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Between privileges and precariousness: Remaking whiteness in China's teaching English as a second language industry

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Abstract

This research examines the multiple and contradictory racialization of white identities in China's booming ESL (English as a second language) industry. China represents a new geography of whiteness studies beyond Euro-America due to the transformation of corporeal whiteness into a minority identity as a result of international migration. This research makes distinctions between white privilege as a form of structural domination in Western societies and white-skin privilege as a form of embodied racial capital in China, which can be easily transformed into white-skin vulnerability. It interprets the tension between white-skin privilege and precariousness as a concurrent and mutually constitutive process that foregrounds the open-ended nature of white racial formation in China. By focusing on the intersections between global white supremacist ideologies and local Chinese constructions of self/Other relations, this project explores new forms of racialization beyond the Black/white, superiority/inferiority binaries in the Western context.

KEYWORDS
China, foreign English teachers, precariousness, racial neoliberalism, white-skin privilege

Resumen

Esta investigación examina la racialización múltiple y contradictoria de identidades blancas en la industria en auge del ESL (inglés como segundo idioma) en China. China representa una geografía nueva de estudios de blancura más allá de Euro-América debido a la transformación de la blancura corpórea en la identidad de una minoría como resultado de una migración internacional. Esta investigación hace distinciones entre el privilegio blanco como una forma de dominación estructural en sociedades occidentales y el privilegio de piel blanca como una forma de capital racial corporeizado en China, el cual puede ser fácilmente transformado en vulnerabilidad de la piel blanca. Interpreta la tensión entre el privilegio de piel blanca y la precariedad como un proceso concurrente y mutuamente constitutivo que destaca la naturaleza abierta de la formación racial blanca en China. Al enfocarse en las intersecciones entre las ideologías

supremacistas blancas globales y las construcciones chinas locales de las relaciones sí-mismo/otro, este proyecto explora nuevas formas de racialización más allá de los binarios negro/blanco, superioridad/inferioridad en el contexto occidental. [*privilegio de piel blanca, precariedad, neoliberalismo racial, profesores de inglés extranjeros, China*].

In June 2012, a photo series entitled "China 2050" went viral on the internet. Created by Benoit Cezard, a French photographer who had lived in China since 2006, the series features an imagined future in 2050 when white "foreigners" are taking various low-paying service jobs in China, as waiters, housekeepers, construction workers, street peddlers, and freelance language instructors. While the artist's speculation of a future where low-skilled migrants were white may seem highly provocative, it nevertheless reflects important transformations of white experiences in China's growing market economy and consumer culture. First, the rise of China as the world's second-largest economy has facilitated a reverse flow of white migrants from the developed world, as they pursue better job or business opportunities. Second, the diversification of the white population in China concurs with the decline of social privileges associated with white skin and Western looks. In addition to the so-called transnational elite class, who are mainly concentrated in the corporate business sector, there are a growing number of white migrants occupying middle- and lower-strata jobs. The mobility trajectories of this new type of white migrants are more precarious and open-ended than was the case for their predecessors (Lan 2011; Lehmann 2014). Finally, in creating a photo series portraying white people performing humble jobs, Cezard explores the dissonance between the long-privileged racial status of white people and their growing loss of social privileges in China. This anxiety around whiteness in China resonates with the current crisis of white identity in the Western world, as economic recession, accelerating migration flows, and cultural diversity remake whiteness itself (Taub 2016).

Taking seriously the precarious nature of whiteness and white privilege at the global level, this research identifies China as a new frontier where the Western notion of whiteness is disassembled and reassembled in complex and contradictory ways. Inspired by recent scholarship that emphasizes the territorially bounded nature of whiteness (Lan 2011; Lundström 2014), I make a distinction between white privilege as a form of structural domination in Western societies and white-skin privilege as a form of embodied racial capital in China. According to McIntosh (1988), white privilege constitutes an invisible package of unearned advantages and benefits that have been conferred systematically to white people. In the Chinese context, since white migrants no longer enjoy structural domination, a large part of their social privilege and preferential treatment is solely derived from white skin and Western looks. However, white-skin privilege can easily turn into white-skin vulnerability due to the racialization of white people as "foreigners" and cultural outsiders. Nevertheless, with the globalization of race and the persistence of white supremacy in a transnational context (Beliso-De Jesus and Pierre 2019; Thomas and Clarke 2013), white-skin privilege in China still benefits, to a certain extent, from white-supremacist ideologies, structures, and practices embedded in global media, international education, and the neoliberal market economy and consumer culture.

This research suggests that English as a second language (ESL) teachers (the majority being white) provide an ideal case to examine the multiple and contradictory constructions of whiteness in China due to notable tensions between privilege and precariousness in their daily lives. With an estimated three hundred million English learners, China boasts the world's largest teaching ESL market, which provides ample job opportunities for migrants from major Western countries (Pan 2019). However, China's ESL job market is also highly racialized due to preferential treatment toward white teachers and discrimination against nonwhite teachers (Leonard 2019; Stanley 2013). The commodification of whiteness in China's ESL industry is largely due to the phenomenal growth of the private education sector, which caters to the needs of middle-class parents who are willing to pay exorbitant fees to enhance their children's competitiveness in a globalizing education and job market (Chan 2019). According to official statistics, in 2018 there were fifty thousand English-language training institutions in China, and the training market was worth $72 billion (Pan 2019). ESL teachers have become a highly visible group of "foreigners" in China due to their increasing interactions with ordinary Chinese people and recent media reports of some foreign teachers' involvement in drug abuse, illegal employment, and child molestation (Pan 2019). Positioned at the front line of a new type of white labor migration that is likely to increase in the near future, ESL teachers represent an emerging type of precarious whiteness, which is facilitated by racial neoliberalism and changing power relations between China and major Western countries.

