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Precarious whiteness in pandemic times in China

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ABSTRACT

In this introduction we explore how the effects of the outbreak of Covid-19 in January 2020 have challenged, undermined, and transformed the racialized privileges of various groups of white migrants in China. While whiteness can be an invisible hegemonic construction in Western societies, it becomes a highly visible minority status in China. We introduce the concept of “precarious whiteness” to flesh out the multi-layered tensions in the transnational circulation and reconfiguration of white privilege, particularly in China. The articles in this special issue focus on white migrants in four domains: transnational business and entrepreneurship, Chinese-foreign families, digital media platforms, and online English teaching. Together they foreground the highly contested and fragmented nature of white racial formation in a critical historical moment of Covid-19.



KEYWORDS

Precarious whiteness;
Covid-19; white privilege;
migration; geopolitics

Introduction: precarious whiteness in pandemic times

Precarious whiteness

Various scholars have noted that the development of the concept of race in East Asia and in China is a complex process of interactions between Western racial ideologies and indigenous cultural concepts and values (Kowner and Demel 2015; Dikotter 2008). Despite the global expansion of white supremacist ideologies and East Asia’s emulation of Western racial thinking, “East Asia was the only region in modern times that had developed coherent theories and explicit policies that sought to actively undermine the Western racial worldview” (Kowner and Demel 2012, 13). In fact, the spread of Western racial ideologies in China has been contested by various strands of racial nationalism in different historical periods (Cheng 2019). When China started interacting with Western colonial powers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Chinese feelings of inferiority in relation to white Westerners were based mainly on

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economic and technological inferiority, rather than on cultural and racial inferiority, since non-Chinese were generally categorized as the barbaric other within a Sinocentric cosmology (Lai 2012).

In contemporary China, white racial superiority is explicitly and implicitly evoked in relation to the stigmatization of blackness, yet it is often denounced in nationalistic discussions of preferential treatment enjoyed by white Westerners over Chinese citizens (Lan 2017). With the rise of China as a global economic powerhouse and the increasing diversity of its international migrant population (Camenisch and Suter 2019; Pieke 2012), it is high time to develop a theory of critical race studies in China and to examine the shifting meanings of race from a Chinese perspective. Existing literature on race and racism in China mainly focuses on racialized experiences of blacks and on how anti-black racism is reproduced in the Chinese context (Dikotter 1992; Cheng 2019; Johnson 2007). This exclusive focus on blackness as a marked racial identity not only risks reproducing the invisibility of whiteness as a transnational hegemony, but also fails to note that hegemonic whiteness can be disassembled and reassembled in a non-Western socio-political context.

This special issue of *Asian Anthropology* aims to dialogue with global literature on critical whiteness studies by examining the multi-layered tensions between privileges and precariousness in the lived experiences of various groups of white migrants in China. It moves beyond the Euro-American emphasis in existing literature and focuses on the regional context of East Asia, where whiteness is often conflated with foreignness and is thus reduced to a highly visible and insecure minority status (Botterill 2017; Debnár 2016; Leonard 2019). In the Chinese context, it is the triangular relations between Chineseness (which is a highly contested notion by itself), whiteness, and blackness that define the shifting meanings of race in a non-Western society (Lan 2016).

The outbreak of Covid-19 in January 2020 has thrown the relational and precarious nature of whiteness in China into sharp relief. With the escalation of the China/U.S. trade war and increasingly critical portrayals of the authoritarian Chinese regime in Western media, white migrants in China face a triple burden. They have to negotiate China's exceptionally stringent travel restrictions and anti-Covid-19 policies, fend off the negative impact of rising geopolitical tensions between China and Western nations, and deal with strident nationalism at the local level. This special issue introduces the concept of "precarious whiteness" to capture the structural marginalization and restricted mobilities of white migrants as well as their feelings of anxiety and vulnerability in response to the prospect of losing privileges associated with whiteness during the early stage of the Covid-19 pandemic in China.

