign is seen by the Chinese state as an essential component of economic reforms aimed at using foreign technology and investment to modernize and strengthen the country. Although this dissertation does not focus on China's foreign affairs system, it shows that foreign bodies—in this case, white bodies—also drive economic practices and function as a technology to generate profits and stimulate China's economic growth. Meanwhile, this generative aspect of white bodies raises important questions: Does the high visibility of white bodies in Chinese media automatically reinforce white privilege? In other words, does the capitalist accumulation derived from white bodies inherently advantage white individuals in China?

My dissertation demonstrates that the relationship between the allure of whiteness in Chinese media and individual white privilege is far from straightforward. In Chapter 2, I illustrate how Western male influencers experience a comparatively smooth and easy path to online fame on Bilibili. Despite this, the surge in Chinese nationalist sentiments on social media and the tightening control of censorship by the Chinese state means that Western male influencers run the risk of being viewed with suspicion not only by Chinese audiences but also by Chinese authorities. To maintain their visibility and popularity, they must skillfully balance being engaging and controversial. Meanwhile, Chinese social media platforms can easily benefit from the internet traffic they attract.

Like white Western influencers, white foreign models in China also experience preferential treatment in China's fashion modelling industry compared to black and brown models, as detailed in Chapter 4. However, while their white identity may grant them privileged access to the Chinese job market, it does not necessarily ensure them a prosperous, comfortable livelihood in China. White models in China have to grapple with intensifying competition within the Chinese job market, stringent migration policies imposed by the Chinese government, and language and cultural barriers in China. Meanwhile, as Chapter 3 illustrates, modelling agencies owned by the Chinese can readily capitalize on economic growth by importing and employing a multitude of foreign white models, which positions them as the primary beneficiaries of the appeal of whiteness in China's advertising sector. In short, white influencers and models encounter various barriers

and obstacles in leveraging the allure of white bodies in Chinese media to their advantage, largely due to their foreigner status and the structural dynamics of their respective industries.

The social stratification of the white population

Previous scholarly investigations into whiteness in migratory contexts have predominantly focused on the viewpoints of upper- and middle-class Western expatriates' interactions with the local Chinese, emphasizing the advantages associated with their whiteness. However, as observed in prior scholarly works on Irish and Italian as well as working-class whiteness in the US, whiteness not only perpetuates social hierarchies between white and non-white individuals but also delineates differences among those perceived as more or less white. In Garner's (2006) words, "the relationality of whiteness involves two simultaneous border maintenance processes: one between white and people of colour, and the other between white and not-quite-white" (p. 175.) Similarly, rather than solely examining upper- and middle-class migrants from North America and Western Europe, this dissertation has conducted a comparative analysis of white migrants occupying various positions on the socioeconomic spectrum. In particular, by scrutinizing the intersection of race, nationality, socioeconomic status, and gender, my dissertation has illuminated the inequalities and perceived hierarchy within the white population, uncovering China's role in mediating the complexities of power dynamics between Western Euro-American whiteness and Eastern European whiteness.

My dissertation findings illustrate that the racial depictions of white people in China underscore the intricate interplay between whiteness, gender, class, and global power dynamics. Within the spectrum of white representations, individuals from Western Europe and North America, especially white males, consistently maintain a dominant position. This is evidenced by Chapters 1 and 2, where the predominant representations of white individuals in Chinese cinema and social media are middle-class, rational, and knowledgeable white men from countries such as the US, the UK, and Germany. At the same time, the modelling industry in China predominantly features white females, primarily coming from Eastern European countries and Russia. Meanwhile, Chinese advertisements often portray these foreign models as epitomes of beauty, confidence, and glamour, aligning with ideals propagated by fashion capitals such as Paris, New York, Milan, and London. This phenomenon, again, underscores China's cultural aspiration for Western and North America, signifying a selective preference for Western Euro-American whiteness over Eastern European and Russian whiteness.

