

Chapter 9: Navigating Whiteness in ELT: Fear, Anger, and Exhaustion Among Chinese Women Teachers

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Abstract

English language teaching (ELT) in China is a racially stratified industry, privileging whiteness as a social norm and identity. Scholars have explored the contested meanings of whiteness in the ELT industry from the perspective of White teachers. This paper extends this scholarship by examining the affective experiences of Chinese women teachers in their encounters with whiteness. Using emotional maps and interviews with 18 Chinese women educators, this study delves into their largely negative experiences with foreign teachers. Through managing White teachers as “time bombs,” my informants shared feelings of fear, anger, and exhaustion, which, I argue, reflect racism and gender regulation conditioning hierarchical interactions between Chinese women and Whites. These heavily racialized and gendered experiences thus draw attention to intersectional dynamics within the global ELT industry from

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transnational and intersectional perspectives, and call for a disruption of white privilege in order to reconstitute the field along lines that value social justice.

White Power as Time Bombs

He was a dingshi zhadan (定时炸弹)……in the middle, it might explode. Just imagine if he did not show up in the classroom, you say, wasn't it a time bomb? (Fan Huiping)

In this study, the metaphor of *dingshi zhadan*, or a “time bomb,” was invoked by two participants to describe White teachers, and several others drew parallels between these teachers and the danger represented by a ticking bomb. This analogy is noteworthy as it sheds light on the manifold challenges and dangers felt by Chinese teachers when collaborating with White colleagues. Fan Huiping’s statement is an illustrative example, with her portrayal of the White teacher underscoring characteristics of unpredictability, unreliability, and a lack of professionalism. A time bomb represents a unique form of destructive weapon, fostering a palpable sense of existential threat. The metaphor of time bombs, encapsulating the conception of White teachers as a threat, emphasizes participants’ emotional distress during cooperation. This metaphor serves as a lens through which the participants convey underlying tensions and power imbalances they encounter in the ELT sector.

The “time bomb” metaphor conveys participants’ feelings towards White teachers as threatening, dangerous, and problematic, communicating the underlying tensions and power imbalances participants encounter within the ELT sector. This chapter critically explores participants’ feelings and emotions, using the emotional map

method to illustrate these feelings as experienced within the racialized, gendered teaching spaces of the ELT industry. This study does not regard emotions as merely individual but collective and political, and therefore aims to understand the conditions that produce these emotions and reflect “the structure of being” (Puar, 2007, p. 207) for Chinese women ELT teachers. The dominant emotions felt among the participants unveil interlocking power structures within the industry.

This chapter employs the concept of White powerⁱ to elucidate the power White teachers have over their Chinese women counterparts. White power is felt in teaching spaces, and participants consider this power as shaped by broad historical, social, and institutional forces, resonating with the notion of “White ontological expansiveness” conceptualized by Shannon Sullivan. Sullivan (2006), a professor who specializes in the intersections of feminist philosophy and the critical philosophy of race, has delved deep into the multifaceted interplay between whiteness, power, and space, and contends that White people have historically felt entitled to claim and define the spaces they inhabit, “whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, or otherwise” (p.10). Building on this claim, Corces-Zimmerman et al. (2020) have explored how White people frequently claim ownership over English-language spaces, such that English-language norms, pedagogical approaches, and even classroom dynamics predominantly reflect Western, often White, perspectives. Within the ELT industry, White power is demonstrated through White teachers’ dominancy of space with an inherent sense of authority and entitlement, marginalizing local educators. For Chinese women teachers, navigating the shared space often invokes negative responses such as

fear, anger, and exhaustion, which constitute racialized and gendered emotional labor. Such labor significantly impacts Chinese women teachers' health and well-being.

Background

English language education has undergone rapid expansion in China, as the nation relentlessly pursues its ambitions of globalization and internationalization. English has ascended as a symbol of modernity, progress, and success, fuelling the belief that proficiency in the language is a key facilitator of these objectives. However, mass public English education initiatives launched since the dawn of the new millennium have not sufficiently satisfied the populace's fervor to master English (MoE, 2001). Simultaneously, beyond the confines of the public education system, English has been commodified to cater to the middle-class demographic. The privatization of English language services has evolved into a norm, with the massive proliferation of English-language international schools and training institutions within urban locales (Morgan, 2022; Cheng [程], 2020; Sohu, 2022). These schools employ foreign teachersⁱⁱ to engender an immersive English environment and to impart "authentic" American or British educational experiences. The overarching objective is to nurture English language proficiency that approaches native-like fluency among the student population. Foreign teachers have thus become a sought-after commodity, embodying high value within the ELT industry.

The commodification of English goes hand in hand with the commodification of whiteness, which refers to the process by which elements associated with whiteness, including Western education and culture as well as White people perceived as valuable

commodities (Henry, 2021; Lan, 2022; Stanley, 2013), are commercialized, priced, marketed, sought after, sold, and consumed. This process is driven by a perceived pursuit of the benefits associated with whiteness. Whiteness as a commodity helps to understand the ways in which whiteness operates as a tool of power and privilege. Henry (2021)'s ethnographic study in China's ELT industry shows how Whiteness is marketed and advertized in a way for schools to create a sense of exclusivity and distinction for English language instruction that targets middle-class families willing to pay more for these perceived benefits. The business focuses more on creating and sustaining demand for their services than on providing quality education to students. Whiteness, including White bodies and their associated cultural norms and educational experiences, are packaged and marketed as a desirable commodity in the English language marketplace in order to attract and retain students. Customers, in this case students and parents, specifically demand White native English speakers for English language instruction (Lan, 2022; Sung, 2011), to an extent that white bodies are fetishized. X. Liu (2018) found that race plays a significant role in the consumption of English classes, as parents' preference for White teachers resulted in the international kindergarten she examined only hiring White English-speaking teachers. Schools thus create and respond to this consumer desire by commodifying whiteness in English language education and incorporating it into their marketing and advertizing strategies.

The commodification of whiteness in English language education has produced significant impacts, leading to a huge, highly racialized shadow ELT industry. Studies reveal the prevailing discriminatory hiring practices of valuing teachers based on their

race in their entry into the ELT industry. As White skin has become a marker of authority of English language, the ELT industry in China prioritizes White appearance over qualifications, resulting in a thriving underground market that facilitates easy employment opportunities specifically for White individuals (Leonard, 2019). White teachers are valued by how “White” they are perceived, and the privileging of somatic whiteness in the market results in pay disparities based on race and different shades of whiteness. Lan (2022) reported that White teachers in China are ranked hierarchically based on nationality, with native English-speaking countries at the top, followed by Northern and Western Europe, and Russians and East Europeans at the bottom. Payment scales in the industry depend on these perceived levels of whiteness. Consequently, although some qualified foreign teachers enter the profession, it is predominantly populated by a significant number of underqualified foreign teachers who are primarily White (Pan, 2019).

