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# Communicating ‘race’ in a digitized gay China

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*Oscar Tianyang Zhou*

## Introduction

In her seminal book *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, Lisa Nakamura (2002), a leading scholar in the examination of race and digital media, argues that color-line is not only the problem of the twentieth century as suggested by American sociologist and civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois, it is also the problem that haunts cyberspace. It is therefore crucial to examine “the ways that racism is perpetuated by both globalization and communication technologies like the internet across a range of discursive fields and cultural matrices”, and more importantly, “more research needs to be done on the emerging terrain of race, ethnicity, and racism in non-American cyberspaces” (Nakamura 2002, xviii–xix). Similarly, Jessie Daniels (2012, 711), a critical media scholar studying manifestations of racism on the internet, has reviewed race and racism in internet studies, arguing that the field has been “entranced by the spectacle of Other” and that internet scholars need to see the field’s own whiteness. In the gay community, racism, as sociologist Chong-suk Han (2015, 17–18) observes, is based largely on “beliefs about the desirability of one race over another as potential sexual partners”, and “within this hierarchy, white men are promoted as being the most desirable, while Asian men are perhaps the least”. It is in this context that this essay examines the racial politics of gay online-dating culture in China, looking at how online communication (re)shapes gay men’s ideas about race, sexuality, and identity. It particularly focuses on Chinese-Caucasian gay sexualities in online-dating to provide a way of seeing how white gay men conceptualize the Chinese gay male ‘other’ in Chinese cyberspace.

The academic discussion of gay men's self-presentation in online-dating has previously focused on the contexts of North America and Europe (e.g. Bartone 2018; Mowlabocus 2010). This current study, however, examines how white men perform and negotiate their sexual-racial identities on gay dating apps in an increasingly digitized China. It pays specific attention to how race occurs in Chinese sexual politics to address the (in)visibility, everydayness, contradictions, and normalizing potential of whiteness in relation to gay desire/desirability in non-Western locations, as well as to highlight the transcultural and intersectional lives of gay men in China. By doing so, I aim to direct attention to the lack of critical literature concerning 'race' in the field of Chinese (homo)sexuality studies, and at the same time, to contribute to the existing literature on race and racism in gay men's online communities (e.g. Callander, Holt, and Newman 2016; Han and Choi 2018; Shield 2018). By questioning the communicative power of whiteness, this essay also answers the intercultural communication theorists Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama's (2006) critical interrogation of whiteness in communication studies. By troubling the racialized I-Other dialectic in gay online-dating, it aims to make a positive move towards, in critical communication scholar Ronald Jackson's (2019, xii) words, "recognizing, valuing, and respecting cultural and co-cultural discourses, legacies, traditions, and differences" so that "the 'I' and the 'Other' get to share the same space as co-subjects rather than one as a subject and the other as an object".

The discourses concerning race in cyberspace cannot be understood in isolation from the ways in which people communicate race in real life. Many researchers, including communication scholars Lik Sam Chan (2016), Brandon Miller (2015), and Shuaishuai Wang (2019) have highlighted the importance of the social-cultural contexts for gay dating apps studies to better understand the self-representations and social interactions of their users. In his analysis of Grindr culture in Denmark, critical media scholar Andrew Shield (2018, 89) argues that we cannot separate the online discourses about race from the larger racist societal structures that perpetuate them—the "popular, political and media depictions of people of color and migrants". In this vein, the first two sections of this essay are contextual, while the third section is analytical. The essay first provides a critical context that allows for a better understanding of how Chinese (gay) masculinity has been framed in the white West, paying particular attention to 'the masculine gay white man versus the feminine gay Chinese man' cultural stereotype in the Western gay imagination. Then, it turns to gay white foreigners' everyday experience in urban China, looking at how they enjoy upward sexual mobility. The third section examines the various self-representations of white men on Chinese gay online-dating sites. By analyzing the performances and negotiations of sexual-racial identities in the profiles of the white 'other' on three gay dating apps, namely, Blued, Grindr, and Jack'd, it interrogates how whiteness gains meanings in everyday communicative practices, and contributes to the Chinese gay man being 'othered' in his own country. In terms of methodological approach, the empirical data for this essay stems from my doctoral project that interrogates the politics of gay male media cultures in China, including 26 semi-structured ethnographic interviews with self-identified Chinese gay men in Beijing in 2015 and empirical research across a range of gay online sites.

