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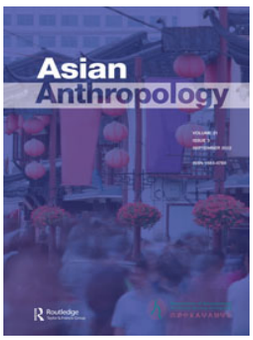

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End of the China dream? Young Western entrepreneurs' trajectories of leaving China during Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

This research examines two groups of young Western entrepreneurs' experiences of leaving China during the Covid-19 pandemic, either due to business failure or due to being stuck abroad when China closed its border to international travelers. Based on semi-structured long-distance interviews with twenty young white entrepreneurs who had previously worked in different Chinese cities, this article highlights the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on their businesses, social status, and identities before and during the pandemic. We identify two prominent themes in our respondents' highly emotional reflections on their involuntary return experiences: loss and victimhood. We argue that such narratives betray multi-layered tensions between privileges and precariousness in the social construction of whiteness in a transnational context.

KEYWORDS

China; Covid-19; return migration; white capital; Western entrepreneurs

Introduction

Due to the outbreak of Covid-19 in January 2020 in China, Lucas, a 32-year-old American entrepreneur, decided to permanently close his consulting business in Shanghai and relocate to Paris with his French girlfriend. Lucas reported losing many Chinese clients due to their fear of investing money in a foreign business during a global health crisis. His Chinese employees also terminated their working contracts with his company as they returned to their hometowns before local lockdowns and restrictions were imposed in almost all Chinese administrative divisions. In early March of 2020, Lucas packed his bags and moved to Europe. Three months later, he said to the first author,

> When I was in California, I was a dreamy boy who wanted to conquer the world with my creative business ideas. In China, after two years of hard work, I became a hero. My Chinese Dream came true and I was finally powerful. Working as a white foreigner in China, I gained a lot of attention, and my customer base increased as people thought of me as an adept American with so-called "know-how" in doing a successful business.

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> However, due to the pandemic, I lost my power and became unskilled! Now I've lost everything. I have to re-build my identity, find out who I am and start a completely new business from scratch![1]

Lucas' case is one of many examples of young Western migrants who decided to leave China during the pandemic, as the virus disrupted the transnational business and entrepreneurship sector. The transformation of Lucas from a superhero in China to a powerless youth in Europe highlights the changing value of white capital in different geographical and sociocultural contexts (P.C. Lan 2011; Lundström 2014). His strong sense of loss also reflects the structural precarity and feelings of vulnerability of Western migrants in a crisis moment of the Covid-19 global pandemic.[2]

In the wake of Covid-19, restrictive policies towards human mobility were established around the world to contain the spread of the virus. While the new virus was first reported in late December 2019 by Wuhan Municipal Health Commission and the World Health Organization, it was not until January 23, 2020 that the Chinese government imposed a lockdown in Wuhan. Lockdown measures and travel restrictions were soon implemented in other Chinese cities to prevent the outbreak of the virus. Two months later, on March 28, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Immigration Administration decided to temporarily suspend visa and residence permits to foreign nationals while thousands of business executives – among them many Western young entrepreneurs – were trapped abroad (Moss 2020; The European Union Chamber of Commerce in China 2020). The spread of the pandemic, the lockdown measures, and the disruptions of people's mobility resulted in negative effects on foreign businesses in China. Growing xenophobia in Chinese society, business failure, and immobility are the three main challenges that young Western entrepreneurs like Lucas encountered during the pandemic. Although some of the challenges experienced by these youth are also common to other foreign migrants in China, as noted by Willy Sier's article in this special issue, not all foreign migrants had the same opportunities or privileges to leave China after the outbreak of Covid-19.