Beyond the differentiated cultural meanings of the white population, my ethnographic inquiry into the lived experiences of white influencers and white models

also uncovers a significant distinction among white individuals based on their socioeconomic status and nationality. In Chapter 2, I elucidate how white males from Western European and North American countries tend to possess higher levels of education and socioeconomic status compared with white models, who primarily come from Eastern Europe and Russia. In these white male influencers' efforts to appeal to Chinese audiences, cultural capital such as Chinese language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity supersede mere physical appearance. Conversely, Chapter 4 delves into the aesthetic labour performed by Eastern European and Russian models, many of whom originate from less affluent backgrounds with lower educational attainment. This group of the white population largely relies on their white embodiment as their primary asset for economic sustenance in China. In contrast to influencers, models face more limited avenues for upward mobility by migrating to China. The differences between the two groups underscore the varying degrees of privilege within the spectrum of whiteness, showcasing the complex interplay between race, socioeconomic status, and nationality status in migratory contexts. One may say that "white skin privilege" (Lan, 2022) is readily apparent in the case of modelling. Yet, for Western male influencers, racial privilege associated with their white bodies tends to be less overt since it intertwines with other forms of social privilege stemming from their gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status. This nuanced understanding underscores the multifaceted nature of whiteness and its intersected manifestations in contemporary China.

Contribution, limitation, and the future research of whiteness

Whiteness studies have effectively revealed the socially constructed nature of white hegemony. Earlier research on the normalization of white privilege, the intersectionality of whiteness with other social categories, and the hierarchy within the white population offers insightful analyses of the multifaceted and persistent nature of white hegemony. However, as noted in the introduction, the field has primarily focused on whiteness within the Western Euro-American context. Failing to conceptually separate white embodiment from hegemonic whiteness risks perpetuating white dominance in the realm of knowledge production. This dissertation challenges the Western-centric analysis of whiteness by examining the negotiation of white identities within Chinese visual culture, where white individuals transition from a dominant, majority status to a minority, foreign identity under the Chinese gazes. By doing so, this research transcends the binary analysis of whiteness versus blackness and adds nuance to the concept of white privilege in a transnational context.

Early in my research, I appreciated the analytical power of whiteness in providing novel ways to tease out certain otherwise invisible racialized connections and relations in Western Euro-America, a white-dominated context. However, as I

delved further into the reading, I also noticed that the formalization and academic institutionalization of whiteness studies have been attributed to initiatives originating from within the white community. Consequently, the field has predominantly centred on pointing out white people who construct themselves as raceless individuals and the realization as well as reflection of privileges associated with their whiteness. This inclination within whiteness literature is evident in the examination of whiteness within and beyond Western contexts. Books and articles employing the notion of whiteness often presuppose a white audience that is urged toward greater self-reflection on what whiteness is. While these analyses are certainly illuminating, I sensed a lack of substantial emphasis on the relational nature of white identity. Indeed, whiteness has been predominantly constructed as a superior, normal identity; it thus invites us to make invisible the visible. However, as a constructed, relational category, whiteness is profoundly embedded in the complex construction of non-white categories such as blackness, brownness, Chineseness, or Asianness. As a Chinese researcher residing in the Netherlands, I have never felt whiteness as something invisible and light, akin to what McIntosh (1988/2001) described as “an invisible weightless knapsack”. My perspectives on and lived experiences of whiteness resonate more with the insights provided by non-white scholars such as Sara Ahmed (2007), who focuses on what whiteness does, how whiteness “orients bodies in specific directions” (p. 150), and how whiteness is “material and lived” (p. 150) by both the population within and without the white community. Thus, as I delved deeper into my research, I became increasingly aware that if the analysis of whiteness solely focuses on the white population’s self-understandings and distinguishing between different groups of white people, then whiteness studies risk recentring whiteness and losing their critical potency on racism at large.