## Chinese-Caucasian gay sexualities: a critical context

While undertaking fieldwork in Beijing, I interviewed Kevin, a 28-year-old postgraduate student in media studies, working at the Beijing headquarters of an international advertising agency. Kevin told me that he had dated several white men between 2012 and 2013 while completing his Master's degree in the UK. After his return to Beijing, he began frequenting various international bars with the aim of meeting *laowai* (white foreigners). As part of my research, Kevin showed me the best places he had found to meet decent *laowai* in Beijing, including a showy sky-high lounge at a five-star hotel, a live-music club in the central business district, and a British vintage bar in a local neighborhood. These places were implicitly gay male spaces located in Sanlitun, one of the most well-known 'ethnosexual contact zones' in China where "complex social, economic, and cultural contact, conflict, and exchange" proceed and "new forms of racialized sexual capital are exploited and reconstructed" (Farrer and Dale 2014, 148).

Kevin stated that his interracial dating in the UK had not always been a positive experience as white men within his age range often did not consider him attractive. He had, however, received a considerable number of sexual messages from older white men on gay dating apps, including a proposal from a 65-year-old on Grindr, who invited Kevin to stay with him at his large house in suburban Birmingham for months, after which he would marry him. This highlights the cultural stereotype of Chinese gay men as 'overseas brides' in Britain—men who have left their home countries "with the high hope that 'marrying' abroad would offer an escape from poverty, constraining familial culture, a homophobic environment or political uncertainty" (Kong 2011, 133–34). Such 'overseas brides' are typically understood to be closely tied to their older white British partners, who they are financially dependent on. This places the Chinese partner in a vulnerable position, putting them at risk of social isolation due to a lack of economic and cultural resources. Kevin partially ascribed his negative experiences of dating in the UK to the fact that he did not fit the identity attributed to gay Asian men in the Western gay imagination, noting that *laowai* are often more interested in small, skinny, and passive Asian men. These cultural stereotypes of Chinese gay men continued to influence Kevin's interracial dating even after his return to Beijing, and he recalled a number of recent white male dates telling him that he was not very Chinese because of his 'distinctive' tall and muscular figure. He also stated that these men commented on the fact that he did not conform to their expectation that Chinese gay men are shy and reserved.

The interracial dating experience encountered by Kevin suggests the continuation of the established narrative of "the masculine gay white man versus the feminine gay Chinese (and other Asian) man" in contemporary Western gay imagination, which was historically constructed by the orientalist discourse. The West defines and makes sense of itself by constructing an 'Orient' as "its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 2003, 2). Orientalism portrays the Orient as an irrational, weak, and feminized

‘other’ in contrast to a rational, strong, and masculine West. Similarly, Richard Dyer (2017, 13), professor of film studies, argues that

white discourse implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject, not allowing her/him space or autonomy, permitting neither the recognition of similarities nor the acceptance of differences except as a means for knowing the white itself.

In this vein, what it means to be Asian in the white Western imagination is largely constructed on “stereotypical, one-dimensional portrayal of Asians who are nearly always presented as one in the same despite divergent histories, cultural backgrounds, and points of origin”, and consequently, Asian men, both gay and straight, have been portrayed as being “distinctively different from the west, one-dimensional, and fundamentally foreign”, and more importantly, “being inferior in every way to white men” (Han 2015, 27).

The problematic construction of Asian men as the feminine ‘other’ in the contemporary Western gay cultures has been vigorously criticized by a number of scholars (e.g. Ayres 1999; Chou 2000; Eguchi 2015; Fung 1996; Han 2015; Hoang 2014; Kong 2011; Lee 2005; Zhou 2019). Travis Kong (2011, 123, 128), a leading sociologist of Chinese sexuality, argues that Chinese migrant gay men in Britain have been living under “the dominant imagery of the sexual stereotype of the ‘golden boy’ in the gay racial hierarchy”—“a young virgin boy who is innocent, infantile, feminized or even androgynous”, who tend to “suffer from various forms of subordination from white and heterosexual society at large, as well as in the sexualized gay community in particular”. In the American context, Han (2015, 39) critically points out that “rather than neutralize the feminine image of Asian men found in mainstream media outlets, gay media outlets tend to also hyperfeminize gay Asian men as a contrast to the masculine white man”. Gay Asian men have been feminized by both gay organizations and mainstream media productions as someone “who must take on the non-normative feminine role within gay relationships that promote the normality of white male (homo)sexuality” (Han 2015, 40–41).