Existing literature identifies China as a new frontier for international migration and labor opportunities (Camenisch and Suter 2019, Camenisch 2019, Leonard and Lehman 2019, Pieke 2012). However, these writings mainly focus on the lived experiences of foreign migrants within China. While within previous anthropological studies, return migration has long been discussed concerning migration cycle and "the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to resettle" (Gmelch 1980), no attention has been paid specifically to China as a field of study and the phenomenon of return migration of foreign migrants from the East to the West. This research fills this knowledge gap by examining the return migration of young white middle-class entrepreneurs back to Europe and the United States due to the outbreak of Covid-19 in China. In contrast to current literature that concentrates on well-established expatriates in Asia (Beaverstock 2002; Farrer 2019; Yeoh and Willis 2005), we focus on the precarious transnational (im)mobility experiences of a group of self-initiated young Western entrepreneurs during a crisis moment, when their white skin and Western looks could not guarantee privileged treatment in China.[3] These young white migrants either moved to China as students prior to their entrepreneurial careers or migrated to China as employees in foreign companies and then established their own businesses. While

they had envisioned a successful career in China as self-made entrepreneurs, their China dream was dashed by the Covid-19 pandemic. This article examines Western youth's narratives of leaving China and returning to Europe and the United States, and how they frame their stories with binary oppositions such as success and failure, victims and victimizer, dreams and disillusions, often with intense emotional ramifications. This is not to suggest that their entire China experience is viewed in such binary terms, but to highlight the dramatic changes brought by the outbreak of the pandemic to their business and personal life. We argue that such narratives betray multilayered tensions between privileges and precariousness in the social construction of whiteness in a transnational context.

White capital, skilled migration, and neoliberal aspirations

Lundström (2014) in her study of Swedish women's migration experiences in the United States, Singapore, and Spain, defines white capital as an embodied form of cultural capital that can be "interlinked with and upheld by (transnational) institutions, citizenships, a 'white (Western) *habitus*' and other resources that are transferrable (but mediated differently) cross-nationally" (14). However, Lundström (2014) mainly approaches white capital as a positive asset for migrants' experiences in different geographical contexts, highlighting the privileged lifestyle they acquire. Alternatively, scholars also note the limitations of white capital's convertibility to other types of capital in a cross-cultural context. P.C. Lan (2011) examines the "cultural ghettoization" of Western English-teachers in Taiwan, emphasizing the difficulty for them to move to job categories unrelated to their English proficiency and cultural background. She argues that the territorially-bounded and field-specific nature of white capital offers grim job prospects for these Western migrants upon their return to the Global North. Based on ethnographic research among foreign English teachers in China, S. Lan (2022) argues that the privilege enjoyed by white migrants in China is no longer based on structural domination, but mainly on their white skin and Western looks. She coined the term "white skin privilege" to reflect the changing meanings of whiteness in the Chinese context.

Hof's (2021) research on young European professionals in Japan and Singapore criticizes a monolithic understanding of white cultural capital as a positive aspect to migrant's experiences. Instead, she develops the concept of passive whiteness to show the limitations and constraints faced by these European youth in obtaining legal citizenship in Singapore and in integrating into workplace culture in Japan. Hof argues that when whiteness becomes reduced to tokenism, it stops functioning as an actionable capital and thus becomes passive in nature. This article furthers P.C. Lan's and Hof's research by examining the changing value of white capital in the transnational migration trajectories of Western youth before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. We examine when their white cultural capital becomes actionable and valuable in facilitating business success in China and when it becomes passive and stops bringing these youth symbolic and material benefits.

Various scholars have noted that skills can be socially and culturally constructed, and geographic mobility can also formulate the acquisition of new skills (Liu-Farrer,

Yeoh, and Baas 2020). Farrer (2019) and Leonard (2019) suggest that whiteness can be an essential attribute that different Western migrants bring to China's job market. Hof and Tseng (2020), in their study of foreign workers in Japanese firms, shows the difficulties and struggles that white European migrants encountered when integrating into the Japanese labor market in which employers expected them to act like local workers. Farrer (2014) also indicated that the relevant "skills" that migrants try to develop are partially constructed around ethnicity, and cultural and national stereotypes, and are field-specific resources. This article finds that the skills young Western migrants brought to China's labor market are inseparable from their white skin and Western educational and cultural background. However, they also face the pressure to develop new skills such as Chinese language proficiency, local cultural knowledge, and social networking. It is the combination of white skin, Western education, and these new skills developed in China that leads to their initial business success in Chinese cities.