Untangling the relationship between whiteness and English reveals that race is a key factor in shaping the ELT industry. However, race does not operate alone but intersects with gender, nationality, and class, leading to a highly racialized and gendered ELT industry. While the majority of Chinese teachers working in the industry are women, the study by Chan (2021) illuminates that for foreign teachers, there is a conspicuous preference for White, male teachers from inner-circle English-speaking countries. The tendency to privilege individuals fitting these racial (White), gender (male), and national criteria (inner-circle English-speaking countries) is not just symbolic but has tangible material implications. As Henry (2021) emphasizes, White

male teachers are positioned as “rock stars” or occupy managerial positions while Chinese women teachers in private English schools often find themselves in secondary roles. Chan’s (2021) findings further indicate that White male teachers often receive the highest remuneration within the ELT sector, an economic advantage that surpasses individuals who do not align with these pre-established criteria. These studies expose the racialized and gendered hierarchy in the industry and division of labor between Chinese and foreign teachers.

While I center race in examining China’s ELT industry, most studies have focused on examining the experiences of White teachers, particularly White male teachers. There is a risk in this research of reproducing whiteness as the norm in the industry through accentuating how White people negotiate the privileges and demonization that they experience in the field (Chan, 2021; Lan, 2022). The current ELT scholarship thus exposes a significant gap: the experiences of Chinese women within the industry remain notably underrepresented. Existing literature underscores the commodification of whiteness in the ELT market, the profit-driven business model in private schools and kindergartens, consumers’ desire for White male teachers, the racialized and gendered hierarchy and division of labor between Chinese and foreign teachers, which uphold White supremacist ideology. This scholarship shows how White bodies are commodified and fetishized, and become profitable and desirable. However, Chinese women teachers’ professional experiences distinctively contrast with the privileged status frequently accorded to their White counterparts. These experiences unfold against the backdrop of an intensely competitive Chinese job market and an

oversaturated ELT industry, engendering a sense of professional precariousness and necessitating substantial efforts from these teachers to secure and maintain their positions. With an understanding of these dynamics, this study thus asks how Chinese women teachers construct whiteness via their daily interactions with White teachers and seeks to uncover a different version of whiteness in the eyes of Chinese women teachers, which is threatening, problematic and disruptive.

Methodology

This study adopted a Women of Color feminist qualitative inquiry design (Freeman, 2019) to investigate the lived intersectional experiences among 18 Chinese women English-language teachers who have worked closely with White teachers in the ELT industry. A purposive sampling approach was adopted to select information-rich participants. The selected Chinese teachers met the following criteria: 1) Self-identified as a Chinese woman teacher or teaching assistant of the English language; 2) worked with foreign teachers for over one year in a private-school context; 3) willing to share their experiences of navigating problems and countering discriminations when working with foreign teachers in the ELT industry.

Among the 18 Chinese female participants, the majority were young graduates ranging in age from 24 to 30 years old. These individuals primarily engaged in the instruction of young children aged 3 to 13 years, working within the contexts of preschools and elementary schools. Predominantly originating from urban areas, these participants possessed degrees in fields related to English and Education. Furthermore, over 50% had obtained master's degrees from prestigious higher education institutions

in the United Kingdom and the United States. Despite the high level of education among this cohort of Chinese women, and the opportunity to serve as English teachers in training centers and bilingual international schools, the majority were relegated to the role of teaching assistants in collaboration with foreign teachers.

This study utilized a semi-structured interview method and adhered to a feminist interview approach in order to gather data on the experiences of female teachers. Each participant was interviewed twice, with each interview lasting between one and two hours. Along with interviews, the study employed an innovative emotional map-making technique to explore participants' emotional landscapes. Emotional mappings were used to facilitate the recollection of experiences and to highlight aspects beyond verbal expression, such as feelings and affective behaviors (Gabb, 2009; Willis & Cromby, 2020). Participants were asked to create maps of locations where they frequently encountered foreign teachers, such as classrooms and teachers' offices, and then instructed to place stickers of varying colors on the maps, with each color representing a distinct emotion (McGrath et al., 2020). During the interviews, participants discussed their emotions and the specific circumstances that elicited various emotional responses in particular locations. These emotion maps offer an innovative approach, providing a visual representation of the participants' embodied experiences in their interactions with Whiteness, spanning temporal and spatial dimensions. The data collected were then analyzed through feminist grounded theory (Olesen, 2007). As no prior study has foregrounded the perspectives of Chinese female teachers with respect to their encounters with whiteness in the ELT industry, this investigation sought to describe

and interpret how they articulated their experiences, as conveyed through their own narratives.

Theoretical Framework: Affect and Emotional Labor

Feelings and emotions are an affective force that links the subjective with the social, and the emotional with the political (Nash, 2013). In her pivotal work “The Cultural Politics of Emotion,” Ahmed (2013) asserts that emotions extend beyond the realm of personal experiences, indicating felt relations of power between people. These dynamics are both historically contingent and socially embedded. Emotions, as characterized by Pavlidis and Fullagar (2013), can be understood as “felt” power relations that produce actions (Bogic, 2017; Nash, 2018; Puar, 2012). Consequently, emotions should not be seen solely as repressive elements but also as productive forces: the institutional structure gives rise to dominant emotions, while emotions, in turn, shape and alter power dynamics through individual acts (Smith, 2007). Therefore, this study explores how whiteness is constructed by Chinese women teachers through their feelings in the industry.

Women of Color Feminisms highlight the crucial role that emotions play in responding to power structures shaped by racial and gender differences. Emotions permeate their everyday struggles; however, such emotional experiences are not confined to negative connotations. As Lorde (1984) points out, even emotions generally considered negative, such as anger, carry transformative potential. For Women of Color, these emotions serve as conduits for personal feelings to transition into forms of

resistance, empowerment, and socio-political mobilization, thereby challenging prevailing power structures. Thus, emotions offer a critical lens through which intersectional experiences can be comprehended, concurrently serving as vehicles for the expression and resistance of marginalized populations.