Historically the precarious nature of whiteness has seemed to be inherent to the concept of racial privilege, since people on the economic and social margins of white populations have always felt the fragility of their status in interactions both with white elites and with non-white "locals" (Stoler 2002). In its Marxist conception, which is derived from W.E.B. Du Bois's "Black Reconstruction," the term white privilege has always been contradictory because the ideological and material benefits of whiteness have been used to enroll white workers in a racial capitalist order wherein, despite their relative privilege, they nonetheless remain exploited and oppressed (Roediger 1992).

The contradictory nature of white privilege becomes even more prominent in the context of transnational migration in Asia, when whiteness is both fetishized as an object of desire (Kelsky 2002) and demonized as a source of danger and threat (Leonard 2019). In her study of Western English teachers in Taiwan, P.C. Lan (2011) finds that white cultural capital functions as a double-edged sword that places Western skilled migrants in privileged yet segregated job niches. Hof's (2021) research on young European professionals in Japan and Singapore showcases the limitations of whiteness: it may bring context- and field-specific benefits but can also be reduced to tokenism, hindering Western youths' integration into local society. Hoang (2015) notes the waning popularity of white men in the Vietnamese sex industry in the context of the rise of Asian economic power. Farrer (2019) even suggests that white expatriates in Shanghai are increasingly functioning as the foreign support staff for the state-coordinated Chinese Dream.

Inspired by recent scholarship on the decline of white privilege in Asia, we propose that whiteness needs to be understood as a polysemic or heteroglossic construct, with local, regional, and national manifestations. As noted by Kowner and Demel (2012), although East Asia positions the West as "the primary and most significant Other and occasionally even as existing in diametrical opposition, the sphere of comparison has not necessarily been racial, but more often cultural, moral, and political" (36). Within the Chinese context, whiteness is often conflated with foreignness and Westernness, and has functioned as one of the dominant racial others against which multiple versions of Chinese identities are imagined and constructed (Henry 2013; Liu and Dervin 2020; Zhao 2004). We argue that the racialization of white experiences in China cannot be simply understood as the geographical expansion of white privilege to a non-Western society. Instead, one needs to take into account the multiple and shifting boundaries between Chineseness, foreignness, and Westernness in order to understand the complexities and relational nature of white racial formation (Camenisch 2022). This special issue examines the increasingly important roles of various Chinese actors in destabilizing, redefining, and transforming the meanings of whiteness in the new historical context of China's rise and changing power relations between China and major Western countries. We introduce "precarious whiteness" as an analytical tool to critically reflect on the highly contested nature of white privilege in an East Asian pandemic setting.

We identify four major factors that contribute to the precariousness of white identities in China: 1) state immigration policy; 2) the commodification of whiteness in China's neoliberal job market and consumer culture; 3) rising nationalism, xenophobia, and the stigmatization of transnational mobility during the early stage of Covid-19 in China; and 4) geopolitical tensions between China and major Western countries. We theorize precarious whiteness at three analytical levels: as lived experiences, as a structural and relational positionality, and as a racialized subjectivity. As lived experiences, precarious whiteness is marked by the co-existence of social privileges associated with white skin and Western looks, and feelings of insecurity, doubt, anxiety, and fear over the prospect of losing one's privilege in the context of rising nationalism and xenophobia. As a structural and relational positionality, precarious whiteness captures the ambivalent position of white Westerners who are caught in geopolitical tensions

between China and their home countries. It also points to the interchangeability of privilege and precariousness. For example, the transnational mobility of white Westerners used to be a status symbol in pre-Covid China, yet it became a source of frustration and crisis for white Westerners after China closed its border to international travelers as part of its Covid-19 containment policies. Precarious whiteness as a racialized subjectivity sheds light on how Western migrants' pandemic experiences in China challenge and transform their racial identities, feelings of (non)belonging, and entitlement to citizenship.

