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## Precarious whiteness in pandemic times in China

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### ABSTRACT

This special issue of *Asian Anthropology* gathers five studies that deal with how the Covid-19 pandemic disruptions impacted on a distinctive social group in a particular geopolitical context: white migrants in China. While the articles reveal in fascinating detail how this combination of people and place is in many ways unique in terms of their experiences of, and responses to, the pandemic, the collection also speaks to larger themes of migration, citizenship, inequality, precarity and vulnerability, and the role of race within these.

### KEYWORDS

White migrants in China;  
Covid-19; migration;  
citizenship; inequality;  
“precarious whiteness”

### Overview

It is widely agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic has constituted one of the most severe disruptions to the globe since the Second World War. What commenced as a health crisis in January 2019 quickly escalated to widespread disruptions to geopolitical, economic, and social relations, with nations both sharing similar challenges and experiencing their own diverse patterns of disturbance. This special issue of *Asian Anthropology* gathers five studies that deal with how these disruptions impacted a distinctive social group in a particular geopolitical context: white migrants in China. While the articles reveal in fascinating detail how this combination of people and place is in many ways unique in terms of their experiences of and responses to the pandemic, the collection also speaks to larger themes of migration, citizenship, inequality, precarity and vulnerability, and the role of race within these. The special issue thus has tremendous value not only in terms of bringing our knowledge of international migrants’ experiences of white privilege in China up to date, but also in joining other literature that explores the changing forms and shapes of whiteness in international contexts (Andreasson et al. 2022; Leonard and Walsh 2019).

However, the bringing together of these two strands raises some interesting questions, not least concerning the applicability of the concept of “whiteness” to the Chinese

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context. In their valuable article, Breen and Meer (2019) note that the concept of whiteness is drawn from nations marked by historical segregation, such as the US and South Africa, and contexts where (1) whiteness has either operated as a “banal repository” (Breen and Meer 2019, 597) of white majority perceptions of the given identity of societies or (2) organized social relations in colonial states occupied overseas. The task of Critical Race Studies is to unmask the invisibility and normativity of whiteness within political, institutional and discursive systems of power, and identify how it serves to maintain the supremacy and dominance of white people within social structures. Goldberg (2002, 248) similarly defines whiteness as “the relative privilege, profit and power of those occupying the structural social positions of whites in a hierarchically ordered racial society.” As noted by Breen and Meer (2019), there is thus an important distinction here between whiteness as a regime of structured power, and white individuals: “whilst whiteness represents a racial discourse, the category of white people represents a socially constructed identity usually based on skin colour” (Leonardo 2002, 31). It is not necessarily the case, therefore, that white people reinforce whiteness (Gillborn 2009).

While the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 ceded Hong Kong to Great Britain and stipulated that five treaty ports within China were to be open to foreign trade (Bracken 2019), China has never been a colony nor subject to white structural dominance within its national boundaries. As pointed out in the introduction, China’s interactions with Western powers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gave rise to feelings of economic and technological inferiority rather than racial, political or cultural domination. Arguably, contemporary China is subject to whiteness within the global stage, but it is, as a nation, a superpower, and the extent to which individual white migrants can “disassemble and reassemble” hegemonic whiteness within China (introduction), a nation where all foreigners are denied citizenship and institutional power, and the total numbers of white residents is small, is bound to be limited. As Koh (2020) points out, non-citizenship is a powerful system of exclusion, equally subjecting both privileged and underprivileged migrants to systems that exclude them as rightful members of their host countries.

In this collection, the concept of “precarious whiteness” is used 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” (introduction, my italics). The concept is further expanded to include three levels: “lived experiences, a structural and relational positionality, and a racialized subjectivity.” The risk of combining these very different issues into one concept is the potential failure to adequately distinguish between, in Leonardo’s (2002) terms, “whiteness” and “white people,” and to, by default, use the former to explain the latter. Undoubtedly, economic capital, such as ease of obtaining work and elevated income levels, and cultural capital such as status, are—or were—delivered to some foreigners in China through possession of white skin in intersection with nationality and skills. However, these privileges have never extended to systemic economic supremacy or political dominance: they are enjoyed, or not enjoyed, at an individual level. In addition, white skin is often appropriated by Chinese as a resource for economic and cultural benefit, underscoring Gillborn’s (2009) argument that individuals do not have to be white to actively reinforce whiteness.

Acknowledging the distinctions between whiteness as a regime and white people as socially constructed identities is critical if the study of white migrants within China is to account for the nuance of the race/power relations within which they are positioned.

In contrast to this, the articles in this special issue take a more open-ended approach to the concept of whiteness. Here it is variously used to embrace color of skin, (Western) nationality, foreignness, culture, senses of privilege and entitlement, and ease of global mobility, among other attributes. While the issue delivers fascinating insight into the experiences of some white migrants at a critical point of history, analysis of broader geopolitical and structural power relations between “whiteness” and Chinese is not so evident. The strength of the issue, however, is to illuminate how the Covid-19 pandemic, and the political, institutional, and individual impacts that followed, heightened the divisions between Chinese citizens and migrant non-citizens, and did, indeed, push many white migrants into precarity. We learn how senses of status and security previously enjoyed by white migrants before Covid became significantly troubled, and their position of being “Other” to local Chinese turned from largely positive to at least partially negative. The non-citizenship status of foreigners heightened this precarity and here Deleuze’s concept of assemblage provides a valuable framework by which to understand the multiplicity of factors contributing to these declines in status and experience, as it “allows us to understand how disparate and often conflicting policies, power relations, institutions, and actors interact to produce different experiences of non-citizenship and variable relations between non-citizenship and citizenship” (Landolt and Goldring 2016). Reviewing the articles in this special issue through this framework enables a structured investigation of how white migrants in China both position themselves and are positioned by the Chinese state and Chinese people. Of course, the articles in the special issue are necessarily quite short given the page limits of the special issue, and so the points I offer below are meant less as criticisms of these existing articles than as suggestions of how these studies might be expanded in future research and writing.