Affective experiences and emotion labor are intertwined and self-reinforcing. As outlined by Arlie Russell Hochschild (2015), emotional labor pertains to the process of managing one's emotional state to meet the emotional requirements of a particular occupation. This involves employees inducing or suppressing their emotions to maintain an external demeanour that elicits a specific response from others. Emotional labor tends to be more pervasive in professions centered around service, with a disproportionate burden falling on women and marginalized groups. Despite the psychological strain that this form of labor can impose on workers, it often goes unrecognized and uncompensated. The concept of emotional labor disrupts the conventional dichotomy that positions emotions and work in separate realms, illustrating that emotions are not merely individual experiences. Instead, they are deeply entrenched within socio-cultural and institutional structures. While Hochschild's work primarily considers how the intersections of gender and class inform the feminization of emotional labor, subsequent scholarship has broadened this understanding to incorporate the dimension of race. Scholars such as Chong (2009) and Kalim (2022) have sought to articulate the racialized aspects of emotional labor. For instance, Kalim (2022) merges critical race theory with theories of emotional labor to scrutinize the racialized emotional labor endured by Black educators. In this research, I posit that the

prevalent affective responses to the racialized and gendered regime of this industry underscore the ensuing emotional labor demanded of Chinese women teachers in the workplace. Such labor has substantial implications for the teachers' well-being and health.

Fear, Anger, and Exhaustion

Fear

This section mainly reviews the experience of the study participant Ning Mu to explore the manifestations of Chinese women teachers' fear elicited by encounters with whiteness, and in particular the dominant behaviors of foreign White instructors. Such behaviors are characterized by intimidation, verbal aggression, and abuse, resonating with the historical legacies of colonial invasions that continue to perpetuate racialized and gendered power disparities within the ELT industry.

Ning Muⁱⁱⁱ, a graduate of a prestigious UK university, was a teaching assistant at an international school who collaborated with foreign teachers to educate primary school pupils. Her professional experiences with foreign English teachers were marked by a pervading sense of nervousness and anxiety, arising not only from feeling inadequate as a non-native speaker. This emotional climate has been visually represented by Ning Mu in an emotional map, featured in Figure 7. The map outlines the layout of the classroom, including the front, where foreign teachers would lecture; the center, occupied by students; and the rear, Ning Mu's position, where she would stand and observe student engagement and behavior. Thus, the classroom layout

signifies a spatial dynamic in which foreign teachers are placed in a position of authority while Ning Mu is given a more passive stance.

In describing the map, Ning Mu said,

Sometimes in class, she [the foreign teacher] would raise her voice and yell at students. I get scared. And she stared with angry round eyes. For me, I saw the image of a perpetrator of violence. When she couldn't find something in the classroom, her facial expressions and behaviors became very mad. So, I thought she was like a ticking time bomb. You know, she could blow up at any moment. That feeling, well, I couldn't stand it. (Ning Mu)

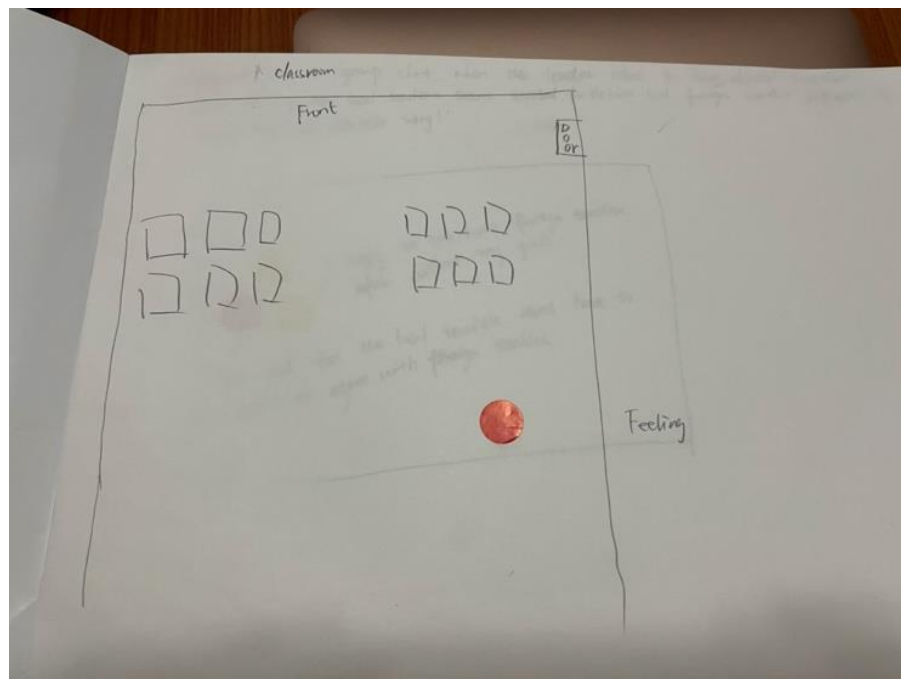


Figure 7. Fear Map by Ning Mu

Ning Mu's interactions with her foreign colleague, a young White American English teacher, permeated with unease. She portrayed this colleague as having a volatile disposition, frequently resorting to "abusive language", and exhibiting aggressive behavior, especially when displeased. The teacher's exaggerated reactions

to issues such as misplacing items in the classroom were believed by Ning Mu to be excessively disproportionate to these minor inconveniences, which signalled the teacher's lack of emotional restraint. Critically, the volatile displays of the teacher in Ning Mu's narrative did not just impact students, but profoundly affected Ning Mu as well. Ning Mu's admission, "I get scared," amplified this sentiment, revealing how Ning Mu perceived this instructor to be not only an irate individual but as a potential "perpetrator of violence," which heightened Ning Mu's fear. In essence, Ning Mu's consistent exposure to such unpredictable aggressive behavior took a toll on her mental and emotional well-being, with her reactions going beyond mere discomfort to an active fear. This feeling of fear was echoed by three other participants who encountered similar experiences of aggression with foreign teachers, describing them as "intimidating," "overbearing," and "domineering."

The fear articulated by these participants underscores a significant undertone of psychological pressure, particularly in relation to interactions with certain White female educators. Confronted with potential challenges, such as diminished authority in the classroom arising from gender dynamics, language barriers, or cultural differences, White women educators sometimes resorted to leveraging their racial privilege as a means of asserting influence and dominance in the teaching environment. Such tendencies align with the "White ontological expansiveness" concept, whereby White individuals may feel entitled to claim and shape spaces. Accentuating their aggressive behavior, these educators seemed to assert a certain hierarchy within the classroom that reinforced their superiority and control, not only over their students but their Chinese

colleagues as well. These White female teachers' behavior paralleled some of the dominating tendencies observed among their White male counterparts, who would become after being corrected by their Chinese counterparts for teaching errors or inconsistencies. These foreign White male teachers would assert their dominance by channelling their anger towards those they perceived as subordinates. Such behavior exposed a silent endorsement of White supremacy and male dominance and reflected oppressive patterns that White female teachers might also adopt towards women of color, evidenced in the works of Armstrong (2021) and Bones and Mathew (2020). While such tendencies cannot be universally ascribed to all White educators, the instances nevertheless provide insights into White power at play.