The rise of China as a global superpower has generated abundant debate in Western media, which contributes to the "China threat" discourse in political, economic, and security domains (Jacques 2009; Xie and Page 2010). However, little attention has been paid to the racial implications of shifting power relations between China and the West. Existing literature on international migrants in China mainly focuses on Black Africans in Guangzhou (Bodomo 2012; Haugen 2012; Lan 2017; Mathews 2017). The relative absence of white people in migration studies literature points to the racialization of "migrant" as a category reserved mainly for nonwhite people (Lundström 2017). This research denaturalizes whiteness as an invisible norm by rethinking it in the context of international labor migration and cross-cultural interaction. China represents a space of rupture where white skin can be decoupled from white hegemony due to the transformation of corporeal whiteness into a minority identity. Since mainland China

was never fully colonized by any Western power, there is no historical legacy of an institutionalized structure to support white supremacy. Rather than commanding institutional power, corporeal whiteness is often conflated with foreignness and subjected to the disciplinary power of multiple Chinese gazes. By critically interrogating China's role in contributing to the reconfiguration of whiteness, this research sheds light on the intricate yet contentious ways that white supremacy may reproduce itself, albeit in distorted and fragmentary manners and in multiple social and cultural contexts.

RETHINKING WHITE SUPREMACY IN A CONTEXT OF TRANSNATIONAL LABOR MIGRATION

The growing body of literature on race and English-language teaching (Alim 2016; Jenks 2017; Motha 2014) is an important backdrop to this work. Scholars have noted that the ESL industry has been playing an important role in supporting global white supremacy in the sense that it helps maintain a racial hierarchy among English teachers, with white native speakers at the top and nonwhite, nonnative teachers at the bottom (Fotovatian 2015; Holliday and Aboshiha 2009; Kubota 2009; Ramjattan 2019; Ruecker and Ives 2015). Kubota and Lin (2006) call for attention to epistemological racism—that is, how ESL textbooks perpetuate white norms and cultural knowledge and how white ESL teachers impart racialized knowledge to students. The research presented here moves away from the politics of language and its pedagogies to focus on a relatively underexplored topic: the migration of white English teachers to China. In centering the multiple contradictions in the racialization of white English teachers as labor migrants, this research contributes to the anthropology of white supremacy by providing an ethnographic example where hegemonic whiteness is simultaneously consolidated and marginalized. On the one hand, neoliberal hiring practices and marketing strategies perpetuate the privileged status of white native speakers. On the other hand, the tightening of immigration control and the profit-driven nature of the ESL industry facilitate the commodification and structural marginalization of white teachers.

Existing literature on white Westerners in Asia mainly concentrates on two groups: the transnational elite class and nonmanagerial white migrants who hold local contracts (Beaverstock 2002; Farrer 2019; Yeoh and Willis 2005). While both groups are reported to experience the decline of "white privilege" with the rise of Asian economies, the second group seems to face more restrictions in immigration control, difficulty integrating into the host society, and precarious job situations (Debnár 2016; Hof 2018; Leonard 2019; Maher and Lafferty 2014). This research identifies three weaknesses in the existing literature. First, the term "white privilege" is often taken for granted, and there is little critical reflection on its reinterpretation and redefinition in a non-Western context. Second, while existing literature attends to class and gendered differences among Euro-American migrants in Asia, there is a lack of discussion about different shades of whiteness—that is, the hierarchical ranking of various groups of white migrants based on nationality. In the ESL industry, such hierarchies are explicit, and racial

whiteness confers privileges above and beyond English-language proficiency. Last, but not least, there is a danger of discussing positive racism or discrimination against white migrants without critically reflecting on the global expansion of white supremacy. Sommers (cited in Lan 2011) argues that there is not much difference between Chinese immigrants running restaurants in America and Western expatriates teaching English in Asia, since both are making a living by selling cultural products. Such comparison not only ignores the different historical and racial contexts in China and the United States but also fails to acknowledge and critically reflect upon the various types of visible and invisible privileges enjoyed by white migrants in Asia. This research argues that whiteness can be enacted in contextually specific ways. For the white migrants in this research, it can be a novel yet painful experience to discover that their white skin and Western looks may function as both a resource and a liability and that they have to constantly negotiate their white identities in relation to various groups of Chinese people.

Bond and Inwood (2016, 719–20) understand white supremacy as "the presumed superiority of white racial identities, however problematically defined, in support of the cultural, political, and economic domination of non-white groups." They further argue that the structures and logics of white supremacy play a key role in the naturalization of white identities and white-skin privilege. This research adopts a transnational perspective by proposing that the structures and logics of white supremacy are also embedded in the process of international migration. Scholars of race and migration studies have noted how global white supremacy can be effectively sustained by racist migration regimes (Erel, Murji, and Nahaboo 2016). Unlike migrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America in major Western countries, who have to go through a racialization process as people of color, often accompanied by downward social mobility, white migrants from the Western world in Asia often experience enhanced racial status and better job opportunities (Leonard 2019; Maher and Lafferty 2014; Stanley 2013). This research argues that in addition to white-skin privilege, the structural marginalization and precarious job situations of white migrants in Asia also need to be examined in the context of the global expansion of white supremacy. Instead of treating privilege and precariousness as a binary, this research explores the dialectical relation between the two. White-skin privilege may lead to white-skin precariousness due to the fragmentation of hegemonic whiteness into different shades and versions of whiteness. White-skin precariousness may ironically reinforce white-skin privilege due to the social construction of racial whiteness as a desirable job skill in the Asian labor market (Farrer 2019; Leonard 2019).