The hyperfeminization of gay Asian men is more evident in gay video pornography. Cultural critic Richard Fung (1996) has long been “looking for his penis”, arguing that the cultural stereotype of Asian men as deficient in masculinity has resulted in the fact that Asian actors are typically treated as sexual objects for the dominant white tops’ pleasure. Fung (1996, 187) is careful to point out that “the problem is not the representation of anal pleasure per se, but rather the narratives privilege the (white) penis while always assigning the Asian the role of bottom; Asian and anus are conflated”. In a similarly way, Nguyen Tan Hoang (2014, 42), a videomaker and critical media scholar, points out that these sexual representations of gay Asian men in video pornography parallel their exclusion from normative white gay citizenship in the Western societies because of “their racial-ethnic foreignness, working-class professions, and tenuous immigration status”, which shape broader understandings of what is ‘normal’ and ‘desirable’ in sex, sexuality, gender, and race.

Kevin's experience demonstrates the popular stereotype of Chinese gay men in Western gay culture, but also it highlights a transcultural and transnational picture of gay life in contemporary China. In her critical analysis of the emergence of gay identities in metropolitan China, American anthropologist Lisa Rofel (2007, 87–88) points out that since the 1990s, “the presence of foreign gay men and lesbians in China who both create and participate in gay networks means that the transnational quality of gayness in China is both visible and visceral”. She challenges the assumption that “a singular ‘a global gay identity’ has come into existence and that China offers one more instantiation of it” (Rofel 2007, 88). Gay sexual identities in China need to be considered in relation to the transcultural and transnational, rather than the global. It is in this context that this chapter is a critical inquiry into the intersection between race and gay sexualities, interrogating the transcultural nature of gay identities in China, and their relationship with digital media technologies. I particularly focus on Chinese-Caucasian gay sexualities as an evolving site of racial-sexual politics, on which diverse social interactions and cultural practices embody competing notions of what it means to be gay in an increasingly digitized China.

## Gay white men in China

In his historical analysis of the sexual status of white Western men in relationships with Chinese women in Shanghai, James Farrer (2010, 85), professor of sociology, observes that “many Western men ‘played the field’ in order to enjoy sexual pleasure, but also to enjoy the sensation of their own sexual attraction with Chinese women—their sexual capital as foreigners”. Heterosexual white men tended to experience a marked sense of increasing sexual status when arriving from the West in urban China. The same is true for gay white foreigners, who are also endowed with high degree of racialized sexual capital that makes them desired by local Chinese men. The concept ‘sexual capital’ here is used to examine how notions of desirability and appropriate forms of desire are constructed within the sexual field as opposed to being naturally given outside of it, as argued by scholars including sociologists Adam Green (2013, 2014) and James Farrer (2010). An auto-biographical account of a 23-year-old gay white French man, Zapi, and his adventures in Shanghai by *Gay Star News* serves as a useful illustration of the experience of being a white foreigner in gay China:

Being a white guy in an Asian country helps: people are really curious and particularly welcoming. . . . As a foreigner in an Asian country you already stand out from the crowd. . . . A lot of people will try to ‘*chi wo de dofu*’—eat your tofu—slang for flirt with you.

(Leach 2012)

Zapi viewed China as a conservative country and expected to conceal his sexuality. However, once in Shanghai, he was overwhelmed by the friendliness of local gay community. Gay white men tend to experience upward sexual mobility in China's global cities. Like their heterosexual counterparts, they can experience (and even be overwhelmed by) a "superhero phenomenon" (Stanley 2012, 222), offering them "increased self-confidence, social empowerment, and external validation of social and sexual success".

One of my interviewees, Dave—a 26-year-old project manager for a transnational corporation in Beijing—identified this empowerment in his answer to the question "Why do Chinese gay men find white men desirable?". He stated, "in the local gay community, *laowai* are considered as handsome and sexy, and those who have foreign boyfriends are believed to be very *xing fu* (happy) [emphasizing *xing*]"'. The term *xing fu* commonly implies spiritual happiness, but here suggests a sexual satisfaction as '*xing*' also refers to sex/sexuality in Chinese. Dave put the stress on the first syllable, deliberately emphasizing the sexual happiness a white man can give a gay Chinese man, a satisfaction that is further linked to a phallic masculinity. Dave further noted that "speaking of Western men, the first reaction is *very big dick*". Like their heterosexual counterparts, gay white foreigners are endowed with high levels of sexual capital as they embody "Western ideas such as 'romance' and 'sexiness' and specific competencies such as 'sexual skills' and 'sexual knowledge'" (Farrer 2010, 76). In a similar way, a 32-year-old Chinese video game designer, Tiger Girl, offered his observation on the desirability of white men by Chinese gay men:

Within the gay online chatroom, when a man says he is American or British and wants to hook up, you can see plenty of local gay men @ him . . . they believe that Western men have a bigger penis, and can sexually satisfy them better.