Daily encounters with racism and sexism “are played out on the body, and are played out with the emotions” (Ahmed, 2004b, p.32). Participants' fear is a visceral emotional response to the dominance of foreign teachers and the power disparity between themselves and their White colleagues. As Ning Mu's statement (“I couldn't stand it”) suggests, this fear was intense and overwhelming, touching on her vulnerability, marginalization, and disempowerment in encounters with whiteness.

When confronted with a “time bomb,” Ning Mu described herself as disempowered:

The environment the school provides, or in general in China, foreign teachers have privileges so naturally. Like in most situations, um, they feel superior, like just working together, it is hard to have an equal footing. It's always like they do things as they wish, so the power dynamics are very different, and we are kind of just trying to do things to make them feel pleased……Just naturally I don't have the boldness to say no to her and I hate that part of myself. I really don't like the way I handle our relationship, like why can't I just put myself in the same equal position as her. (Ning Mu)

This account reveals Ning Mu's fear, originating not from isolated events or individual foreign teachers but from an entrenched power structure shaped by societal and historical factors. She recognizes that in China, foreign, predominantly White teachers often enjoy privileges resulting from racial, linguistic, and cultural advantages, and that this asymmetric power dynamic hinders professional equality. Societal constructs privileging whiteness, amplified by cultural norms deeply ingrained in China's patriarchal society and institutional systems marked by racism and sexism, render Chinese women particularly vulnerable to fear in the face of aggression from White teachers. As acknowledged by six of the participants, Chinese patriarchal norms pressure harmony and deference towards authority figures (Bush & Haiyan, 2000), which can further muzzle the voices of female Chinese educators and lead to their feeling obligated to appease their White counterparts, even at the cost of their own well-being, as in Ning Mu's case. Chinese participants' feelings of fear may also be attributed to language barriers and cultural misunderstandings and be further understood in the context in which challenging the status quo carries potentially serious repercussions. In the ELT industry specifically, challenging established hierarchies can lead to retaliation from and escalating tensions with foreign teachers, career damage as well as the loss of employment, as several participants reported, given a perceived lack of institutional support.

Despite power imbalances and feelings of inferiority, Ning Mu demonstrated a high degree of introspection and aspired to position herself as equal to her White foreign colleagues. This consideration may be interpreted as a form of "conscientization," the

process of cultivating a critical awareness and empowerment to challenge and transform oppressive social structures (Freire, 1970; Lloyd, 1972). By acknowledging her emotions and expressing concern over perpetuating existing power imbalances and gender and racial disparities, Ning Mu initiated a journey towards self-empowerment and the pursuit of more equitable working relationships.

Ning Mu's questioning her own inability to understand her inherent fear of and perceived inferiority towards the foreign teacher presents an opportunity to investigate how racism, as a historical legacy of colonialism and imperialism, manifests in the present day. The felt power relations between foreign and Chinese teachers is not private but collective and shaped by past histories of contact. Ning Mu said she felt compelled to protect herself and her students by compromising her self-dignity to placate the fearsome White "perpetrator." Her descriptions reverberate with the histories of wars and foreign invasions against China by European and American countries when Chinese people were compelled to subjugate themselves and pacify aggressors eager to launch resource-driven wars. One appeasement strategy was to treat violent invaders, particularly Caucasians, as *yang daren* (洋大人) or "foreign lords" (Ang & Martin, 2023). Ning Mu's feelings of inherent fear and inferiority therefore are not historically baseless but reflect a response to White supremacy that is habitual and shaped by past traumatic encounters with foreigners.

In fact, the correlation between foreign teachers and invaders was subtly yet poignantly articulated by another participant:

I was not very lucky in my first year. She was the most overbearing female foreign

teacher, extremely domineering (强势). Sometimes I thought what she did was too much. For example, once I went upstairs to help her laminate paper, and was late to the class. When I came into the classroom, she threw me out of the classroom and slammed the door. The students were so scared when watching that. She threw me out, and I felt very hurt in my heart. She not only did this to me, but always shouted at students. You know, I was also scared. Although I and other colleagues always joke that while this is Chinese land, once we enter the school and classroom we feel that foreign teachers are above us." (Yi Kou^v)

Yi Kou's account of her experience as a teaching assistant in an international school reflects her understanding of the power imbalances between Chinese educators and their foreign counterparts. Her descriptions of her co-worker, a middle-aged White female American, as "overbearing" and "domineering" not only emphasize the teacher's possibly aggressive nature but also positioned her as a dominant, even abusive, figure. The incident described by Yi Kou, in which she was forcibly removed from the classroom, was not only disruptive to the class and emotionally damaging for Yi Kou, but also instilled fear in the students. When confronted with this loss of classroom control and exposure to a temperamental outburst, Yi Kou's sense of disempowerment recalled broader political challenges touching upon Chinese national identity and sovereignty, evoking the discourse of "Chinese land".

Yi Kou's invocation of Chinese land might be seen as influenced by prevailing Chinese discourses around the country's "national humiliation," an appeal to state-promoted nationalism (Ang & Martin, 2023) to counteract their workplace's racial hierarchy. The use of Chinese land also references China's colonial legacy, reflecting these women's lived experiences of indignity and humiliation as a historical pattern of subjugation. The reference to "Chinese land" resonates with China's historical

interactions with Western powers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and collective memories of past foreign encroachments and dominations. These invasions helped to establish and reinforce the racial hierarchy that subordinates Chinese women teachers, manifested in the ELT industry that upholds whiteness. The fear they experienced when confronting White power echoes the impressions left by White foreigners whose bodies they have read as perpetrators, invaders, time bombs, and a superior race. As Ahmed (2004b) claims, “the perception of others as the origin of danger is shaped by histories of racism” (p.13), the perception of foreign teachers as threatening is shaped by the semi-colonial history of racism, and its legacies on the hierarchies of race and gender in China are materialized and sustained in the contemporary English language teaching industry.