Anagnost (2013), in her research on neoliberalism and "life-making" in East Asia, points out that neoliberal subjecthood happened when there is investment in the self and where governments encourage their citizens to acquire responsibility for their fates. Camenisch (2019) finds that for Swiss professionals, China is a new frontier for developing their ideas of neo-liberal self-realization through entrepreneurial activities. Differing from the more established Swiss entrepreneurs in Camenisch's research, the self-initiated young Western entrepreneurs in this study are in the early stage of their business ventures. Under the Chinese state's neoliberal logic of recruiting foreign talent to contribute to China's knowledge economy and business innovation, these young Western professionals are deemed as desirable recipients of seed money from the Chinese state due to their potential to bring economic benefits to China (Song 2007). However, self-initiated entrepreneurship is also a highly risky venture, since in times of crisis such as Covid-19, when nation-states are prioritizing support for their own citizens, these young transnational entrepreneurs are not receiving support from either their home country or the Chinese government. In that case, neoliberalism as a transnational governance contributes to feelings of vulnerability among young Western entrepreneurs who had to leave China during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methodology

This research is based on the first author's eight-month online research (February 2020–September 2020, during the early stage of the Covid-19 pandemic). The data was acquired from semi-structured online interviews with twenty young Western entrepreneurs. They had lived in China for up to three years and returned either to their home countries or other cities in Europe or in the US. The first author used the job portal LinkedIn and her social network in Shanghai to identify initial contacts, then followed snowball sampling methods to reach out to more participants. She mainly targeted self-initiated young Western entrepreneurs who used to live and work in China before the breakout of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this way, she excluded well-established migrant professionals who already had a stable career in China. The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to two hours. The first author also met with the research participants multiple times online to investigate their ongoing mobility

trajectories between China and Western countries. The data analysis included close readings of interview notes and identifying recurring themes in the narratives of different respondents. In addition, we also analyzed Chinese and English language newspaper articles related to China's Covid-19 containment policies.

Our research participants have lived mainly in Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, and Chengdu. The majority was born and grew up either in the US or in several European Union countries such as Greece, France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. One of them is from Russia. Whiteness was not a criterion for recruiting participants, but it turned out to be a prominent theme in participant's narratives. All participants hold a university degree (Bachelor's or Master's). They migrated to China either as employees in foreign companies or as Master's or language students in several Chinese universities. Only seven of the twenty respondents are women, which reflects the predominance of males in China's transnational entrepreneurship sector. They were between the ages of 24 – 28 when they migrated to China and currently are mostly in their late twenties and early thirties. They established their businesses in different fields such as consulting companies, e-commerce, tech startups, a gallery, a graphic design office, project managing, a vegan restaurant, and translation services. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, eleven of the participants decided to leave before China's nationwide lockdown measures, while the other nine were trapped abroad after China closed its borders to contain the spread of the virus.

Becoming a foreign entrepreneur in China

Hof (2019) notes that young Europeans migrate to Asia for distinction and alternative life paths because their language skills and Western educational background position them more favorably in labor markets in Asia than in Europe. Many of our participants came to China with a similar desire for distinction, knowing that their white skin and Western education could become valuable capital in the Chinese labor market. Like Lucas, several participants reported that they had expected to "make it big" in China because it is supposed to be easier to achieve success in China as a skilled white migrant (in contrast to blacks and other migrants of color). This romanticization of the China Dream is also partly encouraged by recent developments in China's visa policy, which encourage highly skilled foreign migrants to engage in high tech business innovations. Since 2016 foreign students from several universities in China have been allowed to apply for an entrepreneurship visa within one year of graduation (Zhou 2019). In 2018 the Chinese government introduced the so-called "start-up visa." First implemented in Shanghai, this type of visa was connected to the city's vision to become a global hub of technology and science by 2030. The majority of our participants used to work in the corporate sector but were unsatisfied with the local wage and modest benefit package they received. They entered the entrepreneurial sector partly motivated by a desire for autonomy, individualism, and self-development, and partly trying to take advantage of China's favorable policies towards foreign entrepreneurs. Moving to the transnational entrepreneurship sector also represents their efforts to escape passive whiteness in the corporate sector (Hof 2021) and to re-activate their white capital in the neoliberal Chinese consumer market.