China's evolving immigration policy

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the presence of the foreign population in the country has been strictly controlled by the state. The *waiishi* (foreign affairs) policy has dominated China's regulation of its international population since the 1950s. Brady (2003) argues that one of the basic principles of China's *waiishi* policy has been to treat insiders and outsiders differently and to make the foreigner serve China. The *waiishi* policy not only facilitated the political, social, and cultural marginalization of the "foreign other," but also promoted privileged treatment of highly skilled foreigners over Chinese citizens (Petracca 1990). 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 whiteness with wealth and social prestige was perpetuated by the *waiishi* policy, which pursued a segregation doctrine and prohibited daily-life interactions between foreigners and ordinary Chinese until the early 1990s. With China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 and the rapid growth of the Chinese economy, the Western migrant population became more diversified in terms of class, gender, nationality, citizenship, legal status, and length of stay in China (Pieke 2012). Western migrants have been generally concentrated in three major fields in China's job market: teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL); media, fashion and entertainment; and transnational business and entrepreneurship.

In response to the diversification of the foreign migrant population, the Chinese state started to tighten its immigration control and make distinctions between "desirable" and "undesirable" foreigners (Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle 2014; Haugen 2015). On July 1, 2013, China implemented a new exit and entry law, which provided a comprehensive legal framework for potential migrants and increased the penalty for illegal migrants. It also created a new visa category R, primarily issued to high-level foreign talents. From 2008 until 2017, more than 7,000 foreigners were recruited through the Thousand Talents program introduced in 2008 (Camenisch and Suter 2019); 53,900 were recruited in Beijing and Shanghai through similar recruiting programs (Zhuang 2018). In 2016, the Chinese state introduced a pilot visa-point system, using an elaborate scoring system to rank foreigners into three categories: A) top talent, B) professional talent, 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. In 2016 the

state also raised the bar for the employment of foreign language teachers, requiring that they should in principle be native speakers with a bachelor's (or above) degree and have two years of teaching experience. A recent wave of state crackdowns on private training centers in 2018 has caused panic among migrants from non-native English-speaking countries, whose dubious legal status rendered them vulnerable to state immigration control (Pan 2019).

The articles in this special issue attend to the heterogeneity of white identities in China by focusing on a new generation of Western migrants who do not belong to the transnational elite class. With the economic crisis in the Western world and corporate downsizing, the number of transnational elites has decreased while the number of Western migrants earning local wages in China has increased (Vance et al. 2016). Many of them, especially foreign language teachers, find employment in China via migration brokers and recruitment agencies, who usually provide one-stop service that includes work visa applications and relocation support. However, unethical practices among some agents have also led to labor exploitation and legal vulnerability among some English teachers (Pan 2019). In addition to the corporate sector and the TEFL sector, there is a rising number of self-initiated entrepreneurs and student-turned-entrepreneurs who engage in various types of start-up ventures in Chinese cities. With the decline of institutional support for the foreign expat community in China (Farrer 2019), these self-initiated entrepreneurs rely heavily on their Western educational and cultural background, transnational networks, and knowledge of Chinese language and culture for their business success. Another emerging group of white migrants are those who engage in platform labor such as online English teaching and vlogging. Although they have gained popularity partly due to their white cultural capital, their career success also depends on the volatile digital economy and the capricious nature of Chinese consumer taste.

Covid-19, the rise of xenophobia, and nationalism in China

Repeating the historical pattern of blaming marginalized and racialized social groups for diseases (Chamberlain 2020), the pandemic has led to a global uptick in racism and xenophobia against various groups of migrants and minorities. At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, discriminatory incidents against people perceived as Chinese, or more broadly as Asian, started to skyrocket to a disquieting degree around the globe, especially in the United States and in several European countries (Pham 2020). However, in the following months, it was not only Asian minorities who were racialized and "othered" as potential carriers of the Covid-19 virus. When the numbers of new cases decreased in China and in Asia while European, American, and African countries were hit by the first wave of infections, many foreigners in China also reported experiences of xenophobia.