Ning Mu was not the only participant to grapple with fear when managing foreign “time bombs,” as feelings of fear were shared among other Chinese women teachers in the ELT industry, transcending their individual experiences and being instigated by “the whole climate, the feeling, the atmosphere” (Murray, 2018, p. 177) of their White-dominated institutions. This fear unveils the sustained existence of a racial and gendered structure that exerts tangible effects on Chinese women teachers. These effects are born out of historically and socially constructed conditions that consistently marginalize and position Chinese women teachers as subordinate and inferior. This pervasive fear preys on these teachers and propels the growth of the ELT industry, which continues to uphold the predominance of whiteness.

Anger

This section explores participants' pervasive anger toward the White privilege inherent in the ELT industry, referencing the cases of Fan Huiping and Zhen Nifu. The section reviews participants' anger at a system that frequently rewards the unqualified and lopsided power dynamics shaped by historical injustices that allow White teachers to operate without adequate regulation.

Fan Huiping served dual roles as both a manager and an English teacher at an English tutoring institution for primary school students. She taught English while also co-teaching a class led by a foreign teacher, where, like other Chinese teaching assistants, her primary responsibilities were to facilitate the successful delivery of the foreign teacher's lessons. She described the foreign teacher she worked with as a time bomb:

He was a time bomb. Because you couldn't control him, you couldn't guarantee if he would come to class on time, you didn't know whether he would finish the course as promised till the next semesterYou know, I prepared most of his lessons, and his salary was far higher than mine, and I served him well. But in the middle, it might implode You know, I had to carry on till that semester finished, so I tolerated him. I thought as long as he did not touch my bottom line, I could still cooperate with him.

(Fan Huiping)

This quote conveys Huiping's perspective on her professional interactions with her foreign male co-teacher, who demonstrated an inherent unpredictability due to his lack of punctuality, unreliable behavior, and overall questionable commitment to his teaching responsibilities, all of which made Huiping feel that he was a potential danger. Anger over this co-teacher's irresponsibility, compounded by her undertaking

additional tasks and service-minded attitude being unappreciated by the foreign teacher, was palpable in Huiping's tone during her interview. Notably, this anger extended to other foreign educators with whom she had worked in the past, and whom she derogatorily referred to as *zha* (渣), or "rubbish," criticizing their teaching competence and personal ethics. Huiping chose to tolerate her co-teacher's shortcomings to maintain a semblance of normalcy until the semester ended, demonstrating a form of resilience and commitment to her professional duties. She also exhibited a pragmatic approach, providing supplemental instruction to mitigate the potential negative impacts of the foreign teacher's inconsistent performance, including reputational damage to her school, complaints from parents, and bad learning outcomes for students. Her description of establishing a "bottom line" for the foreign teacher's behavior suggested an attempt to preserve her dignity and integrity in this challenging context and, as a manager, laid off the foreign teacher at the end of the term. Unlike other participants in this study, Huiping's managerial duties allowed her to evaluate the risks associated with foreign teachers and exercise discretion over their continued employment. However, even in her elevated role, she still had to navigate emotionally taxing efforts to maintain harmony with the foreign teacher—mirroring Ning Mu's strategy—while also taking on extra work to compensate for the foreign teacher's poor performance. Her expression of anger served as a poignant reflection of her frustration with the inequitable system that unduly privileges foreign teachers while relegating her to a subordinate role.

Almost all participants in this study communicated a substantial degree of anger while discussing their grievances with the ubiquitous presence of *zha* foreign teachers,

from whom they were often unable to distance themselves. Consequently, many participants were compelled to undertake additional, uncompensated labor to rectify issues caused by foreign teachers' conduct. This was especially true in the case of Zhen Nifu^v, who taught English to junior high school students at an international school. In addition to teaching her own classes, Nifu was also paired with a foreign teacher who she would assist in English speaking and listening instruction.

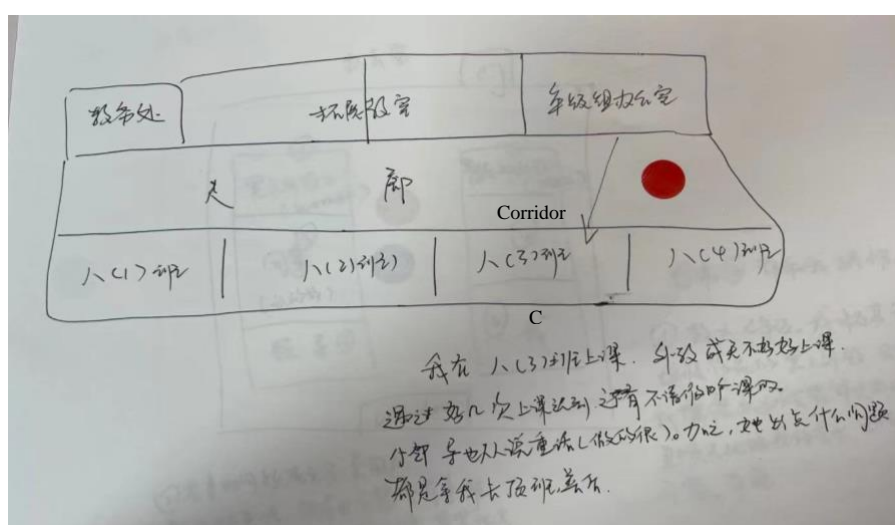


Figure 8. Anger Map by Zhen Nifu

Figure 8, an Anger Map drawn by Nifu, illustrates the spatial arrangement of her school, highlighting the Teacher's Office where she spent her breaks, and Class 3, where her foreign co-teacher conducted classes. An arrow on the map indicates the path Nifu took from the Teacher's Office to Class 3, a short journey which, she reported, consistently induced in her feelings of anger at her co-teacher:

[The foreign co-teacher] was unable to manage the class. Every time she could not manage it, she would come out of the classroom and head to the office for me, "Could you come to help me? The students are crazy. They are out of control." She wanted me

to wipe her butt. You know, this made me angry... Why should I work with these foreign teachers? How did they deserve to be a teacher? I had to teach four classes, manage the same problems that they did, and I faced them. And in the end, what [the foreign teachers] did not finish fell to me... Working with them was a nightmare for me.
(Zhen Nifu)

Nifu's narrative revealed frustration with her White colleagues' inability to effectively manage their classrooms and the privileged positions they held. These foreign teachers subsequently relied heavily on Nifu's support, wielding their racial privilege to avoid the need for self-improvement or self-reflection and essentially offloading their responsibilities onto their co-teachers.