The experiences of Dave and Tiger Girl illustrate that the desirability of gay white men is built on cultural stereotypes that stem from Western gay porn's visual logic, which dominates the global gay imagination, "consistently insists on larger-than-life penises", and prioritizes "the pleasure of cock" (Hoang 2014, 10). This logic is (re)produced in the everyday communicative practices of gay white men, particularly in their online communication. In response to a recent decline in the value of their racialized sexual capital (as more and more Chinese gay men have achieved those social, economic, and cultural capitals previously monopolized by white Western men), gay white men may need to reaffirm their white foreign masculinity through different ways (e.g. sexualizing themselves).

In critical whiteness studies, researchers have attempted to define whiteness as being invisible in that it "operates as the unmarked norm against which other identities are marked and racialized"; in other words, "while whiteness is invisible to whites it is hypervisible to people of color" (Rasmussen et al. 2001, 10). The idea that whiteness is an unmarked category is best illustrated by the work of Dyer (2017, 1), who critically points out that "as long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other

people are raced, we are just people”. Whiteness exerts its power through maintaining a position of invisibility. It is therefore important to ‘look at whiteness’ to “dislodge it from its centrality and authority” and to see its power, particularity, as well as limitedness; in other words, “whiteness needs to be made strange” (Dyer 2017, 10).

Digital communication technologies complicate the claims of unmarked whiteness. In his critical investigation of man-seeking-man personal advertisements on Gay.com, critical communication scholar Han Lee (2007, 249–50) highlights a “difference between the real-life avoidance of the label *white* and the deliberate incorporation of white identity into on-line personal ads”:

in the absence of the corporeal body for others to read the user’s racial markers, the first priority for an individual may be to clarify his race and to gain as quickly as possible the status as a privileged white man.

The digital tends to force gay individuals to identify their white identity in order to draw upon the sexual capital that comes with such an identity. In this vein, the following section aims to ‘make whiteness strange’ in the context of gay online-dating culture, looking at how white men negotiate their gayness and claim their racialized sexual capital in Chinese cyberspace. Various self-representations of white men on three gay dating apps—Blued, Grindr, and Jack’d—are critically analyzed to understand how whiteness retains its power in a Chinese gay context where whites are Others. Personal profiles of 299 white users were collected over two weeks in June 2016.

## Performing ‘race’ on gay dating apps

Studying the self-representation of white men on gay dating apps can prove an effective method for understanding the sexual-racial power dynamics in gay China. Without understanding local gay culture or having proficiency in Chinese, it might be very difficult for Western expats to target underground gay venues. Gay dating apps have thus become a portal into the local gay world. Julien, a gay white American fashion blogger based in Beijing, received a great deal of attention on gay dating apps. He stated that:

Most of gay life in China takes place online. Two apps, Blued and Grindr, were my portals into this world. Perhaps, since gay men in China have been so marginalized, these online spaces offer safe havens. Eventually, I had to delete Blued, because, honestly, I couldn’t handle the influx of information.

(The China Channel 2018)

Julien’s online-dating experience raises two important questions: why are gay white men so overloaded with messages on Blued and Grindr, as opposed to the pervasive presence of ‘no Asians’ on gay dating apps profiles in many Western countries? And how do these

apps provide us with a way of seeing how gay white men communicate their privilege and conceptualize the Chinese gay male other. This section pays particular attention to the ‘racial mapping’ in digital contexts (Kang 2003; Lee 2007), illustrating how race is socially constructed and gains meanings in the context of Chinese gay male digital culture. It is notable that two principal themes emerge in my analysis: the first concerns the concept of whiteness as place, and second whiteness as culture/language. It should, however, be noted that these are not intended to be exhaustive categories of analysis.

