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Shanshan Lan, “Researching race, migration, and the transnational circulation of racial knowledge: On Chinese migrants in Chicago, on African migrants in Guangzhou, and on the reconfiguration of whiteness in China”. Interview by Dominique Vidal and Simeng Wang. Transcriber: Nora Sahel

Shanshan Lan, Dominique Vidal and Simeng Wang

- 1 Shanshan Lan is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. She has been conducting researches for nearly twenty years on Chinese migration to the United States (*Diaspora and Class Consciousness: Chinese Immigrant Workers in Multiracial Chicago*, a book based on her doctoral dissertation, published by Routledge in 2012), on Africans in the Chinese metropolis of Guangzhou (*Mapping the New African Diaspora in China: Race and the Cultural Politics of Belonging*, Routledge, 2017) and on whiteness in China, in the framework of the ERC “ChinaWhite” project she is currently leading: “The reconfiguration of whiteness in China: Privileges, precariousness, and racialized performances” (2019-2024).
- 2 Her researches meet in many ways the interests of *Appartenances & Altérités*. First of all, it raises the question of the transnational circulation and empirical transposability of conceptual and theoretical frameworks formed in singular spaces and moments, such as the debate on the meaning of race according to the fieldworks and racialized

situations studied. Studies carried out by Shanshan Lan also show the interest of reversing nationally situated perspectives, particularly in terms of the “majority/minority” relationship and what is at stake around the theme of whiteness. They also highlight, in the context of China's rise, the contrast between the different national contexts analyzed, in other words, between the United States and China, in terms of political regime, economic development model, migration policies for internal and international migrants from different continents, etc.

- 3 In the following interview, Shanshan Lan introduces her biographical and scholarly background, her training as an anthropologist in the United States at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and her distanced use of Western social sciences. She also discusses several concepts that she has developed from empirical investigations: “racial knowledge”, “overlapping racialization”, “grassroots interracial interaction”, and the difference she makes between “white privilege” and “white skin privilege”. She also provides several essential elements for understanding contemporary China, such as the meaning of race, the significance of the Maoist period in the representation of Africa and Africans, the rise of nationalism, and the possible future of immigration landscape in the country. She also comments the social and political responsibilities of researchers, a series of ongoing debates in the social sciences (intersectionality, decolonial perspective), the increasing difficulties to carry out ethnographic surveys in China under the pandemic, and new featured research programs to be undertaken, before offering young researchers some reading advices and reflection perspectives.

Researching race, migration, and the transnational circulation of racial knowledge: On Chinese migrants in Chicago, on African migrants in Guangzhou¹, and on the reconfiguration of whiteness in China

Discovering everyday racism in the United States via personal experiences

A&A: *Maybe we can begin with a first question about your trajectory, your academic training. You can introduce yourself, telling us about your scientific trajectory and how you became an anthropologist—where you studied and how did you get started working on issues of migration studies, particularly about race and racialization?*

Shanshan Lan: Ok, I’m currently associate professor in the Anthropology Department at the University of Amsterdam. I got my Bachelor’s degree and my Master’s degree in English language and literature in China. I moved to the US in the year 2000 when I was admitted into the Master’s program of East Asian studies at the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign. I stayed there one year but I didn’t like it because all my cohort were Chinese students, we were speaking Chinese in the office all the time. My research topic was on ancient Chinese poetry, but at that time, I thought it had very little to do with social reality and I really wanted to go into Social Sciences. So later I transferred to the Anthropology Department—or not really transferred but I reapplied. I reapplied for the PhD program in the Anthropology Department, because one of the professors who later became my supervisor, Professor Nancy Abelmann, she had a joint appointment in both Anthropology and Asian studies. I was encouraged by her to apply for a PhD in Anthropology, which

I did. Even before I applied for my PhD, my first semester I took a course on the history of anthropology, and I really liked it. I think anthropology is the greatest discipline in the world because you can study anything related to what human beings are doing. So that was how I became an anthropologist, and I was very happy in the Anthropology Department. What I didn't know was that department was actually among the top ten in the US, it's a very good department. And I really enjoyed my time there. I never regretted becoming an anthropologist.

Now I want to talk about how I discovered my PhD topic. When I started my PhD, I was inspired by Aihwa Ong's book *Flexible Citizenship* (Ong 1999), which was hugely popular at that time. So I told my supervisor that I wanted to study transnational mobility of Chinese businessmen but my supervisor said why don't you do a literature review on Chinese immigrants in the US and identify the gaps in existing literature. So one of the gaps that I found was family, family issues among Chinese Americans and the other one was interracial relations. It's really interesting how we discover our research topics, sometimes by pure coincidence. Because in the summer 2003 I got a grant from the National Science Foundation and its purpose was fieldwork methodology training. Its purpose was for you to go to a field site and learn how to do ethnographic research under the supervision of a faculty mentor. So I discussed the issue with my mentor Prof. Martin Manalansan. We decided that I could probably try Chicago's Chinatown. At that time, I only had a vague idea that my dissertation research would be about Chinese immigrants in the US. I thought I was using Chicago's Chinatown as a laboratory, learning how to conduct fieldwork. Because I am Chinese, it was also quite natural that I should do research in a Chinese immigrant community, and Chicago is only two hours away from Urbana-Champaign. And that's something we can discuss later, the politics of knowledge production in anthropology. It seemed at that time that what topic one can choose is largely based on one's ethnic background. It has both pros and cons and we can discuss that later.