Murji and Solomos (2005, 1) define racialization as "a core concept in the analysis of racial phenomena, particularly to signal the processes by which ideas about race are constructed, come to be regarded as meaningful, and are acted upon." Mullings (2005) notes that the consolidation of global capitalism and recent migration processes have created new forms and sites of racialization. China represents a new site of racialization due to the recent diversification of its foreign population and excessive media attention to anti-Black racism in the country (Liu 2016). This research suggests that the racialization of white migrants in China is qualitatively different from that of Black Africans due to

the persistence of white supremacy as a global power system and its invisible workings in different local contexts (Beliso-De Jesus and Pierre 2019). While the racialization of Black migrants in Guangzhou reproduces, to a certain extent, established anti-Black discourses in Western countries, such as criminalization, illegality, and hypersexuality (Lan 2017), the Chinese perceptions and engagements with racial whiteness seem to be marked by considerable ambivalence, confusion, and instrumentalism. By focusing on the intersections between global white supremacist ideologies and local Chinese constructions of self/Other relations, this project explores new forms of racialization beyond the Black/white, superiority/inferiority binaries in the Western context.

Existing work on racial neoliberalism has noted the prevalence of a race-mute culture in the public sphere and the relegation of discussions of race and racism to the private domain (Goldberg 2009; Kapoor 2013). China echoes this race-mute culture due to its official denial of racial problems in the country and its externalization of issues of race and racism to the Western world (Lan 2016). In this vein, China represents a perfect example to examine "how race is maintained and reproduced without formal structures" (Mullings 2005, 679). However, scholars also note that the operation of neoliberalism in China is characterized by the interplay of state authorities with a multitude of self-interested individual actions (Ong and Zhang 2008). This research suggests that racial neoliberalism in China is marked by active state interventions in the market economy, which both obscures and intensifies the racialization of white identities in its ESL sector. Building on scholarly works that emphasize the historicity and intersectionality of racial meanings (Grenshaw 1991; Omi and Winant 1994), this research examines the racialization of ESL teachers in China at three interrelated levels: macro (state policy), meso (brokerage services), and micro (daily experiences). It integrates whiteness studies and migration studies by critically reflecting the mediating role of commercialized job-recruitment agencies, whose work behind the scenes constitutes an important yet often overlooked dimension of white racial formation in China.

RESEARCHING WHITENESS IN CHINA

The primary data for this research is based on thirty-four semi-structured interviews with foreign teachers in Beijing and Xi'an (seventeen from each city) between June 12, 2019, and January 16, 2020. As the capital city, Beijing is noted for the diversity of its international population and the highly competitive nature of its ESL market. Xi'an is a provincial city located in central China's less-affluent Shanxi province. It attracts foreign teachers through its rich historical and cultural heritage, affordable cost of living, and less-competitive job market. Since white-skin privilege is a relational concept, I intentionally recruited eight nonwhite participants. Data collected from this racially diverse group of teachers has enabled me to identify the existence of a racial hierarchy in the ESL industry. In the Beijing sample, nine participants are from the United States (including one African American, one Japanese American, and one multiracial American),

three from the United Kingdom, one from the Netherlands, one from Iceland, one from Australia, one from Spain, and one from Belarus. In the Xi'an sample, nine are from the United States (including one Chinese America and one multiracial American), five from South Africa (two self-identified as Black), one from the United Kingdom, one from the Philippines, and one from Venezuela. In both cities, I first used my personal network to recruit participants and then followed the snowball-sampling method. To avoid focusing on foreign perspectives alone, I also conducted open-ended interviews with twelve Chinese people who had daily interactions with foreign teachers. In addition, I did participant observation at English corners,[1] Christmas parties, marketing events for English training centers, and game nights and weekend social activities organized by foreign teachers in both cities.

Due to privacy concerns, I did not tape the interviews. I first took handwritten notes during an interview and then reconstructed it on my laptop within twenty-four hours after the interview. The data-analysis process involved close reading of the fieldnotes and interview notes multiple times to identify recurring themes, such as complaints against state immigration policy, exploitation by migration brokers, differential treatments of white and nonwhite teachers, and native speakers and nonnative speakers. From these themes, I identified key terms and concepts, such as privilege, precariousness, white-face jobs,[2] etc. The analysis of racialization at the macro level is mainly based on archival data gathered from English- and Chinese-language news and Chinese government websites. The meso-level analysis is based on interviews with foreign teachers, participant observation in English training centers, and social media analysis. Unfortunately, I was unable to interview any migration brokers, who seemed to be highly suspicious of my research, partly due to competition in the field and partly due to their involvement in unethical practices. However, I managed to join three WeChat groups administered by ESL job-recruitment agents. Through reading the recruitment advertisements and watching foreign teachers' demo videos posted in these groups, I gained valuable knowledge about the racialized marketing practices by some agents.

As a middle-aged Chinese woman conducting research on white "foreigners" in China, I initially faced some challenges establishing trust with my participants. However, my status as an academic living in Europe also helped me gain credibility and thus positioned me in a flexible middle ground between foreign teachers and their Chinese employers, colleagues, and clients. This article is structured as follows: I first discuss changing state policies in the construction of the foreign Other (with whites being the default "foreigner" group); I then examine the racialized marketing strategies of migration brokers and job-recruitment agents in the ESL sector; and finally, I investigate the contradictory racialization of white knowledge and expertise in everyday interactions between multiple groups of white migrants and Chinese.