On American dating site Gay.com, Lee (2007, 251–52) observes that Asian American advertisers tend to indicate their places of origin, birth, and current location in order to articulate an American identity, confirming “the oppressive idea of America as white by default”. Meanwhile, white advertisers often “use racial place or history not necessarily to specify a nation but to generalize a symbolic sense of a European origin”, which “provides the historical backdrop and cultural space for the construction of white identity”. Accordingly, many white men in my study used imprecise terms (e.g. Europe/European) when introducing themselves. For example, a 23-year-old gay white man wrote “New here. From the far Europe” in his profile. Moreover, this reference to whiteness-as-place was often used in an overtly sexual way. A 38-year-old white man advertised himself as “*xihuan jiewen, qianxi de wenrou ouzhou gege*” (European man who loves kissing and foreplay) on Blued to negotiate his sexual/racial identities. In a similar way, another 30-year-old white man talked to his Chinese gay audience: “*feichang da de ouzhou de yingjing you xingqu zhi zai nianqing nvxing de nanhai*” (huge European cock, only interested in young feminine boy). As this last example demonstrates, rather than being seen as real men, Chinese gay men fell into the category of the exotic ‘golden boy’ (i.e. boyish, young, and feminine) that dominates the Western gay imagination. In emphasizing the pleasure of a white European cock, this profile followed the dominant visual logic of gay porn in Western gay culture, celebrating images of white masculinity and larger-than-life penises, while also privileging the experience of a white top over a Chinese bottom. This white man proudly declared his white foreign phallic masculinity, which is best understood as investing in his racialized sexual capital in the context of Chinese-Caucasian gay online-dating.

While some white advertisers associated themselves with imprecise locations, others felt they had to be more specific. For example, men with Mediterranean complexions could be mistaken by their Chinese audience as being from Xinjiang (officially the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of PRC), and therefore they worked to clarify their identity as a privileged white male foreigner. A 26-year-old white Greek man introduced himself on Jack’d as follows: “*beipao de xilalang, bu shi xinjiangren*” (Greek man drifting in Beijing, not from Xinjiang). Similarly, another 18-year-old white Turk spoke to his Chinese gay audience: “*wo shi tuerqiren, bu shi xinjiangren, wo de tian a*” (I am Turkish, not from Xinjiang, for God’s sake). Xinjiang is home to many ethnic minority groups, in particular the Turkic Uyghur who have a Turkish appearance. While local Chinese gay men from Xinjiang can be visually identical to their Caucasian foreign counterparts as they share similar biological traits, they do not enjoy the privilege and desirability of gay white male foreigners. Therefore, some white foreigners deliberately associated themselves with precise places in order to reaffirm their white Western

gayness as a mark of distinction from their local Chinese homologues. This confirms the instability of the category of whiteness, yet it also proved that whiteness could carry rewards and privileges in the context of gay desire/desirability. In other words, whiteness exists not as “a credible biological property” but as “a social construction with real effects that has become a powerful organizing principle around the [gay] world” (Rasmussen et al. 2001, 8).

White men can also perform their race as place to highlight their social-economic privileges since economic capital (particularly in relation to white men) retains its importance in the sexual field of interracial gay dating in China. The large population and considerable wealth gap in Beijing has resulted in gay Western men enjoying certain economic advantages over their Chinese counterparts. Compared to the older Caucasian men observed by the Hong Kong activist/scholar Wah-Shan Chou (2000) who offer up financial incentives to younger Chinese men, these online performances are more elaborate and subtle. For example, a 54-year-old Caucasian American man says to his potential Chinese dates on Jack’d: “Nice professional guy you might enjoy meeting. I love being outdoors. I enjoy sailing, hiking and biking. Recently returned from four months sailing down the California coast and Mexico. What’s my next adventure?”. The term ‘professional’ implies high social and financial status, further corroborated by the mention of sailing. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1978) identified a correlation between social class and involvement in sport, and sailing is generally viewed as an elite, white, upper-class sport dominated by men. Thus, four months “sailing down the California coast and Mexico” signifies middle and/or upper-class privilege, which, in Lee’s (2007, 252) words, portrays “a white man exercising identity tourism in a postcolonial fashion”—a person who might try out other cultures for fun but he can return to his white privileges at any time.