Although the threshold for becoming a self-initiated foreign entrepreneur seemed to be relatively low, the difficulties of navigating the Chinese legal system posed various constraints to our participants' entrepreneurial dreams. Andrea is a 25-year-old computer technician from Spain. Taking advantage of the pilot program of the entrepreneurship visa, he established a tech startup in Shenzhen immediately after completing his Master's studies in Suzhou. However, Andrea decided to give up his entrepreneurship visa one year later. He was frustrated by the Chinese government's demand for constant reporting and considered it a nuisance. He complained that it was very difficult for young self-initiated foreign entrepreneurs to renew their startup visa after the first year if their company was not making a good profit. Andrea ended up hiring a Chinese consultant who helped him obtain a work visa. Basically, he hired himself as an employee for his startup e-company. Like Andrea, all our participants held a Z visa (work visa) before they left China during Covid-19. They first established their businesses as wholly foreign-owned enterprises (WFOE), then hired themselves as employees.

WFOE is actually the most popular type of company for foreigners who want to establish a business in China. It is a limited-liability company that is wholly owned by one or more foreign investors. Since the liabilities of shareholders are limited, the owner's personal assets remain protected from the liabilities incurred by the company. Most of our research participants were reluctant to share details about their visa application procedures and obstacles they encountered in establishing a business in China. Due to their unfamiliarity with the Chinese bureaucratic system and their limited Chinese language proficiency, many have relied on consulting companies to handle the legal issues. Although the Chinese state advertises the entrepreneurship visa through pilot programs for specific categories of migrants such as fresh graduate students and those who wish to start innovative businesses in Shanghai and other cities, it is in reality very difficult to obtain an entrepreneurship visa, even for white Westerners. Like Andrea, the choice to hire oneself as an employee for a WFOE is an improvised strategy for many of our participants, whose whiteness did not grant them advantages in terms of navigating the Chinese legal system.

Our participants' business ventures generally fall into three types: ethnic food, fashion, and art and cultural products; high-tech startups in the field of sustainability; and consulting companies. These types of businesses are financed with foreign funds without a Chinese partner's involvement. Some participants used their own savings, while others received support from their parents when starting their own business in China. Since most of them operated their businesses via online platforms, they rented offices or co-working spaces to reduce the cost of maintaining a physical company in China's big cities. Due to limited financial resources, such flexible business models are heavily dependent on the Chinese consumer market. Many participants reported that they had achieved initial success based on the "uniqueness" of their service or products, which involved a certain degree of cultural stereotyping and ethnic branding. Amelie, a 31-year-old fashion designer from France, who used to operate an E-fashion store in Beijing, was known by her Chinese clients as "that white girl from Paris." George, a 30-year-old German importing sustainable products from Europe to China, attributed his success to his European background and transnational business networks. While our

participants' white Western identities were an indispensable factor for the takeoff of their businesses, such success could ultimately also be temporary and fragile, especially when rising nationalism and xenophobia during the Covid-19 crisis transformed whiteness and foreignness into a liability rather than an asset.

Reasons for leaving China

The outbreak of Covid-19 in January 2020 caused a general standstill or slowdown of China's economy. It also negatively impacted many of our research participants' business activities. This section examines how and why self-initiated young Western entrepreneurs left China voluntarily or involuntarily during the Covid-19 pandemic and how they make sense of this troubled journey of returning to Europe and the United States. Our research participants reported three reasons that pushed them to leave China since the start of the pandemic in China in January 2020: the rising sentiment of xenophobia, business failure, and immobility due to travel restrictions.

The rise of imported Covid-19 cases from overseas travelers and China's strict policies against foreigners entering the country has led to anti-foreign sentiment among the Chinese public (Wang and Qin 2020). Although most of the imported cases were brought in by overseas Chinese, it was foreigners who do not look like Chinese who bore the stigmatization as "virus carriers" and "foreign trash."[4] While white skin and Western looks had earlier enhanced our participants' status as highly welcomed foreign talents, they were disappointed to find that the same physical feature worked against them during the pandemic. One participant, Emma, told us, "we are not foreign trash. We invested our money, our dreams, and hopes in China. Even after years of living there, we were still called foreigners!" Olivia, a 26-year-old woman from France, who was running a small business importing handicrafts from Europe to Beijing, reported that many Chinese started to avoid her when she went out for grocery shopping. A few weeks later, she noticed that her Chinese clients significantly decreased. She said, "it hurt my feelings because my business used to be a brand name before the pandemic. Now it became no-name since I lost most of my Chinese clients."