So I went to Chicago's Chinatown to learn how to do ethnographic research, but something happened that helped me discover race and everyday racism. This is recorded in my first book (Lan 2012). One day I was walking back from an interview in Bridgeport, which is a historically white neighbourhood next to Chicago's Chinatown, and I was harassed by some white-looking kids. They were calling me names, you know like the racial slurs against Chinese, and imitating Chinese words, they even threatened to beat me. So I was totally devastated. I never experienced this before. It was my third year in the US. So suddenly I was confronted with this race-based hate crime. So I tried to call a hotline, ran by a local NGO, and they asked me "How old are you? We only deal with teenagers", and they also asked me "Have you any wounds or injury on your body?" I did not have any physical wounds on me, but I was shaking with anger and fear. I was so angry because I couldn't find any help. And I just did not fit into any category of victims of hate crimes.

It was very emotionally challenging for me, until I started talking to the residents in Chinatown and Bridgeport. So I was sharing with this elderly Chinese American person and he said "hey take it easy, it happens all the time, we got used to it." So that became the moment when I suddenly became local, and that really opened the door for me to see the everyday racial encounters or harassment the people in that neighbourhood, in Bridgeport, went through. My landlord, who is Cantonese, would say "hey, don't worry, they are just stupid people!" That really helped me think about

how do people, especially Chinese migrant workers, how do they understand racial discrimination? Is it me, the researcher, who brings this term into their life? Because in their own terms they would say that those white kids are ignorant, they are stupid, they don't understand us, it's cultural differences. So my whole dissertation project really focuses on uncovering the different ways for Chinese migrant workers, working class people who are working in the restaurants and ethnic business sector, how do they make sense of this everyday racism? How do they articulate it without using our academic terminology? They probably will talk about which part of the neighbourhood is safe to live, which part is not. And about how you move around, you know, the different ways of travelling, whether by foot or by car in order to avoid some of the dangerous spots. So how space has become racialized in that neighbourhood. That was a very traumatic incident but it really helped me find my research project.

Transnational racial knowledge formation. From Chinese migrants in the United States to African migrants in China

A&A: *You have already evoked this question but we would like to know how you have successively worked on the different projects on migrants from different ethnic backgrounds. Of course we started on your PhD work on Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants in Chicago, but then you also carried out fieldwork about the African diaspora in Guangzhou, in China (Lan 2017), and also recently in the frame of your ERC project ChinaWhite about the questions of the reconfiguration of whiteness in China (<https://www.china-white.org/>). So we want to maybe go back to these scientific trajectories of yours, so we would like to know how did you come to move from one field to another and from one subject to another and also, behind all of this fieldwork and empirical data, how the theoretical framework of each research has evolved?*

Shanshan Lan: Thank you, that's a great question. To go back to my Chinatown project, I discovered race and racism. And actually, it was so traumatic I immediately left the field. I wrote a message to my mentor saying that I couldn't stay here any longer and just left. But after a couple of months, you have to calm down, really do some critical reflection. I didn't just discover my research question on the spot. It was through painful self-reflections, reading literature on race and racism, and discussions with my professors. I discovered that this was a very important topic. So studying this, for me, as a woman from China, who has no training or background in race or ethnic studies, it was a totally new area for me but it was personally very important for me. Fortunately, the University of Illinois has some great scholars on race and ethnic studies. I had David Roediger, the renowned whiteness studies historian, on my dissertation committee. I had Arlene Torres, she is an anthropologist on Latin America and Latino studies. So I read a lot- literature on race, racism against blacks, racism against Asian Americans. After I left the US and found a job in Hong Kong, I had to transform myself into a China studies scholar but my training was very US-focused, mainly on race, migration, and ethnic studies. One of the key concepts in my dissertation is overlapping racialization. There was a comparative perspective in my doctoral research. I focused on how the racialization experience of Chinese migrants overlap with that of black Americans and Mexican migrants. I consider Chinatown not as an ethnic enclave for Chinese only but a multiracial neighbourhood where Chinese, African Americans and Mexican immigrants rub shoulders with each other. Through these everyday interactions they begin to develop very complex knowledge about racial differences and class

differences. One of my arguments is that middle class Chinese who live in the suburbs have no everyday interactions with black people or with Mexican immigrants, they don't share the same values as those migrant workers who live in Chinatown and who have on the ground multi-racial experiences. So I look at this overlapping racialization, it's not racialization of one group alone. It's through these interracial encounters that people begin to develop and also modify and change their knowledge, or enrich their knowledge, about race.