STATE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FOREIGN OTHER

The term "foreigner" is an emic term used by the Chinese state, ordinary Chinese people, and international migrants themselves

in various political and social contexts. However, the meaning of "foreigner" remains highly elastic due to its explicit association with non-Chineseness and its implicit association with whiteness. In premodern China, cultural difference was the primary means to distinguish Chinese people from non-Chinese people. Foreigners were considered "barbarians" or "devils" due to an ethnocentric cosmology that placed China at the center of human civilization (Ho 1985). This cultural determinism persists today, since ethnic Chinese people who hold foreign passports are more often identified as "overseas Chinese" than "foreigners" in both state media and popular perception.[3] The elastic nature of the "foreigner" category is further demonstrated by its semantic ambiguity. In its broadest sense, it may include all international people in China, yet in its narrow sense, it often refers to white "foreigners," since white people are commonly understood as the default group of "foreigners." Although corporeal whiteness is highly visible in Chinese society, white identity remains an invisible norm within the "foreigner" category. This is manifested by the fact that white migrants in China are seldom referred to as "white people" (*bairen*) in both state and popular media. They are simply identified as generic "foreigners." In comparison, "foreigners" from Asian backgrounds are often identified by their nationality: Koreans, Japanese, Indians, Filipinos, etc. Regardless of their nationality, Black migrants are commonly referred to as "Black people" (*heiren*) in popular media, which reflects the racialization of Blackness as a marked identity in China (Lan 2016).

The conflation of whiteness and a specific type of foreignness can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when China started interacting with Western colonial powers. Before that, white skin was often associated with the elite class in China and was used as a symbol for internal differentiation (Johansson 1998). With the defeat of China by the British army in the Opium Wars and the entry of foreign missionaries and traders, indigenous notions of whiteness were gradually marginalized and whiteness became increasingly associated with Europeans (Bonnett 2000). Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the images of "foreigners" kept changing due to China's shifting policies on international migrants. In 1954, the state established the Foreign Expert Bureau to oversee the employment and management of high-skilled "foreigners." Brady (2003) notes that the majority of foreign experts in the 1950s were from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and they worked mainly as engineers and technological advisers. After 1960, the foreign expert population became more diverse as Westerners from English-speaking countries were hired as language teachers, translators, and workers for state propaganda (Brady 2003). In the early reform years in the 1980s, there was a notable conflation of white people and "foreigners," since the majority of "foreigners" in China were white Westerners who worked as investors or top managerial staff in multinational corporations. The association of white bodies with wealth and social prestige was perpetuated by the state's *waishi* (foreign affairs) policy, which pursued a segregation doctrine prohibiting everyday interactions between "foreigners" and ordinary Chinese people (Brady 2003). Until the 1990s, foreign experts (the majority being white) enjoyed various privileges that were not available to Chinese people, such as sep-

arate housing, social prestige, high income, and access to luxury hotels and shopping centers.

In his review of whiteness studies in Japan, Fujikawa (2008) distinguishes between visible whiteness, which refers to white bodies or somatic whiteness, and invisible whiteness, which refers to whiteness as a hegemonic construction and a set of universal norms. In response to his call for critical attention to the relationship between these two versions of whiteness, I suggest that there are important overlaps and tensions between perceptions and receptions of white bodies and white norms in the Chinese context. While somatic whiteness remains highly visible in Chinese society due to its conflation with foreignness, the spread of white-supremacist ideologies in the country was often couched in the language of development, modernization, and integration into the world economy (Bond and Inwood 2016). China's Open Door Policy in the reform era facilitated the influx of people, images, capital, and commodities from the Western world. In the 1990s, many Chinese intellectuals understood the world according to an international racial hierarchy, with Western industrial nations at the top, Third World countries at the bottom, and China somewhere in between (Lufrano 1994). In terms of state policy, Deng Xiaoping's official launch of the Four Modernizations (in the realms of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defense) was based firmly on the idea of learning from the West. With his innovative idea of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," regional capitalism and the market economy were legitimately introduced into China and became the major drivers of the country's economic takeoff. The conflation of whiteness (as an invisible norm) and Westernness often masks the spread of white-supremacist ideologies in Chinese popular media, consumer culture, educational institutions, and business practices.

While the conflation of whiteness and Westernness in the early reform era has contributed to the naturalization of white-skin privilege in Chinese society, whiteness nevertheless has always been contained in the "Other" category based on its foreignness (i.e., non-Chineseness). Brady (2003) argues that one of the basic principles of China's waishi policy was to treat insiders and outsiders differently and to make the foreign serve China. This has effectively facilitated the political, social, and cultural marginalization of white Westerners as the "foreign Other."[4] In the 1950s and 1960s, "foreigners" were divided into friends and enemies based on their political affiliation with the Chinese Communist Party. In the early reform era, between the late 1970s and 1990s, "foreigners" were evaluated by their contribution to China's economic development. In the Communist Party's Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in 1983, Westerners were constructed as potential threats to Chinese cultural values and moral standards (Carrico 2017). To cope with the influx of foreign people, the state implemented new legislation in 1996, Regulations on the Employment of Foreigners in China. It required "foreigners" working in China to obtain an employment certificate issued by the Ministry of Labor. However, those who held a foreign expert certificate issued by the Foreign Expert Bureau were exempted. This dual-certificate system lasted until 2016, when the state decided to merge the employment certificate and foreign expert certificate into one work permit. The

implementation of the new work-permit system indicates the abolition of the "foreign expert" as a legal category. This is further confirmed by the change of the name of the Foreign Expert Bureau to the Ministry of Science and Technology in March 2018.

The disappearance of the "foreign expert" as a legal category (with white Westerners being the majority in this category) reflects the destabilization of white-skin privilege, to a certain extent, in the new historical context of China's rise as a global superpower.[5] With China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the images of white "foreigners" became more diverse in popular media. While corporeal whiteness continues to be associated with business success, English proficiency, and a global outlook (Yan 2017), state immigration control has also started to target "undesirable" whites, who are often denigrated as "triple illegals," "low quality," or "foreign trash" during periodic outbursts of popular nationalism on Chinese social media (Zhang 2012). The diversification of the white population in China betrays the tension between visible whiteness (white bodies) and invisible whiteness (white supremacy and white norms). In other words, white skin and Western looks may not be sufficient to guarantee preferential treatment in everyday interactions with multiple groups of Chinese people. On June 30, 2012, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress passed the new Exit and Entry Administrative Law, which took effect in July 2013. The implementation of the new law represents China's efforts to distinguish between desirable and undesirable "foreigners." For example, while the new law contains tougher provisions for illegal immigrants, it also introduces a new visa category to facilitate the inflow of foreign talent (Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle 2014; Haugen 2015).