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in China caused business failure to eleven of our participants, who experienced the pandemic as an unprecedented challenge to their transnational business activities. George used to run a small-scale business importing environmentally sustainable products from Europe to Beijing. He reflected,

> Before the pandemic I had many Chinese clients. They were enthusiastic about adopting a European lifestyle. But with the pandemic, there were delays in the deliveries and the orders from Chinese clients also decreased. It was a big shock for me. I had a panic attack because I did not know how to pay the suppliers in Europe and deal with all the delays. In mid-March, I decide to leave Beijing and return to Germany.

Suffering from the negative consequences of the pandemic, most of our respondents struggled with financial difficulties and the fear of not having enough money to cover their expenses for business and personal life in China. Being financially fragile in a foreign country was one of the major reasons for their decision to leave China.

When China closed its border to international travelers in March 2020, nine of our participants were stranded abroad, unable for several months and many until now to return to their businesses. These entrepreneurs repeatedly blamed the Chinese state for creating a mobility and identity crisis for them. All of them associated China's new international travel policies with the stigmatization of foreigners as virus carriers. Leda, a 28-year-old woman from Greece who used to run a graphic design startup in Beijing, was on vacation in Southeast Asia when China closed its border to foreigners in March 2020. Stranded outside China, she eventually decided to return to Athens. As she explained, "Going home was a big surprise for me. I left everything behind, my dreams, my business and my friends. It wasn't my choice to leave. China chose to keep me outside its door." For Leda and other respondents, their "desertion" by the Chinese state during the pandemic contrasted with their preferential treatment by the same government before the pandemic as skilled migrants and foreign talents. When hopes for special treatment collapsed in the face of China's lockdown policy, they were overwhelmed by feelings of vulnerability and disappointment. Some chose to close their business in China, while others struggled to manage their business from a distance. Most respondents found it hard to process their negative feelings against the Chinese state and its border control policies.

Feelings of loss and victimhood

Echoing Lucas's feelings of loss expressed in the beginning of this article, many participants talked about China as a lost paradise. China in the pre-pandemic period was often romanticized as a place where, according to Lucas, "dreams and normal life existed together." Like Lucas, many of our respondents made a contrast between their efforts at business success and self-development before the pandemic and their business failure during the pandemic. The binary between success and failure not only indicates financial and material loss, but a loss of their privileged status as white Westerners during the pandemic. This is supported by the fact that many participants attributed their business success in China partly to their white capital, e.g. their white skin and Western looks, English language skills, Western educational and cultural background, and transnational networks. Lucas admitted,

> As a white foreigner, I had more opportunities than others, especially in workshops and conferences. I particularly remember the look on their faces when I spoke English with an American accent. Maybe it wasn't just my appearance but my American education as well. I had a client who came to me because I am American and, as he said, I am well educated.

Leda, the Greek woman, also recalled the many privileges she enjoyed as a white woman in China. As she said,

> Honestly, I was flattered when I was walking in the streets and people looked at me. I am white with blue eyes and that made me different. In China you have to know how to present yourself, such as having a British accent. There was one time in one of these workshops where I was at the same table with a woman from Pakistan. I stood up and talked about my qualifications with confidence. Most of the Chinese in the room looked at me, and in the end, I had two new clients.

Leda's narrative points to the existence of a racial hierarchy in China's transnational business sector. Skilled migrants with a white phenotype like Leda are positioned higher in that hierarchy than non-white migrants such as the woman from Pakistan. However, Leda's performance of a British accent also betrays an internal hierarchy within the white migrant community, with native English speakers ranked higher than non-native English speakers in the eyes of Chinese clients.

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the growing sentiment of xenophobia in China, the positive value of white capital seemed to decline significantly for our respondents, who started to experience structural constraints due to their status as foreign migrants in China and various international travel restrictions. For respondents who became stranded outside China, a strong sense of being victimized by China's lockdown measures pervades their narratives. Mark is a 27-year-old entrepreneur from Belgium, who used to run a web-design startup in Chengdu. When the lockdown measures were imposed, Mark was in Brussels visiting his family. He said, "I am a victim of the Chinese immigration system. I can't follow their logic not to allow me to be back to my start-up. We invested our money in China and helped Chinese clients develop innovative projects, but suddenly they threw us away." Amelie, the fashion designer from France who found her way back to Paris, said, "The big question that is running in my mind these months is why did China leave us behind? We were not tourists. We had our businesses in China. We invested money there, but one day, I became an outsider, literally and metaphorically. I feel like a victim." Instead of blaming the pandemic for ruining their business and life in China, they blamed the Chinese government. Through such narratives of victimhood, the image of China was transformed from a land of dreams and opportunities to a land that mistreats or victimizes foreigners during the pandemic.