Another 52-year-old Caucasian man introduces himself to his Chinese gay audience on Blued simply as “*chengshu shenshi*” (mature gentleman). *Shenshi* (the direct Chinese translation of gentleman) is an imported term, which has become a positive synonym for British (white) men in China. Its cultural meaning can be demonstrated by the experience of William Spence (2014), a British journalist based in Beijing:

When I tell a Beijing cab driver I’m a British, . . . ‘Gentleman’ is usually said with a smile and a faint nod of approval, not to question what the word means, but as a simple acknowledgment of the subtle but strong notions of Britishness it invokes . . . the concept has flourished in a wholly positive way. Whether it’s shows like *Downton Abbey* and *Sherlock* attracting millions of online viewers, or David Beckham delighting vast crowds with his latest *hanzi* tattoo, it seems China can’t get enough of ‘gentleman’.

In this sense, *shenshi* is best understood as a British cultural identity with symbolic values, implying not only nationality but prestige, recognition, and distinction. This white man advertises himself elaborately, combining his maturity with his Britishness, which has attracted thousands of fans on Blued. While some Chinese gay men compliment him as handsome and smart, others over-straightforwardly express their affection, saying ‘I love you’. One comment is particularly noteworthy, from a 29-year-old Chinese man who

says “you are too handsome for me to chat with, handsome old man”. This colloquial out-of-my-league expression illustrates “a sexual capital discordance between the desiring actor and the desired actor wherein the desirer is located too low in the field’s tiers of desirability to obtain the interest of the desired” (Green 2014, 48), revealing the asymmetrical power structure in the interracial gay scenes in China that elevates gay white men as ideal and desirable while simultaneously prompting self-perception amongst gay Chinese men.

In exploring interracial gay relationships in the 1990s Hong Kong, Chou (2000, 199–200) argued that “if language signifies a kind of worldview and value system, then who speaks whose language becomes a good entry point to understand the power dynamics of interracial gay relationships”. Having examined the way white men associate themselves with specific locations to signal their whiteness as privilege on gay dating apps, a critical analysis of the sexual-racial power dynamics of Chinese-Caucasian gay sexualities through the lens of the micro-politics of language will be the focus of the remainder of this chapter. Chou (2000, 199) observed that it has always been “the Chinese *tongzhi* who adjust themselves to integrate into the Caucasian circle. In other words, considerable understanding of Western culture and fluent English, defined not by themselves but their Caucasian partners, are the basic requirements”. In a similar vein, white men on the three gay dating apps I analyzed tended to assume that their gay Chinese audience should speak English to them, such as the 30-year-old white Spaniard on Grindr: “Picture is me. Say hi! I don’t speak Chinese. If you wanna speak with me, English plz”.

Gay cultural/linguistic practices privileging the use of English prevail not only on Grindr and Jack’d (even without any racial pictures, terms, or labels, users could be arguably assumed to be white if their profiles are in English), but also on their local Chinese counterpart, Blued:

(59-year-old) Easy going Dutchman. But cannot speak Chinese. Like to meet people and have fun. If you do not have a personal pic and you cannot speak English, then I am sorry. Do not contact me. I will not reply. I do not send pics of my dick! Love.

(23-year-old) I can’t speak any Chinese. OK: English, French, Spanish, Dutch. Can’t respond to everyone and everything.

(46-year-old) Working and living in Beijing. I don’t speak Chinese. No drama guys.

Despite living and working in the country, these white men seem to have no interest in learning Chinese, demanding that all communication should be in English (or another white-dominant language). In the context of American gay dating sites, Lee (2007, 254) observed that white advertisers, who exclusively seek Asian men, tended to use their knowledge of English to create a racial hierarchy, “assuming that Asians and even Asian Americans are foreign and not native speakers of English”. English therefore becomes a “status symbol” in interracial gay online-dating that “legitimis[es] and naturalis[es] the superiority of English-speaking culture” (Chou 2000, 188). These advertisers see English as the only medium of communication with their potential Chinese dates, through which

they can claim and exercise their white privilege, and consequently, a hierarchy based on English proficiency among Chinese men within the interracial gay scenes can ensue.