In 2016, the Chinese state introduced a pilot visa point system, using an elaborate scoring system to rank "foreigners" into three classes: (A) top talent, (B) professional talent, and (C) unskilled workers. The goal was "encouraging the top, controlling the middle and limiting the bottom" (Tatlow 2016). The pilot program started in nine provinces/cities and was expanded nationwide in 2017. The new visa policy affected the lived experiences of ESL teachers in concrete ways. While many of them used to be in the privileged "foreign expert" category, since 2016 they became recategorized as class B foreign workers and thus were subject to more rigorous immigration control. Another crucial change in 2016 was the so-called native-speaker policy. A supplementary law on the classification criteria for jobs held by "foreigners" in China states that in principle overseas language teachers should be native speakers with a bachelor's (or above) degree and have two years of teaching experience. Those who hold bachelor's (or above) degrees in education, linguistics, or teaching-related disciplines, or those who have obtained a teaching certificate in their home country or international language-teaching certificate, can be exempt from the requirement for prior teaching experience. Also in 2016, the state abolished the accreditation requirement for hiring foreign employees, which made it much easier for private educational institutes to hire foreign teachers. While this has greatly expanded the job opportunities for foreign ESL teachers, it also has rendered them more susceptible to unethical practices by commercialized recruitment agencies.

MARKETING WHITENESS IN THE ESL INDUSTRY

One Saturday morning in summer 2019, I was invited to attend a demo class taught by David, a twenty-nine-year-old Dutch man working as an English teacher in a private English training center in Beijing named Superkids.[6] When I arrived, several Chinese parents were already there with their children. I sat next to a middle-aged man who had a two-year-old toddler. He told me proudly, "Even before my daughter started speaking Chinese, we were playing English tapes to her." A few minutes later, David started the class with two women Chinese teaching assistants, Lucy and Candy. He first played a short video of an English song, teaching the children about their head, shoulders, knees, and toes. All the children were encouraged to stand up and do the motions together with David. I was amused to see that some of the parents were singing along with David and doing the motions just like their kids. David then taught the children how to say different shapes, such as circle, square, triangle, and rectangle. He spoke in an exaggerated high-pitched voice, like a cartoon figure. He also laughed a lot and moved around the room constantly, giving a high five to one kid and patting another one on the shoulder with a stuffed monkey. The two teaching assistants acted like David's fake students. They would repeat after him and ask the children to do the same. When David posed a question and no children replied, Lucy or Candy would raise their hand and give an answer. When a boy tried to stand up and leave, Candy held him in her arms and whispered to him gently in Chinese and tried to make him sit down.

The demo class is a regular promotional event at Superkids, with the purpose of encouraging parents to enroll their kids in the center's children's program. David told me later that since the children's program was the fastest-expanding program in his center, his Chinese boss always made sure to assign a white teacher to lead the demo class because a white face sells. Being the only white person in the classroom, David obviously enjoyed undivided attention from the various groups of Chinese people there: the children, the parents, and the two teaching assistants. However, he was also working hard to perform the racialized stereotype of a "fun foreign teacher" to impress his potential Chinese clients (Stanley 2013). While recognizing a tension between whiteness as a resource and as a burden for English teachers such as David, I was also puzzled by the following questions: Since the marketing strategy of Superkids is to teach authentic American English, why did the administration choose David, a white Dutch teacher, to embody/perform Americanness in its promotional event? What makes a white person more qualified as an English teacher than a nonwhite person in popular Chinese eyes? How do nationality and native-speaker status contribute to the formation of different shades of whiteness in China's commercialized ESL market?

While China's private educational sector has created a huge demand for foreign teachers, the ESL market is fraught with unethical hiring practices due to the proliferation of commercialized migration brokers and job-recruitment agencies (Pan 2019). The flourishing of brokerage services is caused by notable contradictions between the regulatory and commercial dimensions of the migration infrastructure

for foreign teachers (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Until 2016, private educational institutions had to gain accreditation from the local Foreign Experts Bureau before hiring foreign employees. To bypass the tedious bureaucratic procedures of obtaining an accreditation, some newly established private educational institutions resorted to illegal hiring practices, mainly through collaboration with commercialized recruitment agencies. Raymond, the Chinese CEO of Superkids, told me that after 2016 it was difficult to obtain work permits for non-native-speaker teachers. In addition, language barriers often hinder potential employers from directly hiring foreign teachers. Most small- and medium-sized educational institutions do not have professional human-resources personnel who can review application materials and conduct interviews with foreign teachers, nor are they familiar with the bureaucratic procedure of applying for a work permit. This has created a lucrative market for job-recruitment agencies, some of which can handle both recruitment and visa issues. Existing literature on migration brokers mainly focuses on their discipline and exploitation of migrants in the physical, economic, and legal realms (Constable 1997; Guevarra 2010; Xiang 2007). My research shifts the focus to the mediating role of migration agents in facilitating the contradictory construction of white racial identities in China's ESL industry. Migration brokers not only play an important role as gatekeepers in channeling different groups of white migrants to China but also shape popular perceptions of whiteness through their racialized marketing strategies.