## Review

### *Policies*

In her fascinating article, Sier tells the stories of two Western-Chinese families who became effectively “stuck” in Wuhan due to China’s visa policies towards mixed children. While focusing on “white mobility capital” to explain the sense of entitlement possessed by both Western partners for their family’s right to leave China, and their anger at Chinese policies preventing this, Sier’s intricate analysis also makes important points about nationality and citizenship. As well as being white, her subjects are both from powerful nations with long histories of global mobility. We do not learn, however, about the Chinese spouses’ views which would have helped to understand the families’ positions more fully. Furthermore, but also not addressed here, the stories raise some fundamental questions concerning the future of multiculturalism in China, citizenship, and rights for people in mixed-race families.

### Power relations

In contrast, Kefala and Lan's article investigates white migrants who had to leave China during the pandemic because their livelihoods abruptly disappeared. Non-citizenship status meant that no social protection was available, an exclusion worsened by a rising xenophobia towards foreigners, whereby white people lost cultural capital. The article attributes the feelings of loss and vulnerability they experienced to the decline of the value of "whiteness" in China. Although this concept is not fully defined, evidence is presented to demonstrate how a white phenotype previously provided capital. More comparative detail about the structural and systematic nature of the privileges this delivered, such as statistics on migrant income levels and job types, would help to flesh out what white privilege meant in the Chinese context. From the migrants' own quotes, it is noteworthy that their success was attributed not only to their white physical appearance, but their "foreignness" in general, their nationality and, crucially, their skills. As these attributes lost symbolic and economic capital for Chinese, the migrants lost power. Of course, precarity and vulnerability were not only experienced by white migrants but foreigners of all backgrounds. It would be instructive to learn how the comparable experiences of other foreign migrants could be explained to disentangle the distinctive meanings of white power relations.

### Institutions

Litman's perceptive article on the employment of online English teachers in China's private educational market during the pandemic reveals how the transfer to online teaching served to reinforce historical/colonial understandings of race and whiteness. "Whiteness," although once again undefined, is rendered by Litman as an "image" or an "idea" to explain the commodification of white skin, Western nationalities, "pure" accents, language skills, and cultural knowledge, by Chinese educators for economic benefit. The resultant discriminatory practices also deliver higher wages and status to white teachers.

Within white majority societies, the concept of "institutional racism" is used to describe "[the] collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their color, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes, and behavior which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. It persists because of the failure of the organization openly and adequately to recognize and address its existence and causes by policy, example, and leadership" (Macpherson 1999, 28). Institutional racism is thus a key means by which whiteness – white structural dominance – is secured and maintained within white majority societies. Of particular interest in Litman's article, therefore, are the ways in which white teachers are subjectively positioned by *Chinese* institutions to secure whiteness at a meso-level, while maintaining Chinese dominance overall. A more critical distinction between whiteness as a structural position of power and "images" of white people would help to better expose the ambiguities of the racialized practices and power relations involved.

## Actors

With the decline of the cultural capital of whiteness in China, many white migrants found that they were facing a new environment of xenophobic hostility. While widely experienced by the white migrant population, Camenisch's article illustrates how individual actors, here Swiss foreigners, had to negotiate anew the ways in which Chinese citizens responded to them. While such xenophobia toward whites remained on a lesser scale than the more deep-seated racism towards black Africans held by many Chinese, Camenisch reveals the social-structural dynamism triggered by the pandemic. This evidence could use a clearer theoretical framing if we are to better understand China's structures and cultures of racial hierarchies, not only towards "foreigners" but also how these are positioned within China's hierarchy of diverse ethnicities. While the article adroitly avoids the concept of "whiteness," there is analytical slippage in the interchangeable use of "white," "foreigner," "Western" and "European," distinctions which necessitate careful deconstruction.

Ma's creative article demonstrates the innovative ways that some white Western men are playing with the rise in Chinese nationalism. She highlights the small resistances made by online vloggers to the negative images of foreigners on Chinese social media, either by aligning themselves with China and/or crafting performances of "new masculinities" much approved of by Chinese netizens. In Ma's analysis "whiteness" once again refers to the meanings attached to white skin. While any privileges enjoyed are presumed rather than evidenced, her approach to the intersectionality of social positioning and the contingency and dynamism of racialized relations in China is highly astute.

As a collection, the articles succeed in presenting an invaluable lens to changing white migrant experiences and white-Chinese relations at a seismic moment in history. Yet they all lean more towards analysis of the social constructions of white people, rather than engaging critically with whether, and how, whiteness may operate as a regime of power in Chinese contexts. This means that we are left with the broader question of how appropriate the concept of "whiteness" is to China. Given the lack of full evidence to support the idea of white power and policies consistently positioning white people at the top of China's structural hierarchies, it would seem that the concept is not easily transferrable to explain the Chinese context. Despite this, it is clear that this special issue's exploration of the nature and form of white privilege in China offers considerable comparative value, and makes this special issue important in the context of understanding the complex ambiguities of "precarious whiteness" in the world.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributor

*Pauline Leonard* is Professor of Sociology at the University of Southampton. She has longstanding interests in the intersections of migration and whiteness and is the author of many books,

including *Expatriate identities in postcolonial organizations: working whiteness* (Routledge 2010), *Migration, space and transnational identities: The British in South Africa*. (with D. Conway, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) *British migration: Privilege, diversity and vulnerability* (edited with K. Walsh, Routledge, 2018), and *Destination China: Immigration to China in the post reform era* (edited with A. Lehmann, Springer, 2019).

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