The dynamic between Nifu and the foreign teacher paralleled traditional gender roles where women are expected to be caregivers and problem solvers. Nifu's account of being called upon to assist the foreign teacher when the classroom spun "out of control," as well as her reference to the foreign teacher's wanting Nifu to "wipe her butt," suggested a nurturing yet demeaning role that Nifu, a qualified English instructor, was expected to play for her White colleagues. This phrase also suggested Nifu's frustration with a lack of recognition received for the additional work she undertook, further highlighting the inequitable work conditions she experienced. Her portrayal of working with foreign teachers as a "nightmare" signified the heavy toll of these interactions took on her in terms of emotional labor.

Nifu's resistance to the extra responsibilities thrust upon her by foreign teachers underlined her struggle against an inequitable and demanding professional environment. Her statement that "as a worker, I did not have a say but just worked hard" poignantly

articulated her perceived lack of agency within her professional environment, with her school prioritizing the retention and satisfaction of foreign teachers over the welfare and equitable treatment of local instructors. This institutional arrangement trapped Nifu in a cycle of additional, uncompensated work to mitigate issues caused by foreign teachers, intensifying her sense of disempowerment and frustration.

The anger articulated by this study's participants extended beyond individual instances of unqualified foreign instructors, or unjust practices permitting these instructors to operate without repercussions. Numerous participants claimed that foreign teachers' behavior could be explained by their *Diqi* (底气), because of their whiteness. The concept of *Diqi* can be translated as the foundation(底) of energy(气). As understood in this context, *Diqi* is an unshakeable force that asserts influence on the world. Such an assertion of power was how Chinese women teachers perceived their foreign peers' racial privilege—as an immovable force that gave these foreign teachers the ability to act with impunity, without concern for the repercussions of their behavior. Participants believed that foreign teachers' *Diqi* was engendered by socio-historical factors; Ning Mu argued that societal and institutional structures tacitly buttress this *Diqi*, inadvertently bolstering White supremacy. The anger of the participants was therefore also targeted at these institutional arrangements, with many mentioning how schools indulged foreign teachers irrespective of their abilities or ethical conduct, primarily due to their racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Li Yu further connected this *Diqi* to historical legacies, tracing its origins to the Anglo-Chinese

Opium War of the nineteenth century, a reference that highlights the profound impact of colonialism's enduring effects on present-day Sino-Western relations.

Thus, the anger expressed by the Chinese female teachers in this study may be considered a response to the ELT industry's hierarchical power relations, signifying these teachers' ongoing negotiations and resistance to White dominance and authority in their workplace, as well as the gendered expectations that they serve and assist foreign teachers. The outrage sparked in participants by their unacknowledged efforts defusing potential "time bombs" highlights these teachers' questioning of whiteness and gender norms, and how their anger could potentially disrupt the system that exploits their labor through assumed servitude; this disruption, in turn, could open opportunities for altering the ELT industry's dominant patterns to establish new relationships (Holmes, 2004). Nifu described the potential embedded within her anger as follows:

I think it was very unfair. I had to do this extra work without being paid. I was angry until the third term, then I became hardened. Why should I do their work? Therefore, I refused to do it. In the end he [the foreign teacher] left the school. I felt so good, because sometimes people think it is easy to bully you and then ride above your head; they know you have no power, and they exploit and oppress you. Anyway, I spoke up for myself. It was indeed very satisfying, at least you can vent anger. (Zhen Nifu)

This excerpt presents Nifu's response to the imbalanced power dynamics she experienced working with foreign teachers. Her initial sentiment of unfairness arose from her being compelled to undertake additional, uncompensated work, which was a recurring theme in her professional engagements with foreign teachers. Her assertion that foreign teachers took advantage of and exploited those in subordinate positions encapsulated her own experience of subjugation throughout her encounters with

whiteness. Her outrage later evolved into a form of resilience, leading to her ultimate refusal to take on extra work. By resisting this exploitation, she took a significant step towards reclaiming her autonomy and dignity. Expressing her anger served as a vehicle for self-assertion and resistance against the dominant power structures she faced in her workplace, indicating that anger could work as a tool for resistance, a catalyst for change, and a form of emotional catharsis.

Exhaustion

Participants shared a profound sense of exhaustion due to the demanding nature of their work within institutions they perceived as perpetuating racism and sexism. Working in the ELT sector can be physically and emotionally draining, with Chinese female instructors often struggling to manage relationships characterized by dominance. These teachers' exhaustion stems from coping with difficult, often underqualified and/or inexperienced teachers in an environment that disrespects and undervalues their professional expertise and experience; in other words, in managing their affective responses and negotiating the power relations holding up the status quo of the ELT industry. Drawing upon Chinese women teachers' own narratives regarding their feelings of exhaustion, this section aims to show how managing the potential severity of "time bombs" may result in pervasive physical and emotional weariness, a common occurrence in this context.

Engagement in unpaid and unacknowledged labor, necessitated by favoritism toward foreign educators and in conjunction with pre-existing workloads, causes

profound physical exhaustion in Chinese female instructors. Nifu likened her labor intensity to that of a hardworking cow, others described feeling “tired as a dog.”

We [Chinese women teachers] know how to teach kids. But what do these foreign teachers specialize in? I was already very tired taking care of the children, but that was my job, and I was willing to do it. But why should I teach these foreign teachers? They didn't pay my tuition. (Li Ke^{vi})

Li Ke found herself bearing additional work burdens when she was tasked with instructing foreign teachers on the smooth delivery of daily lectures. Her experience mirrors that of Fan Huiping and Zhen Nifu, who noted that they were expected to “serve” foreign teachers with lesson preparations and classroom management demonstrations. These jobs put undue strain on participants, augmenting their workload significantly, causing them to face the looming risk of burnout. Moreover, these jobs exemplified the teachers’ positions in an unjust power dynamic, as participants seldom received additional compensation or recognition for their efforts.

Navigating the precarious situation of managing “time bomb” foreign teachers also resulted in profound exhaustion among Chinese participants. This exhaustion is multi-faceted, encompassing not only physical but emotional dimensions, as chronic exposure to and anticipation of potential issues instigated by foreign teachers could escalate from mere anxiety to a state of emotional trauma:

Sometimes mental illness is far more difficult to cure than physical illness. Every time [the foreign teacher] could not control the classroom, she would shout, hit the table, or slam the door and leave in the middle of class. Because of this, I suffer from PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder]. Most times, my feelings exhaust me. I cannot calm my emotions and my brain is noisy. I must see doctors and take anti-depressants. (Xia Xiaojing^{vii})

The excerpt illustrates the destructive emotional trauma that may ensue from attempting to interact with unmanageable foreign teachers. Xiaojing reported symptoms consistent with PTSD, the severity of her emotional turmoil leading to a chronic state of exhaustion characterized by an inability to regulate her emotions and incessant mental noise. Xiaojing's narrative underscores the profound psychological impact that systemic power imbalances and racial dynamics can have on Chinese women teachers, to the point of instigating serious mental health conditions.