Although "foreign teacher" (*waijiao*) is the most-used term by all parties in the ESL sector, white teachers remain the default group within this elastic category. David told me that while his school did hire Black and Asian teachers, his Chinese boss always makes sure the majority of the foreign teachers are white. The normalization of whiteness in the "foreign teacher" category is also demonstrated by discriminatory hiring practices against Black and Asian people. Marcus, a twenty-seven-year-old African American, was told by the principal in a primary school in Beijing on his first day of work that he was too dark to work there and that they had been expecting a white teacher. Marcus later found out that the agency that recruited him never sent his photo to the school. Yana, a thirty-four-year-old Japanese American, told me that she had to go through more interviews than a white person in order to find a job. She said, "They will only consider Asians if they cannot find a white teacher." While the boundary between white and Black and white and Asian are relatively clear, multiracial Americans with light skin and Western looks are often considered closer to the white category. In provincial cities where the ESL market is less competitive, such teachers are generally perceived as white. The same is true for light-skinned teachers from the Middle East and Latin America. Lucas, a Venezuelan working in a university in Xi'an, confided in me, "Back home, we were just average people, but in China we become handsome white foreigners. Chinese often think I am from France or other European countries." Lucas's example points to the ambiguous meanings of whiteness in the Chinese context. It also highlights a process of becoming "white" for some foreign teachers in China (Gualtieri 2001).

Regular observation in three WeChat recruitment groups for ESL teachers shows that whiteness has been both implicitly and explicitly marketed in these groups. A short demo video is usually attached to every job advertisement for potential employers to evaluate the applicant's physical appearance and oral English proficiency. This format implicitly favors applicants with white skin and Western looks. Meanwhile, some WeChat posts spotlight whiteness as a desirable quality among foreign teachers. For example, potential employers would post messages such as "Need two white native speaker teachers urgently!"; "White teacher from native English speaking countries needed!"; and "Can anyone recommend some white non-native speaker teachers?" One agent in Beijing always started a job advertisement by emphasizing the white identity of his candidate: "White British female teacher," "White American male teacher," "High quality white Irish male teacher." In contrast, he would use more generic language to describe nonwhite applicants. For example, a message starting with "Female American teacher" features an African American, and one needs to check the demo video to find this out. Corresponding to this explicit marketing of white identity, the salaries listed in the job advertisements also display a clear racial hierarchy, with white teachers being paid more than nonwhite teachers. One post says, "Anyone needs a black American teacher who can start immediately? Salary not high." Another one says, "Low prize promotion, Brazilian male teacher." Agents who market white nonnative speakers often emphasize their native-like accent or the specific visa they hold, such as student visa, tourist visa, or business or spouse visa. The implied message is that employers do not have to worry about sponsoring a work permit for them.

The commodification of whiteness in the ESL industry is marked by a tension between homogenization and differentiation. On the one hand, the explicit marketing of whiteness as a desirable quality for foreign teachers has led to the fetishization of whiteness as a valuable human capital that can be easily converted to financial capital for various players in the ESL sector (Lan 2011). On the other hand, the profit-driven nature of the ESL industry facilitates the differentiation of multiple shades of whiteness. Due to the higher cost of recruiting white native-speaker teachers with good qualifications, agents gradually shifted their attention to white nonnative English speakers as a ready substitute. In Xi'an, the influx of migrants from Eastern Europe and Latin America has not only enlarged the pool of white nonnative-speaker teachers but has driven down payment scales. One common practice for some agents is to hire a white nonnative speaker with a low salary offer and then present the person as a native speaker to an employer, who has to pay a higher salary due to the person's assumed native-speaker status. The agent thus makes a handsome profit out of the salary difference. In order to charge expensive tuitions, some schools or training centers act in complicity with job agencies by asking their white nonnative-speaker teachers to lie to parents, pretending they are from native-English-speaking countries. Perry, a thirty-three-year-old Icelander in Beijing, explained to me the hierarchical ranking of different groups of white teachers: at the top are those from native-English-speaking countries; in the middle are those from Northern and Western Europe, such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands; Russians and East Europeans are at the bottom. He said, "The payment scale in China's ESL market really depends on how white you are. Russians are white, but they are also not white enough." Perry's comment

that Russians are not white enough highlights the gap between corporeal whiteness and hegemonic whiteness in the Beijing context.

Racialized business practices and marketing strategies in China's ESL industry are both obscured and perpetuated due to the many contradictions in a rapidly changing neoliberal Chinese society. While the native-speaker policy aimed to raise the standard for hiring foreign teachers, it did little to break the naturalized linkage between white skin and native English fluency. By ignoring the racialized business practices in the commercialized ESL industry, the race-mute Chinese state tacitly endorses the commodification of whiteness in its neoliberal market economy and consumer culture. The fetishization of white teachers reflects the repackaging of white supremacy in soft languages, such as English proficiency, native speakerism, and market competition. Yet it also leads to emerging types of vulnerability that result from the intersection between immigration control, native speakerism, and exploitation in the ESL labor market. Despite the normalization of white-skin privilege, non-native-speaker teachers face notable challenges in obtaining a proper work permit. Many of them belong to the semi-compliance category defined by Ruhs and Anderson (2010): there is a mismatch between their visa type and the actual work they do. David, from the Netherlands, was holding a manager's visa. Carmen, a twenty-nine-year-old woman from Spain, was holding a work permit as a Spanish teacher, while her real job was to teach English. In addition, I heard stories of Russians and Ukrainians working with business and tourist visas who had to leave China regularly to renew their visas. A recent wave of state crackdowns on private training centers in 2018 has caused new feelings of anxiety among white nonnative speakers, especially those from Central and East European countries.[7] Such examples of precariousness highlight that in the new historical context of China's rise, white bodies can be both exalted as valuable human capital and trivialized as disposable foreign commodities.

WHITE FACES OR WHITE TALENT?