Life after returning to Europe and the United States

The Covid-19 pandemic substantially changed participants' trajectories from China to Europe and the United States as they returned to their home countries or relocated to other places in Europe and the US. Both group of entrepreneurs, those who voluntarily left and those who were stuck abroad, faced similar challenges in readjusting their lves back in the West. We identify three trajectories among our respondents: difficulties in finding a new job; transition to a new career path based on knowledge and experiences acquired in China; and returning to China.

Most of our research participants could not find a new job several months after returning to Europe and the United States. This happened not only because they had to struggle to find a new career direction, but also due to the lockdown measures in Western countries, which made it difficult to search for new working opportunities. Amelie reported that her return to Paris was not a pleasant experience since she could not find a job. She said,

> When I returned, I felt lost. I am still struggling with what kind of job to search for or how to do a successful and creative business as a French girl in Paris. In China, people were mesmerized by my French accent or how I presented myself and my company. I got used to being called the Parisian white girl in English or 外国女孩 in Chinese. Now I am no longer unique anymore!

Frank, a 30-year-old American, recalled,

> In February 2020, a period when the pandemic was gaining momentum, I returned to Chicago, trying to establish a new business, but I am still struggling with this process. In Shenzhen, I experienced the Chinese Dream as an American entrepreneur. My business had the so-called foreign-brand name. Now I am invisible. I am one among many other Americans.

Return migrants like Amelie and Frank seemed to experience a de-skilling process in the West, since their somatic whiteness stopped functioning as a valuable resource that could be readily converted to economic and social capital. This de-skilling process seemed particularly frustrating when they recalled their "successful" time in pre-pandemic China. Another reason for this changing value of white capital is their move from a developing country to a developed country, where white skin and Western knowledge no longer stand out as unique and desirable, but rather are commonplace.

Although negotiating and readjusting to a new work and life environment in the West can be challenging, not all participants experienced disappointment and failure. Leda, who is from Greece, managed to find a new job two months after returning to Athens, thanks to her working experiences in China. As she said,

> The key for my aspiration now is all the qualifications I gained in China, including learning to do business as a self-initiated entrepreneur and speaking Chinese fluently. If it wasn't for China, I might be unemployed at the moment. China provided me with working experiences, how to present myself, compete with other entrepreneurs, and establish myself as a woman in the business world.

Bryan, who is 28 years old and from the U.K., also found a well-paid job as an intrapreneur in a big company. He said, "My manager hired me because I had the knowledge of doing business in China. With my Chinese language skills, I can easily work with Chinese clients in Europe." Leda and Bryan's stories point to a re-skilling process, when their China experiences became valuable additions to their white capital toolkit in the Western job market.

Three of our respondents managed to return to China. Instead of continuing their business activities, they found a job in a foreign company through their personal network. John, a 30-year-old American, reported, "I am relieved that I am back. I am not eager to continue my business or to establish a new one. It's not the time to take risks, but at least I have a new job and I'm back with my Chinese friends." The other two participants returned to China because one has a Chinese girlfriend and the other wants to start his business again in order to keep his China Dream alive. It is not clear what the future might be for those who chose to return to China. But the lure of the China Dream still looms large in some participants' imagination for business success and career development. While our participants' stories of leaving China invite critical reflections on the limitation of white capital and white skin privilege in a moment of crisis (S. Lan 2022), there is the possibility that white skin and Western looks will resume their privileged status in China once the pandemic crisis is over. Are our participants' feelings of vulnerability and precariousness the result of a temporary disruption of their white skin privilege in China, or will they lead to a growing trend of the decline of white skin privilege in the global context? We do not have an answer to this question yet, but we have identified an interesting moment when young Western

entrepreneurs are no longer so sure about their preferential treatment in China, and the fear and anxiety associated with this revelation could represent signs of fissures and cracks forming in white hegemony on a global scale.