Several Western media outlets published articles in March 2020 about European, Northern American, and African foreigners in China being subject to discrimination. People described experiences of being treated like pariahs and subjected to verbal abuse, as well as being denied access to hotels, restaurants, gyms, shops and other facilities otherwise open to the public (Kuo and Davidson 2020; Vincent 2020). These

anti-foreigner sentiments were also reflected in a Chinese comic that was circulated in Chinese social media in early-mid 2020. It perpetuated the stereotype of “foreign trash” by illustrating two foreigners, a white man and a black man, being thrown into garbage bins by Chinese sanitary workers for failing to comply with China’s Covid-containment regulations (Van der Made 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic spawned not only a rise in xenophobic scapegoating but also the politicization of states’ pandemic responses, and relatedly, a nationalist rhetoric which exacerbated pre-existing geopolitical tensions between Western countries and China. De Kloet, Lin, and Chow (2020: 1-2) argue that ongoing debates about the success of different governments’ virus response led to a spread of what they call “biopolitical nationalism.” In some Western countries, and particularly in the United States, the fact that Covid-19 originated in China was used to escalate tensions and cast doubt on the stability of the country’s economic and political system. This was fueled by former US president Donald Trump, for instance, who repeatedly referred to Covid-19 as the “China virus.” In an opinion piece entitled “China is the real sick man of Asia” by Mead (2020) in the *Wall Street Journal*, China’s economic and political system was similarly described as “brittle” and doomed to collapse.

In parallel, Chinese newspapers began to report on the country’s ability to curb the spread of the virus as proof of the superiority of the Chinese political system, while increasingly painting the virus as a threat that was imported from abroad (Wang 2021; Yang et al. 2021). Referring to China, de Kloet, Lin, and Chow (2020: 4) state that “while military and economic power has always been the cause for national pride, the latest trigger has become efficiency in the exercise of biopower, especially vis-à-vis the ‘inefficient West.’” More broadly, this reflects the political implications of state responses to pandemics in China. The rise of xenophobia, nationalism, and geopolitical tensions between China and major Western powers has not only contributed to the structural marginalization of Western migrants in China but also forced them to make strategic choices in navigating the heavily politicized mobility infrastructure at the transnational scale. In this vein, both leaving the country and staying in China became highly contested strategies that involved emotionally charged decisions which may redefine migrants’ racialized identities and produce an ambivalent sense of belonging and non-belonging.

Investigating precarious whiteness

The articles that comprise this special issue were written in the context of a larger research project on the reconfiguration of whiteness in China. Due to travel restrictions, the research for these articles was conducted mainly through the internet, including long-distance interviews, and analyzing media reports, policy documents, and interactions on social media. The challenges of conducting ethnographic research in pandemic times partly explains the relatively small sample of some of the articles. However, this research is also rooted in the authors’ many years of experience living and doing research in China. In some cases (Litman; Kefala & Lan) researchers maintained long-term relations with their interlocutors, albeit from a distance. In another (Camenisch), the author was able to reconnect with a long-established network of interlocutors.

Finally, there are two articles that analyze data gathered through social media, media reports, policy documents, and discussion forums (Ma; Sier). One advantage of doing online research is its ability to highlight the increased importance of the online dimension during the Covid-19 pandemic, when online language-teaching became the norm (Litman) and Covid-19-fueled nationalism and geopolitical tensions shaped the contours of online performances of racial identities (Ma) and debates (Sier).