Tony is a sixty-year-old white American who had spent the past ten years recruiting students from China to attend high schools in the United States. When I met him, he was living in Xi'an and working as a part-time English teacher in a private school with an international curriculum. One Saturday evening, Tony told me that he was giving a talk, "How to Get Your Children into Harvard," which was also a promotional event for his school. When I arrived, there were already more than twenty Chinese in the room. Some were parents, and some were teachers from various private training centers. In addition, four college students in media studies were there to videotape the event. They wanted to make a documentary on Tony as a class project. Wearing a bright-colored Harvard T-shirt, Tony seemed to enjoy being in the spotlight. He later told me, "I used to be a shy person back in the States, but my personality changed in China. I feel comfortable being treated like a celebrity here." In his talk, Tony listed ten qualities elite universities in the United States are looking for. To illustrate each point, he resorted to comparisons between Chinese and American

cultures. Although he was speaking from experience, there was an implicit American superiority in the way he presented his argument. For example, on the necessity to adapt to American academic culture, Tony said, "American culture celebrates and rewards individual opinions, but most Chinese students I interviewed do not have their own opinions. They always started with 'Mom says.'" Concerning self-reliance, Tony first cracked a joke about Chinese mothers being "slaves" to their children. Then he switched to the lecturing mode and offered, "Don't do everything for your child. If you remove all the barriers and solve all the problems for them, they will never learn how to deal with challenges themselves." Some parents nodded in response, and some were taking notes carefully.

During the question-and-answer session, one Chinese father raised his hand and asked, "When I was a visiting scholar in the US, I did a survey. I found that 85 percent of the American students had not visited another country, and 90 percent of them did not want to learn a second language. It seemed their knowledge about China and other countries were quite superficial. So how can they deal with cultural differences?" I thought this was a sharp question, since it challenged Tony's implicit message of the superiority of the American educational system. Instead of answering the question directly, Tony reverted to his American-superiority narrative by offering a critique of internet censorship and lack of cultural diversity in China. He replied, "I guess the difference is that American children have more freedom, more access to information. American kids do not have to travel far to enjoy diversity. They have diversity at home. In comparison, not many Chinese kids have foreign friends." The Chinese father obviously was not satisfied with this answer, but he tried to be polite and did not say anything. The same politeness was displayed by Kevin, a Chinese teacher from a private training center who sat next to me. Kevin kept silent during the talk, but as soon as we walked out of the building, he observed, "These ten points are all beautiful in theory, but it's hard to apply them to the Chinese context. After all, foreigners [*laowai*] cannot fully understand the Chinese situation." What happened during and after Tony's talk revealed interesting tensions in Chinese perceptions of white expertise. While Tony was apparently respected as an "expert," his American superiority was also openly contested by a Chinese person who had overseas experiences. Behind the façade of Chinese politeness, Tony's expertise was also critically evaluated due to his racialized status as a white "foreigner" and a cultural outsider.

Since Americans constitute the biggest foreign population in China, American whiteness is often perceived as the default whiteness within the white category. This is supported by the fact that some of my white participants are routinely mistaken as Americans. Eric, a Filipino teacher in Xi'an, reported that Chinese parents usually cannot tell the difference between white native and nonnative speakers and think all white teachers are Americans. However, with the acceleration of the Sino–US trade war, growing nationalistic sentiment in China has led to more critical perceptions of whiteness and foreignness in popular media. The year 2019 witnessed several high-profile criminal cases of English teachers in different parts of China. In July, sixteen foreign teachers and students from Education First, one of China's

largest ESL schools, were detained on drug offenses by police in Xuzhou. On August 2, a foreign teacher at a kindergarten in Qingdao was sentenced to five years in prison for molesting a female student (Pan 2019). Such sensational news not only caused anger and panic among Chinese parents but also fostered popular nationalistic sentiment through the denouncement of illegal foreign teachers as foreign trash that may pollute Chinese youth (Sohu News 2019). Echoing this national trend of questioning and doubting the credibility of foreign knowledge and expertise, some private educational institutions displayed a more critical attitude toward white employees. Caroline, a thirty-two-year-old Chinese staff member from a training center in Beijing, related to me some of the problematic teachers they had. She said, "White people have a sense of superiority, especially those from the UK and the US. They are used to being treated with privileges. They are very picky when choosing a teaching schedule. Some do not have professional experiences, so they prefer easy classes, such as English conversation." Caroline also noted that the quality of Chinese teachers has been improving due to an increasing number of overseas returnees.

The commodification of whiteness in the ESL industry has led to the proliferation of white-face jobs that prioritize white appearance over professional qualifications. The fetishization of white teachers often contributes to exoticization, objectification, and even trivialization in the workplace. Tony recalled his experiences of working as a school principal in a small city in East China: "I only worked two days a month. One day was to meet with the parents. I did not have to do anything, just being there and looking pretty. The other day was when the people from the Education Bureau came. They asked me to talk about fourth grader's math curriculum. What the hell do I know about that? But my interpreter told me to just talk about whatever I want. I knew they wanted me because I am an old, white, male American. Other foreign teachers joked with me that I am a trophy wife, someone who looks pretty and stupid." Sophie, a twenty-two-year-old teacher from the United Kingdom, who worked in a private kindergarten in Beijing, explained to me, "I feel like a Mickey Mouse with the white-face advertisement thing. We are not treated as real teachers. They are only interested in us as white foreigners." Sophie lamented that in her company, foreign teachers served marketing purposes and local teachers were the ones doing the more foundational work. Eric, the Filipino teacher in Xi'an, told me that his school even rented white teachers to be at some of the promotional events, just to impress parents with their white faces. Low expectations and a lack of critical evaluation from Chinese employers not only demotivate foreign teachers to work hard but also contribute to the depreciation of white bodies; since such white-face jobs can be performed by anyone with white skin and Western looks, white bodies are reduced to disposable and replaceable commodities.