This dissertation thus also makes another noteworthy contribution to whiteness studies by moving beyond the viewpoint of the white population and instead engaging with the perspectives and experiences of non-white communities. One of my primary focuses has been understanding how the Chinese make sense and make use of whiteness and how Chinese nationalism and racism are entrenched in their narratives and practices around white people. Furthermore, I have broadened the scope beyond individual-based analysis and comprehensively explored whiteness as a discursive system that persistently delineates relations among skin tones and ethnic origins. Specifically, I have highlighted the active involvement of the cultural and advertising sphere in the social and cultural construction of whiteness in China.

This aspect of my contribution also entails the limitation of my research. Like whiteness, Chineseness is relational and far from monolithic. While this dissertation has analysed the racialized gazes of Chinese cultural workers, fashion work-

ers, and young audiences on whiteness, it does not suggest that every Chinese person perceives and engages with the white population in the same way. Future research on the formation of white identity in other media forms or among white migrants in China's small cities and rural areas, for instance, could further complicate and add nuance to the central arguments presented in this dissertation.

The last point is that, at the initial stage of my research, my focus primarily rested on the distinctive features of race and whiteness within the Chinese context and explored insightful texts on the cultural specificity of race in China written by scholars such as Frank Dikötter (1992, 1994) and Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010). However, upon immersing myself in the field in Shanghai, and gleaned lived insights from my model participants, I learned that white privilege in China's media is unique but not as unique as I initially perceived. As highly mobile labourers, white models often spend a brief period in China before moving on to the next destination, which could be South Korea, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia, India, and so on. For many foreign models, relocating to China for work was just one of several potential options, and China is just one of the destinations where they have privileged access to the modelling job market. In the recently published book *Global China as Method* (2022), Franceschini and Loubere introduce the concept of "global China" to articulate their critical approach to studying China. They contend that regardless of researchers' political stances, many studies on China share an assumption, which is that China is an "externalized, separate, and self-contained 'other'" (2022, p. 5). China, like other countries and regions, certainly embodies its unique sociohistorical and political context and requires a degree of particularism when researchers attend to affairs happening there. However, it is also equally crucial to recognize that China is part of and intricately linked to the rest of the world. Rather than viewing China as an Orientalized, isolated entity in the global landscape, they advocate understanding China as intricately intertwined with global histories, processes, and trends. This dissertation has sought to reconcile the universal and particular aspects of white identity formation in China by considering China both as a creator and mediator of racial hierarchies. In other words, I have demonstrated that the racial formation of whiteness in China is not purely in China but embedded in both the "local and global racial systems" (Lundström, 2014, p. 174). Looking ahead, the project could further expand through the exploration of the transnational mobility of racialized aesthetic labourers such as models, dancers, and other types of performers in different Asian countries. Such research could delve into discerning the distinctions, parallels, and interconnections between white formation in China and other countries of the Global South.

While writing my PhD, I asked myself daily: What is whiteness? We intuit its meaning and experience the significance of race, yet it remains elusive. Despite

my efforts to reject categorizing people through race in my daily life (my skin colour is wood, not yellow, as the late Chinese poet Gu Cheng puts it), race still persists, knocking on my door, falling onto me, and lingering in my body. In doing this research, whenever I seek to capture the crux of whiteness in a given context, what is immediately presented in front of me is often not the race, not the logic of biological determinism per se. Instead, it is often through class distinction, ethno-national rivalry, and gender inequality that the fragments of racial thinking are lived, relived, and so made discernible through these intersections. As such, race/whiteness is a phantom. However, precisely through capturing such a ghostly existence, we can better understand some previously obscured connections. Among these, particularly given the rising geopolitical tensions and economic disparities in recent decades, the discourse of race and ethnicity in nation-building projects, the marketization and capitalization of racialized differences, and the shared class struggles faced by various precarious, racialized labourers, in my opinion, deserve more scholarly attention.