Participants indeed indicated that experiencing and regulating intense emotions such as fear and anger tasked them with serious emotional labor, resulting in *xinlei* (心累), whose literal translation is “heart tired,” a weariness arising from psychological distress. *Xinlei* represented the emotional burden borne by Chinese participants in their encounters with whiteness. As part of their daily routines and survival strategies, participants needed to maintain a pleasant façade to conceal their negative emotions, evidenced by Ning Mu's adoption of a “pleaser” persona, although this requires a strategic suppression of genuine feelings that could result in additional psychological strain. Participants' constant emotional self-regulation not only depleted their emotional reserves but could also manifest as physical ailments, with symptoms such as chest discomfort, weight loss, and sleep deprivation. Yi Kou's experience is illustrative.

I was very scared at that time. I thought it was my own problem. I lost more than 10 kg that year. Waking up every day, I told myself I wanted to go to work, because it was a job, and I wanted to persevere. Then a year passed, every day passed, I could do nothing about it, I didn't know how. I didn't want to let myself give up so soon. No matter how, I had to drag on. (Yi Kou)

Yi Kou narrates how internalized self-blame and self-responsibility arising from managing her fear on the job caused her exhaustion that produced real material effects such as weight loss. Having to “drag on” and not give up demonstrates her constant struggles to overcome this fear, with Yi Kou framing this suffering as an opportunity for growth, perhaps a sign of last resort stemming from a sense of powerlessness. Having to endure the feeling of being powerless led to an overwhelming depressive exhaustion when she felt there was nothing she could do to change the situation. Yi Kou’s experience unveils how this exhaustion is not individual but structured. This “structural exhaustion” (Emejulu & Bassel, 2020, p. 405) underscores the systemic conditions that compel Chinese women participants to manage “time bombs” by overworking both physically and emotionally. Thus, exhaustion, as an experience of being worn down while grappling with the intersectional race and gender inequalities in ELT, effectively becomes the “weights of oppression” (Nayak, 2014, p. 9) borne by most Chinese women participants.

Exhaustion may be understood as a cumulative outcome of several taxing factors: the constant anticipation of potential crises symbolized by irascible and unprofessional teachers; the undertaking of additional, unrecognized, and unpaid tasks for managing these underqualified and inexperienced teachers; the relentless need to mask their fear and anger; the emotional toll of persistent belittlement and dehumanization; and the struggle to maintain a functioning status quo in the face of adverse circumstances. Participants’ exhaustion reflected their extraordinary commitment to preventing further incursions by unqualified foreign teachers and

mitigating their detrimental impacts on learners. Unfortunately, these efforts could push participants to their mental limits, as well as perpetuate the exploitation inherent in the ELT industry.

Still, Chinese women teachers' state of exhaustion need not be considered solely negative, as it may act as a powerful catalyst for conscious acts of "self-interruption, self-suspension, and self-abeyance" (Berlant, 2010, p. 27). Exhaustion could also function as "an endpoint and gateway to withdrawal" (Emejulu & Bassel, 2020, p.406). Some participants opted to abstain from their responsibilities when faced with exhaustion, leaving foreign teachers to fulfill their own tasks, while others allowed the metaphorical "time bombs" to detonate, inevitably leading to the expulsion of these problematic foreign teachers. Still others decided to leave their positions and pursue employment in public schools, where they would not have to collaborate with foreign teachers. These decisions and actions may all be considered forms of protest aiming at positive transformations in the private ELT education system. That said, these actions are not without risk, with teachers potentially jeopardizing their livelihoods, and these acts of resistance are a testament to Chinese women teachers' resilience and determination.

While this chapter has foregrounded feelings of fear, anger, and exhaustion experienced by Chinese women teachers in the face of White power, the positive emotions felt by participants in the workplace should also be acknowledged. These feelings often emerged when foreign teachers demonstrated competence and professionalism, delivering lessons of high quality and efficacy. Chinese women

educators cherished the opportunities to learn from and collaborate with such adept counterparts. Positive feelings also flourished when foreign educators actively engaged in pedagogical discussions with Chinese teachers, incorporating their suggestions and acknowledging their contributions. Equally, when space and power was democratically shared, with Chinese teachers invited to share in leading lessons, a mutual sense of respect and appreciation was fostered; as one participant expressed, “It was a collaborative year filled with both joy and challenges. Together, we shaped everything from the teaching space to the content, always aiming for excellence.” Nevertheless, such positive experiences were relatively uncommon, with many participants stating that encountering a qualified foreign teacher who regarded them as an equal seemed to require a stroke of luck. Given the structural biases endemic to the ELT sector, negative emotions remain predominant for Chinese women teachers.

Discussion

By analyzing the metaphor of White teachers as time bombs, this study exposes how White power in the ELT industry is experienced by Chinese women teachers through affective dimensions. Everyday encounters with White power generate predictable emotions among Chinese women teachers, thus serving as a path towards self-knowing through relationality. As discussed in the previous chapters, institutional arrangements and consumers have fostered White power while simultaneously dismissing Chinese women teachers as incompetent due to their race and gender, which results in marginalization and vulnerability among these teachers. The “time bomb” metaphor reflects the force of this White power, given its connotations of threats to the

professional lives of Chinese women teachers. “Time bomb” teachers are not merely created and tolerated in daily encounters but emerge from the historical legacies, societal norms, and institutional structures that sustain and amplify the privileges of foreignness and whiteness.

White power is being known in a particular way. It is an emotional knowledge that reveals unequal power relations. Among participants, three primary affective responses were experienced when confronted with “time bombs”: fear, anger, and exhaustion. The fear these teachers experience is primarily in response to foreign teachers who wield power and exert dominance, often through aggressive and abusive behaviors. The anger these teachers express is targeted at foreign teachers who, despite their lack of competence and professionalism, bask in privileges conferred upon them by their whiteness. Finally, the exhaustion of these teachers stems from their constant negotiation of power imbalances, and the significant physical and emotional labor required for this negotiation. Contrary to the dominant emotional narratives within China’s English classrooms, which are typically characterized by feelings of joy, fun, and aspiration associated with embracing whiteness (Shahjahan & Edwards, 2022; Stanley, 2013), this study illuminates a counter-narrative. Often, these mainstream narratives tend to obscure the necessity for historical analysis and critical discourse around social power dynamics in the sphere of English language teaching. By foregrounding these often-overlooked affective responses, this study provides a relational lens to examine whiteness in the neoliberal ELT market.