The articles in this special issue examine precarious whiteness in four domains: transnational business and entrepreneurship; Chinese-foreign families; digital media platforms; and online English teaching. Willy Sier's article on the evacuation dilemmas faced by families made up of white Western migrants and Chinese citizens in Wuhan captures a critical moment when transnational mobility privileges commonly associated with whiteness began to break down in the face of a global pandemic. The feelings of anxiety, disappointment, and anger exhibited by these white migrants ironically highlight the tensions between their long-held privileged status in China's immigration system, mainly due to their Western citizenship and status as highly skilled migrants, and the precarious nature of such privilege, as it cannot be extended to their Chinese family members. Aldina Camenisch's article on European entrepreneurs and managers in China explores their ambivalent positionalities after the outbreak of Covid-19. Despite their privileged status compared to black African migrants, this group still faces xenophobia and social stigmatization as potential virus carriers. However, their personal experiences of the effectiveness of China's Covid containment measures also gave rise to a discourse of praising the Chinese people and Chinese state that deviates from Western critiques of China's authoritarian regime. They by and large support how China handled the pandemic and speak in support of the population's compliance with pandemic measures.

Kefala & Lan's article examines self-initiated young Western entrepreneurs who are still in the early stages of their business ventures. Through analyzing their highly emotional narratives of leaving China and returning to the West, the authors pinpoint the shifting value of white capital in a transnational context and the transformation of China from a land of promise to a land of disillusionment for aspiring young white migrants. Ke Ma's article on Western male vloggers and Raviv Litman's article on online English teachers from the Philippines and Euro-America point to new fields of whiteness studies such as platform labor and the digital economy. While Ma focuses on the shifting representations of white masculinity on the Chinese social media platform Bilibili, Litman examines the diversified yet highly racialized marketing and management strategies of two Chinese recruitment companies. Both articles showcase the increasingly important role of Chinese consumers and employers in evaluating, reinterpreting, and redefining the meanings of whiteness in China.

In sum, the articles in this special issue shed light on the fragmentation and pluralization of white identities in China, and by implication at the global level. We not only examine whiteness as a relational identity in relation to Chineseness, blackness, and Filipinoness, but also foreground how class, gender, sexuality, nationality, citizenship, English proficiency, and length of stay in China has given rise to new forms of precarious whiteness in pandemic times. Together these articles offer interesting case studies for comparison with literature on the fragility of white privilege in Asian countries such as

Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam (Appleby 2014; Botterill 2017; Debnár 2016; Hoang 2015). They also contribute to the development of a critical race theory in the Chinese context.

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Shanshan Lan is an associate professor in the anthropology department at the University of Amsterdam. Her research interests include urban anthropology, migration and mobility regimes, comparative racial formations in Asia and Euro-America, the African diaspora in China, and class and social transformations in Chinese society. She is the author of *Diaspora and Class Consciousness: Chinese Immigrant Workers in Multiracial Chicago* (Routledge, 2012), and *Mapping the New African Diaspora in China: Race and the Cultural Politics of Belonging* (Routledge, 2017).

Willy Sier is an anthropologist and assistant professor at Utrecht University. She obtained her PhD degree from the University of Amsterdam in February 2020. Willy has lived in China for seven years as a student and a researcher. In her work, she focuses on questions related to mobility and identity through research on Chinese labor mobility and (gendered) rural-urban dynamics as well as the construction of racial identities among migrants in China. Willy has produced several short films, such as *Empty Home*, *Happy Weekend in Wuhan*, and *New Year in Wuhan*. Recently, her articles have appeared in *Modern China*, the *Journal of Development Research*, *Gender, Place, and Culture*, *China Information*, and *Pacific Affairs*.

Aldina Camenisch is a postdoctoral researcher in anthropology at the University of Amsterdam and the Administrative Director of the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) for migration and mobility studies at the University of Neuchâtel. Her special interests revolve around the (re-)negotiation of social and economic positions of Western migrants in non-Western contexts against current shifts in global power hierarchies and changing processes of racialization. Her research in the ChinaWhite project explores how European professionals in China navigate the COVID-19 crisis economically, socially, and politically. She has published articles in *Transitions: Journal of Transient Migration, Ethnicities and International Migration*.

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