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Table 1

Name on Bilibili	Country of origin	Number of followers on Bilibili
京城小雷Alex	Italy	180,000
Barrett看中国	UK	454,000
钟逸伦要继续努力	US/Italy	279,000
非正式会谈的宁大人	South Africa	176,000
阿福Thomas	Germany	1,596,000
Real麦克老师	US	923,000
红袋鼠小明	Australia	55,000
贝乐泰是冠军	UK	469,000
西班牙小哥儿德明	Spain	150,000
Scor奥熙	Germany	323,000
肖恩Shaun-Gibson	UK	667,000
我是郭杰瑞	US	7,050,000
不是柯桑德	Netherlands	1,340,000
拂赫坊	UK	1,060,000
NathanRich火锅大王	US	1,551,000
小马在纽约	US	585,000
Noel苏诺伊	Spain	439,000
荷兰老司机Rein	Netherlands	241,000
伏拉夫	Russia	79,000
Daniel Dumbrill	Canada	460,000
美国犹太重庆大足人	US	12,000
功必扬队长	Argentina	289,000
高佑思不是皮克	Israel	286,000
德国小伙吴雨翔	Germany	207,000
光头哥EVAN	Russia	38,000
爱笑的艾杰西	US	196,000
小文楷Kevin	Spain	44,000
杰里德Jared	US	1,926,000
口语老炮儿马思瑞	US	1,991,000
小萨666	Russia	389,000

Table 2 Cited participants

Name	Country of origin	Gender	Age	Occupation
John	UK	male	44	English teacher; online influencer
Max	Germany	male	34	musician; online influencer
Paul	Germany	male	32	entrepreneur; online influencer
Chris	China	male	47	owner of modelling agency Fame
Ian	China	male	32	model booker
Dave	China	male	38	model booker
Sara	China	female	35	model booker
Orange	China	female	28	model booker
Jacob	China	male	29	model booker
Benjamin	China	male	35	model booker
Chang	China	male	41	fashion photographer/producer
Shui	China	male	33	stylist/fashion editor
Donna	China	female	34	PR for a Chinese fashion brand
Adela	Tanzania	female	24	Model
Tom	Madagascar	male	25	Model
Theo	France	male	28	Model
Alina	Poland	female	24	Model
Natalie	Serbia	female	21	Model
Julia	Polish	female	26	Model
Anton	Ukraine	female	21	Model
Hana	Montenegro	female	24	Model
Theo	France	male	27	Model
Boris	Russia	male	24	Model

Thesis Summary

**The Allure of White Bodies: Race, Capital,
and Nationhood in Contemporary China**

Research on race and whiteness in Western societies has illuminated the pivotal role of the media in shaping, normalizing, and challenging white privilege. As China emerges as a global economic power and hosts a growing number of foreign migrants, media portrayals of white foreigners have become increasingly diverse. In line with the objectives of the Chinawhite project, funded by the European Research Council (ERC), this dissertation examines the racial formation of whiteness in Chinese cinema, social media, and the fashion modelling industry.

This study views whiteness as a discursive system that permeates ideological and cultural domains whilst also being embedded in everyday interactions and practices. To foster a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, the study employs ethnographic and cultural studies methods to explore the cultural meanings of white identities and the racialized social dynamics between Chinese individuals and white foreigners.

Three research questions frame this dissertation:

1. How is whiteness perceived in relation to Chineseness? In particular, how have rising Chinese nationalism and the increased geopolitical tensions between China and major Western countries in recent years impacted the representation and production of whiteness?
2. To what extent does white embodiment afford foreign migrants material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages? How does it enrich our understanding of the notion of white privilege?
3. How does racial whiteness intersect with other social categories, such as gender, class, and nationality?

This dissertation reveals that contradictions often mark the cultural meanings of white identity: on the one hand, white identity is often linked to positive associations such as modernization, progress, socioeconomic advancement, and cosmopolitanism; on the other hand, it is Othered and contrasted with Chinese bodies, accommodating the cultural tastes and feelings of nationalism among ordinary Chinese. This research also unpacks the complexities of white privilege in the Chinese context: while the symbolic value attached to whiteness often grants white performers – such as Euro-American influencers and models – prominent visibility in China’s media landscape, these performers face various obstacles in capitalizing on their white identity due to their foreigner status. Additionally, the analysis addresses the intersections of race, gender, nationality, and socioeconomic status, shedding light on how China mediates the inequalities and perceived hierarchy within the white population.