Leonard (2019) argues that whiteness is a key component of the "skills" that white migrants bring to jobs in Asia. However, in China's ESL market, the privileging of corporeal whiteness ironically leads to the devaluing and even disempowerment of white teachers with good teaching qualifications. This is partly due to the Chinese perception of racial whiteness as foreignness. Despite their elevated social status,

better job opportunities, and financial rewards, white teachers are routinely grouped with nonwhite foreign teachers in the workplace as belonging to the "foreigner" category. In other words, white-skin privilege cannot shield them from being structurally marginalized in a predominantly Chinese institution. One major frustration for foreign teachers is workplace segregation. Due to the legacy of the waishi policy, the administration system for foreign teachers is kept separate from that of Chinese teachers. While this dual system maintains a notable salary gap between foreign teachers and local Chinese teachers (with the former being paid much higher), it also excludes the former from participating in decision-making processes concerning teaching and administrative issues. Vicky, a thirty-year-old white South African in Xi'an, who had eight years' teaching experience back home, explained to me the tension between her school's business model and her own teaching philosophy: "I regard my job as education, but for my Chinese colleagues it's about business. My Chinese teaching assistants always want to please the parents. Sometimes they place a kid in my class who is below the level of other students to meet the request of some parents. I do not like to have mixed-level students, but there is nothing I can do." While Vicky felt that her opinion was not valued in her school, other participants complained about the lack of professional training and career development in the workplace. Chinese employers are perceived to be generally uninterested in the long-term benefits or cultural integration of foreign employees. This contributes to the high turnover rates among foreign staff.

Based on my observations, the commodification of white bodies is more commonly found in bilingual kindergartens and children's programs. In contrast, participants working as private tutors or university lecturers often need to deal with high expectations from Chinese employers. In addition to her job in a kindergarten, Sophie also worked as an English tutor for a Chinese CEO who had just started a business. She confessed to me that since she didn't have a background in economics, she had to learn some of the terms from the internet before teaching her client: "It involves a lot of Googling under the table. The Chinese assumption is that because I am white, I know everything." Richard, a fifty-two-year-old ESL teacher from the United Kingdom, was burdened by his Beijing university's request for him to teach courses such as History of American Culture and Introduction to Western Culture. He told me, "It was nice to be treated as an expert, but it was also naïve. I felt I was pressured to teach things I do not know." Richard eventually left and found a language-teaching job. Sophie's and Richard's cases reflect the complexity in the racialization of white identities in everyday settings. On the one hand, one notes the homogenization of whiteness in popular and even academic Chinese perspectives: the collapse of British, American, and Western identities into one monolithic white identity. On the other hand, there is the disturbing truth that white-skin privilege may backfire on some white bodies, so much so that they feel compelled to perform idealized stereotypes of white expertise to better serve their Chinese clients. However, this also points to the revealing fact that it is their white faces, rather than their knowledge and expertise, that appeal most to Chinese consumer clients.

AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST

CONCLUSION: WHITENESS IN THE PLURAL FORM

The social construction of whiteness in China is mediated by multiple and intersecting factors, which both obscure and intensify the racialized nature of white identities. Indigenous distinctions between Chinese and non-Chinese became institutionalized in the state's waishi policy, which contributed to the conflation of whiteness, Westernness, and foreignness. The elastic meanings of "foreigner" often hide the racialization of white identity due to the latter's unmarked status within the foreign category. Although the vulnerabilities experienced by white migrants in China's ESL sector are also faced by nonwhite migrants, there is a certain degree of flexibility in white experiences that is absent from that of nonwhite migrants—that is, the flexibility to move between markedness and unmarkedness, between different categories such as "foreigners," "native speakers," and "Westerners." This research interprets the tension between white-skin privilege and precariousness as a concurrent and mutually constitutive process that foregrounds the open-ended nature of white racial formation in China. The racialization of native English speakers as white may lead to unethical hiring practices, which facilitate the hierarchical ranking of different groups of white migrants. Although white teachers may enjoy preferential treatment over nonwhite teachers in finding employment, white-skin privilege cannot shield them from state immigration control and workplace exploitation. The fetishization and depreciation of white bodies often go hand in hand due to the commodification of whiteness in the profit-driven ESL industry.

The slippery boundaries between white-skin privilege and precariousness indicate the possibility for some white English teachers to degrade from professional talents to low-skilled migrants with dubious legal status. Recalling Cezard's artistic portrayal of low-skilled white migrants in China at the beginning of this article, it seems that one no longer needs to wait until 2050 for that to happen. In addition to white jobs in the ESL sector, the rise of "white monkey jobs," where white bodies are reduced to a spectacle for curious Chinese gazes in provincial Chinese cities, presents another example of new types of precarious whiteness in China's stratified labor market for "foreigners" (Toropov 2019). However, instead of reading these as symbols of the crisis of white identity, which presumes white domination as the norm, I interpret the Chinese case as contributing to the fragmentation and pluralization of whiteness in a global context. While stratification in white identities may lead to the emergence of multiple versions of whiteness, of which the precarious white English teacher is just one example, it should not hinder us from interrogating the persistence of white supremacy as a global power system.

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NOTES

[1] English corners are informal social gatherings where participants are encouraged to speak English with each other. Foreign students and teachers are particularly welcome there because they are often considered the ideal person to practice English with.

[2] This is emic terms that means jobs that do not require specific skills other than a white face.

[3] Ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau belong to a special category of overseas Chinese due to the Chinese state's "One country, two systems" policy.

[4] Brady (2003) holds that China's *waishi* policy has been primarily targeting the West since it serves China's national agenda of modernization and catching up with the West.

[5] Despite the abolition of foreign expert in the central state's vocabulary, the various provincial branches of Foreign Expert Bureau still maintain the same name and the term "foreign expert" is still used widely in local contexts.

[6] "Superkids" is a fictional name. All personal names in this article are pseudonyms, as well.

[7] This group of teachers is the most difficult to recruit for interviews due to their vulnerable legal status, but I heard a lot of stories about them from my participants.

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