English also dominates the more explicitly sexual advertisements. For example, a 53-year-old white French man speaks to his gay Chinese audience: “Hot top for young bottom if sub it is a plus :) Like it hot!! Be below 35 Please < 35!!”. While this senior Caucasian man will not doubt be fantasied about by many young Chinese gay men, his local Chinese counterparts are often marginalized and lack the privilege to behave in the same manner as him in gay online-dating. Older local Chinese gay men are practically invisible on the three gay dating apps I analyzed, and none proclaimed themselves to be mature, gentle, and considerate, or seeking a slim, young, feminine Caucasian boy who should talk to him in Chinese, in the way that their white counterparts did. Indeed, it would seem that contrasting older white men, older Chinese men, in Chou’s (2000, 183) words, “seem to lack the ‘right color’ to enter this erotic game”. This further underscores power asymmetries in Chinese-Caucasian gay sexuality—“while the Caucasian ads are mostly written by middle-aged men seeking almost exclusively young, slim, and nubile Chinese, the Chinese do not seem to have the same option of being so selective” (Chou 2000, 184). It is important for us to ask the crucial question: why is a dominant Caucasian top soliciting a submissive Chinese bottom considered natural and normal in gay online-dating, whereas the idea of a middle-aged Chinese man using the same platform to seek a young, slim, feminine Caucasian boy is unimaginable?

Critical sexuality scholar Susana Peña (2004, 246) reminds us to “be careful not to equate English and US gay cultures with liberation, egalitarianism, or freedom without also questioning about how these languages and cultures are experienced by non-English-speaking, non-Anglo homosexual men”. English competency has been experienced by Chinese gay men as a stratifying mechanism in both local gay scenes and online-dating. One of my Chinese gay male interviewees, Tiger Girl, described the following experience with a white man he met on Blue2:

Whenever I wanted to talk to him, I had to use a software to translate my message into English first, and then sent it to him. I really want to find a Western boyfriend. The biggest obstacle is that I don’t speak English. I have always been keen to learn English. However, it is unrealistic and impossible for me to do it now while working because my best learning age has passed.

Tiger Girl, like many other interviewees, has arguably internalized the ‘failure’ to acquire sufficient English to communicate with his white male date. This cultural distinction based on English proficiency has resulted in those lacking in fluency being disadvantaged in the Chinese-Caucasian gay scenes, both online and offline. English competency becomes part of *suzhi* (quality) discourses that embody the hierarchically differentiated quality of gayness, dividing gay men while reinforcing the social stratification. *Suzhi*, as Rofel (2007, 104) argues, has been used by local Chinese gay men to express their anxiety about homosexuality becoming associated with money boys (who come from the rural) in Chinese popular imagination, which suggests “an emergent bourgeois subjectivity, the proper expression of sexual desire, and a transnational capitalism that

makes Beijing the object of transnational interest and the subject of a network of transnational bourgeois cultural life". Although the increasing higher social-economic status of local Chinese gay men could arguably lead to a decline in the appeal and privilege of Caucasian men, just like the transformation undergone by the interracial gay scenes in Hong Kong (Ho and Tsang 2000), they still "occupy a certain 'market niche' in the globalized, English-language-dominated world" (Kong 2011, 88).

While English is used by the majority of white men on the three gay dating apps under discussion, some white users employ a hybrid language to negotiate their whiteness and advertise themselves to their potential Chinese dates. For example, a 26-year-old white Irish man introduces himself in both English and Chinese: "Irish living and working in Beijing", whereas a 31-year-old white American man says: "just enjoy life! Let's be friends" in English, while simultaneously advertising that he is American and "wants to make more friends on Blued" in Chinese. Other white men solicit the attention of their Chinese gay audience by communicating in more sophisticated Chinese:

(45-year-old): *Zhaopian benren. Wo zai Beijing shenghuo gongzuo. Wo hui zhongwen. Wo xihuan jianshen youyong lxxing. Xiwang ni you zhaopian zai he wo shuohua.* (That is me in the photo. I am living and working in Beijing. I can speak Chinese. I like swimming and travelling. Please talk to me with a photo).

The linguistic practices of white men on these dating apps may be dominated by English, but this does not infer that all subjectivities within the Chinese-Caucasian gay scenes are "on a single trajectory or that the trajectory automatically ends in an Americanist vision of sexual life, sexual politics, or linguistic performance" (Boellstorff and Leap 2004, 7). Peter Jackson (2004, 227), professor of Thai history and cultural studies, argues that

simplistic accounts of global queering as being equivalent to 'Westernisation' or 'Americanization' mistakenly assume that Western discourses, because of the West's technological, economic, and political dominance, are equally robust on the global stage and will eventually overwhelm and dominate local understandings.

It is therefore important for us to pay more attention to the process of meaning-investment in order to better understand the effects of Western gay cultures on the rest of the world.