Overall, this dissertation argues that white privilege and hegemony continue

to recur while constantly facing adaptation, mutation, and contestation. Comprehending white formation in contemporary China necessitates a substantial consideration of the cultural construction of Chineseness as well as the changing nationalist and capitalist ideologies and practices within China's reform era since the 1980s.

Samenvatting

De allure van witte lichamen:
ras, kapitaal en natie in het hedendaagse China

Onderzoek naar ras en witheid in Westerse samenlevingen heeft de cruciale rol van de media belicht in het vormen, normaliseren en uitdagen van wit privilege. Naarmate China zich ontwikkelt tot een wereldwijde economische macht en een groeiend aantal buitenlandse migranten ontvangt, worden de mediabeelden van witte buitenlanders steeds diverser. In lijn met de doelstellingen van het Chinawhite-project, gefinancierd door de European Research Council (ERC), onderzoekt dit proefschrift de raciale vorming van witheid in de Chinese cinema, sociale media en de mode-modellenindustrie.

Deze studie beschouwt witheid als een discursief systeem dat doordringt in ideologische en culturele domeinen en tegelijkertijd ingebed is in alledaagse interacties en praktijken. Om een alomvattend begrip van dit fenomeen te bevorderen, maakt de studie gebruik van etnografische en culturele onderzoeksmethoden om de culturele betekenissen van witte identiteiten en de raciale sociale dynamiek tussen Chinese individuen en witte buitenlanders te onderzoeken.

Dit proefschrift wordt gekaderd door drie onderzoeksvragen:

1. Hoe wordt witheid waargenomen in relatie tot Chineesheid? In het bijzonder, hoe hebben toenemend Chinese nationalisme en de toegenomen geopolitieke spanningen tussen China en grote westerse landen in de afgelopen jaren invloed gehad op de representatie en productie van witheid?
2. In hoeverre verschaft witte belichaming buitenlandse migranten materiële en symbolische voordelen en nadelen? Hoe verrijkt dit ons begrip van het concept van wit privilege?
3. Hoe kruist raciale witheid met andere sociale categorieën, zoals geslacht, klasse en nationaliteit?

Dit proefschrift laat zien de culturele betekenissen van witte identiteit vaak wordt gekenmerkt door tegenstellingen: enerzijds wordt witte identiteit vaak geassocieerd met positieve aspecten zoals modernisering, vooruitgang, sociaaleconomische ontwikkeling en kosmopolitisme; anderzijds wordt witheid als anders gezien (*Otherised*) en gecontrasteerd met Chinese lichamen, waarbij tegemoet wordt gekomen aan de culturele voorkeuren en nationalistische gevoelens van gewone Chinezen. Dit onderzoek ontrafelt ook de complexiteit van wit privilege in de Chinese context: hoewel witheid vaak symbolische waarde heeft en witte performers – zoals Euro-Amerikaanse influencers en modellen – een prominente positie verschaft in de Chinese media, stuiten deze performers op obstakels bij het benutten van hun witte identiteit vanwege hun vreemdelingenstatus. Daarnaast behandelt dit onderzoek de intersecties van ras, geslacht, nationaliteit en sociaaleconomische status, en belicht daarmee de manier waarop

China de ongelijkheden en waargenomen hiërarchie binnen de witte bevolking bemiddelt.

Al met al betoogt dit proefschrift dat wit privilege en hegemonie zich blijven herhalen en voortdurend onderhevig zijn aan aanpassingen, mutaties en betwisting. Een begrip van de vorming van witheid in het hedendaagse China vereist een grondige beschouwing van de culturele constructie van Chineesheid, evenals de veranderende nationalistische en kapitalistische ideologieën en praktijken binnen het Chinese hervormingstijdperk sinds de jaren tachtig.