Discussion and conclusion

How can we make sense of our respondents' highly emotional interpretations of their plight of involuntarily leaving China and returning to Europe and the United States? We offer four possible interpretations here. First, the business failure and blocked mobility of our participants reflect the fragile nature of their business success in China, which was partly based on their white capital. As young self-initiated foreign entrepreneurs, they did not have robust starting capital and local networks to sustain their businesses in a time of crisis. Although some of them benefitted from China's favorable policy for foreign startups during the initial stage of starting a business, there was no specific aid program targeting foreign entrepreneurs during the pandemic. Second, the Chinese state's priority to take care of its own citizens and the stigmatization of foreigners as virus carriers during the pandemic also transformed the social context in which their white capital was evaluated. Instead of enhancing social privilege and business success for young Westerners seeking business opportunities, whiteness became a passive capital that they could no longer activate. To a certain extent, it became a liability in China. The growing nationalism in China and geopolitical tensions between China and Western countries have also contributed to the precarious nature of whiteness in Chinese society.

Third, our respondents' feelings of loss and victimhood betrayed their implicit sense of white entitlement in China. Having the expectation that white foreigners can easily succeed in China, as many well-established expats have already done, our respondents often failed to take into account their vulnerable status as new-entry entrepreneurs with limited resources. Many of them selectively focused on their glorious time before the pandemic during the interview, when they received preferable treatment from both the Chinese state and the Chinese public. When this taken-for-granted sense of white entitlement was suddenly challenged by China's Covid-19 containment policy, many participants felt betrayed by the Chinese state and Chinese people. Viewed from a transnational perspective, we think that this blaming-China narrative may also reflect, to a certain extent, Western media's critique of China's authoritarian state and its Covid-19-related border control policies. Fourth, our participants' experiences of leaving China and returning to the West highlight the shifting meanings of whiteness in the context of a global pandemic. From highly skilled migrants in pre-Covid time to suspicious foreigners who are potential virus carriers during the Covid-19 crisis, to invisible white bodies back in Europe and the United States, the meanings of whiteness are highly malleable and context-dependent, yet always filled with contradictions. In other words, somatic whiteness in China can be both a status symbol and a reason for social stigmatization and exclusion. White skin and Western looks plus working experiences in China may lead to new job opportunities in many Western countries for some participants,

yet they may also lead to frustration and disappointment for others, whose white capital may have become devalued in a Western context.

Western entrepreneurs' stories of leaving China during the Covid-19 pandemic also reflect the important connection between age and migration (Hopkins and Pain 2007). Their youthful China Dream is imbued with neoliberal aspirations for self-realization and self-development, but also with a racialized understanding of their relatively favorable position in the Asian business field. The gap between these youths' high expectations of China as a launching pad for their future careers and the less flattering reality they experienced during the Covid-19 crisis points to the fragile nature of white privilege on a transnational scale. We are aware that some Westerners' depictions of business success in the pre-pandemic period were selective and even perhaps exaggerated, making it easier to blame their business failure on xenophobia and China's Covid-19 containment policy. The first author noticed that some participants were reluctant to discuss challenges or business failures during the pre-Covid period. In any case, the binary oppositions in our participants' narratives have explicitly shown the transformative and disruptive dimension of the pandemic on their business trajectories in and outside China. The feelings of loss and victimhood expressed by these Westerners point to the disillusionment of their China Dream and the transformation of China from a land of promise to a land of disappointment and frustration. They also show that these young entrepreneurs are less ready to critically reflect on the limitations of their white skin privilege in a transnational context and their vulnerable structural position in the global neoliberal economy.

Notes

1. Although Lucas uses the term "Chinese Dream," it is very different from the official Chinese discourse of the "Chinese Dream," which contains a strong dose of racial nationalism and is generally not shared by foreign migrants. In the rest of the article, we use the term "China Dream" to show our participant's romanticization of China as a land of opportunity for white Westerners, a place to learn a new language and to gain new cultural experiences.
2. Although not all Western youth are white, in the Chinese context, there is often a conflation of whiteness and Westernness. See Bonnett (2004) for a larger view of this.
3. China's Covid-19 containment policy is the most stringent in the world, and this may constitute a shock to some participants who had previously seldom experienced significant barriers to transnational mobility.
4. See the introduction of this special issue for more details on these points.

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