Some white advertisers introduce linguistic innovations that involve a mixture of English and Chinese, reflecting and contributing to an emerging bilingual gay culture. An example of this is the hybrid language used by a 32-year-old white American man on Jack'd: "White American looking for fun or maybe LTR. I'm vers top. *wo shi meiguoren. wo shi 1* (I am American. I am top)". This bilingual advert presents a 'vers top' in English while emphasizing the identity of '1' in Chinese to solicit local gay audience, which illustrates what happens when gay English interacts with the local already-existing ways

of talking about gay sexualities. Interestingly, this example of linguistic hybridity appears in an advertisement that communicates the sexual hybridity of the user, who identifies himself as a ‘vers top’.

In Western gay culture, a ‘vers’ (versatile) top refers to an individual who plays the role the ‘top’ for sex but is also willing to be ‘topped’ himself, creating a flexible space for his sexual position. Although a ‘vers top’ enjoys being a top more than a bottom sexually, it is still possible for him to act as a bottom during sex. The popularization of the category ‘versatile’ (particularly on online gay cruising sites) suggests that “top-bottom positionings have become institutionalized in gay male communities”, which “allows for the switching and assumption of multiple positions, but not the transcendence of them” (Hoang 2014, 12). In the context of Chinese gay culture, cultural anthropologist Tiantian Zheng (2015) observes that through relationships and experiences, gay men are socialized and formed into 1 or 0 identities—while the former symbolizes the penis and is identified as the male role, the latter symbolizes the vagina and is associated with the female role. The formation of 1/0 system is “a result of a multifaceted confluence of the local cultural system and economic and social transformations in the postsocialist era”, which therefore “refutes a universal homosexual identity based on same-sex acts” (Zheng 2015, 77). As I write elsewhere, bottomhood (being 0) tends to be denigrated and assigned an inferior status, which suggests “a strong denial of gay male effeminacy in China” (Zhou 2019, 88), and consequently, Chinese gay men may strive to achieve desirability and gain acceptance from the dominant heteronormative culture via remasculinization. It is in this context that one possible reading suggests that this bilingual innovation with a mixture of gay English and gay Chinese is strategically used by this gay white American advertiser to expunge himself from a potential (white) bottomhood, which could be seen as undesirable by his Chinese gay audience, while simultaneously exploiting the cultural stereotype of “dominant Caucasian top versus submissive Chinese bottom” and reaffirming his gay white topness as upward sexual capital.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored Chinese-Caucasian gay sexuality and its relationships with digital media technologies, focusing on the racial politics of gay online-dating culture in China. It has interrogated the diverse performances of gayness in the interracial gay interactions, in order to understand how whiteness has inscribed gay men’s lives. By looking into the ways of the white ‘other’ in China communicating same-sex desires, practices, and subjectivities, I have illuminated how the Chinese gay man becomes ‘the other’ in his own country. My analysis serves to destabilize the normalcy of whiteness, viewing it as a historical, contextual, unfixed and unstable construct that continues to be negotiated online. At the same time I have suggested that whiteness continues to gain new meanings in everyday communicative practices. In doing so, I have directed attention to the underexplored theme of ‘race’ in Chinese gay and lesbian studies and helped to answer calls for a critical interrogation of whiteness in Internet Studies. While

gay white men are endowed with notable sexual capital in the interracial sexual fields of China, both online and offline, local Chinese gay men's interaction with gay white men and their identification with Western gay discourses is best analyzed as being strategic, rather than a total, uncritical acceptance. Caucasian-Chinese gay interactions cannot be characterized by a simple dominant-dominated duality. The interracial sexual field may provide new sexual possibilities for local Chinese gay men, who can use interracial dating as a tool for their own empowerment.

The experiences, narratives, and performances of white Western men (and their Chinese gay audience) on three gay dating apps display various transcultural articulations, which are not simply about race and nation, but also what it means to be gay in today's China. These examples demonstrate that gay identities in China are constructed within a complex and contested cultural field that represents "neither a wholly global culture nor simply a radical different from the West", materialized "in the articulation of transcultural practices with intense desires for cultural belonging, or cultural citizenship" (Rofel 2007, 89). By considering these online self-representations in relation to the transcultural (rather than the global) and the intersectional, I hope this essay provides a starting point for further discussions regarding the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and digital media in China, moving from a global gay identity to gay identifications, so that we can challenge the homogeneity of gay sexualities and envisage a politics of contingent alliances.

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## Chapter 10

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