Teachers' collective emotional responses of fear, anger, and exhaustion highlight how whiteness is understood through affect as a power structure of dominance. Ahmed (2004a, 2004b) has emphasized the significance of emotions in understanding the racial dynamics, positing that racism epitomizes a distinct type of inter-corporeal encounter steeped in profound emotional responses. Seen through Ahmed's (2004a, 2004b) approach, the interactions between Chinese women teachers and foreign, typically White, instructors in China's ELT industry can be construed as one type of emotionally intense, inter-corporeal encounter, thereby reflecting subtle dynamics of racial violence. Moreover, the emotions arising from these racialized encounters are historically produced and socially embedded (Ahmed, 2013), with structural echoes of the racialized and gendered legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Focus on these often-overlooked affective experiences allows this study to move beyond simply appending emotions to existing narratives. Rather, it contributes to the broader understanding of China's racial dynamics, shedding light on the ways historical legacies continue to shape present experiences and relationships within the neoliberal English education market.

As demonstrated, these feelings of fear, anger and exhaustion are pathways to knowledge. These affective responses provide a nuanced and profound understanding of how whiteness, as a structure of dominance and privilege, is negotiated, resisted, and navigated in the context of the ELT industry. They vividly illustrate the challenging circumstances Chinese teachers must endure within the industry. While this linguistic market empowers foreign teachers, granting them race and gender privileges, Chinese

women teachers often have to “defuse ticking time bombs,” manage abusive or incompetent foreign teachers, “wipe their butt,” confront their *diqui*, and in the process, become *xinlei*.

Still, Chinese women teachers’ feelings of fear, anger, and exhaustion are not merely negative. As these feelings are expressed by individuals who have been disempowered with social norms, these feelings also have the potential to allow Chinese women teachers to see through and resist their profession’s current racialized and gendered power structures. By naming, recognizing, and employing these affects, Chinese women teachers are further motivated to question, challenge, and disrupt the whiteness by which they are disenfranchised. As Muñoz (2006) states, the attentiveness to feelings highlights a need to “not simply cleanse negativity but instead to promote the desire that the subject has in the wake of the negative to reconstruct a relational field” (p. 683). The desire beneath participants’ articulations of fear, anger, and exhaustion is not to succumb to paranoia, but negotiate with reality and remap social relations, aspiring to equality by acknowledging barriers (Muñoz, 2006). By examining these feelings, their interactions, and their impacts on Chinese women teachers, paths toward challenging and reshaping uneven power dynamics can be developed, directing Chinese women teachers’ further aspirations for social justice, equity, and dignity in their professional lives.

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ⁱ White power in this research is used to describe the dynamics of power and authority that White teachers hold over their Chinese counterparts, different from the broader political or racial dominance implied in the Western context. For example, in the United States, White power is a term often associated with White supremacy and racial dominance. It refers to the socio-political systems and ideologies that maintain and reinforce the superiority and dominance of the White race, often involving a commitment to defending a White-only world where non-Whites are subordinated, segregated, or eliminated (Futrell & Simi, 2004; Hinton, 2021). In contrast, in this study, the application and implications of White power are specific to the educational and professional environment of the ELT industry, while this specific professional dynamic still reflects broader issues of racial and cultural hegemony.

ⁱⁱ In China, “foreign teachers” (外教, waijiao) typically implies White educators in the ELT market context. Foreign teachers who are not White require racial, ethnic, and/or national modifiers (e.g., Black, Filipino). In this study, “foreign teachers” used by participants referred to White teachers unless specified otherwise, e.g., “Black foreign teacher” or “Filipino foreign teacher”.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ning Mu, who did not pursue a degree in English or education, initially returned to China to serve as an English teacher in the country's largest training center. She then transitioned to a teaching assistant at her current international school, and has worked in the school for two years. During our interviews, she expressed a lack of confidence in her oral English abilities and reported a strained relationship with the foreign teachers with whom she collaborated. Ning Mu envisions her current role as a stepping-stone towards a position in a bilingual international school where she can independently instruct students.

^{iv} Yi Kou held a bachelor's degree in English obtained in China. She worked as a teaching assistant at an international school for two years at the time I interviewed her. Growing up in rural China and joined the school with the goal to improve her English, gain an understanding of international education, and learn from Western teaching methods. However, after working with two foreign teachers whom she perceived as being abusive towards both students and herself, she reconsidered her glorified view of foreign teachers. After a two-year stint, she left her job and at the time of the interview, she was in the process of seeking employment in public schools.

^v Zhen Nifu, after obtaining a bachelor's degree in English, worked as an English teacher in a training center for one year. Despite her impeccable pronunciation and intonation in English, her self-confidence was hindered by the fact that she did not graduate from a prestigious university. Consequently, she did not attempt to take the competitive exam to work in public schools, a decision she has regretted to this day. She turned to an international school, taught English in the Chinese national curriculum, and assisted foreign teachers in their oral English classes. Disappointed with the quality of foreign teachers in the school and the constant need to "wipe their butts" after them, Nifu eventually left her job after about two years, pursuing a TESOL at a UK university, and now works at a public school.

^{vi} Li Ke worked at an international kindergarten. While an educator with a degree in early childhood education, Li Ke was constantly overlooked as a qualified early childhood teacher. She was critical of the quality of the foreign teachers working in the kindergarten. She had observed how two White women teachers from Russia without teaching qualifications were put into teaching positions and struggled with teaching, and also noted how a particular foreign teacher, a former Siberian boatman, was woefully inadequate as an educator but was still favored by parents due to his White European appearance. Her responsibilities as a teaching assistant involved extensive childcare tasks, which made her feel more like a nanny than an educator. Disturbed by the lack of quality foreign teachers, she eventually left the school in frustration after three years.

^{vii} Xia Xiaojing, who graduated from an elite UK university with a master's degree and a US teaching certificate in bilingual education, accepted a teaching assistant role in an international school when the opportunity presented itself, after she had failed to secure a teaching position at a college after graduation. She has been in this school for two years, and plans to continue in this position to save money while seeking her next employment opportunity, feeling quite disheartened at her current school due to the consistent oversight of Chinese teachers and preference given to White teachers.

Chapter 10