Another key concept is racial knowledge, which I define as knowledge about racial differences accumulated through the transnational migration experience. So one of my arguments is that racial knowledge formation did not happen in Chinatown, it happened even before they migrated to Chinatown. One chapter in my first book is really about how Chinese develop knowledge about black people in China. So that actually became the start for my project about Africans in Guangzhou. So when I was doing archival research on that chapter about how Chinese people develop their ideas about black people, I began to discover some works on black Africans in Guangzhou. There were already a few articles, not academic articles because it was a new phenomenon. So I began to notice, but I didn't realize that later I would move back to Hong Kong to start a new project on black Africans in Guangzhou, but there is a connection there. The seed has already been sown in my first book.

So that naturally transitioned to the second project. Even now my project on whiteness, the focus is still on racial knowledge formation. How Chinese people develop their knowledge about blackness, and about whiteness. One of my arguments is that this development of racial knowledge is a transnational process. It is not developed in an isolated Chinese environment, there is globalization, transnational migration. So if you take this transnational perspective as the core of my research, you will see the connection between the Chinatown project and the Africans in China project. They are both about international migration and the development of racial knowledge. The only difference is location. You know, the first is located in the US, the second one shifts its focus to China, it's about international migrants in China. How this international migration is bringing something new to China, especially in my Africans in Guangzhou project, I examined the interracial encounters between internal migrants², rural to urban migrants in China, and international migrants. Those people who have never met a foreigner before. They really had no previous, intimate knowledge about black people. So it's an intersection of internal and international migration. So I'm really interested in these inter-group relations. How two groups who are very different and who had no previous contact, they suddenly come into contact with each other in this business environment in Guangzhou. They have to engage in buying and selling, bargaining, and business negotiation, which I call grassroots interracial interactions. During this process of course racialization happens, or I prefer to call it interactive racialization.

Many people like to talk about my article on the shifting meanings of race in China (Lan 2022) but today I really want to highlight another one, "Reconstructing Blackness in Grassroots Interactions Between Chinese and Africans in Guangzhou" (Lan 2019). I personally like that one better because in that one I distinguish between different groups of Chinese and I talk about the Chinese gaze. Of course the Chinese gaze is not as powerful as the White one, and also there are multiple Chinese gazes. You have the elite Chinese gaze, you have the grassroots Chinese gaze. So, in the

reconstructing blackness paper, I make the distinction between elite and non-elite Chinese gazes. And they lead to different constructions of blackness.

So the elite gaze, actually, to a large extent, reproduces Western mainstream ideas about blackness. It's stigmatized but it's also considered intellectually inferior. Well, in the grassroots construction of blackness, one basic principle is equality. They treat Africans as equals, the same people as themselves, not as someone who is stupid or inferior to them. Both groups are migrants. So I make distinctions between two types of racialization. For the elite, it's called presumptive racialization, it's based on second-hand knowledge, for example, knowledge from the newspapers or Hollywood movies. Western media contain plenty of racist images of black people. Some Chinese online discussions about black Africans in Guangzhou cited racist publications in the West supporting the argument that black people have lower IQ. Well if you ask a migrant from rural China, they've never read that kind of book, they don't know. All their knowledge about black Africans are through everyday interactions. They would also complain to me about black people, but it's based on interactive racialization. These two types of racialization are different because one is based on hearsay, second-hand knowledge and the other is based on daily interactions. But this doesn't mean these daily interactions would not involve racialization. Chinese migrants also complain about black people being stingy, being rude. One of the reasons for these stereotypes can be traced back, interestingly to the Mao years. The Maoist ideology is still very much alive today in China. Most Chinese people, whether they are rural or not, know of the Mao ideology that the Africans are our brothers. This language of brotherhood and this official rhetoric of Sino-African friendship is still very much alive. However, the Mao era also had its legacy, which was not very positive. Because, what we learned was that China was doing its best to help Africans and African people are poor and are always in need of help. So the Maoist ideology really perpetuates the idea that Africans are in a dire situation and they need help. But in reality, some of the African traders who travelled to Guangzhou, they are actually quite wealthy. But when, during the business negotiation process, when there are conflicts, when there are some misunderstandings, some Chinese will revert to the old stereotype that Africans are stingy, they bargain over every cent because they have no money. White people are generous, they never bargain. I argue that this is based on partly on the Mao era stereotypes, partly on the marginalization of both groups in urban Chinese economy. Because the rural migrants are also fighting for every cent since they want to make it in Guangzhou. They want to make money out of foreigners. While the Africans, they are also at the lower end of the global value chain. They have to bargain hard in order to make a profit when shipping the goods back to Africa to sell. Gordon Mathews called it globalization from below. It's really about people with small capital, who operate their business under the radar of the state and in the grey zone between legality and illegality. They face all kind of mobility regimes, visa and immigration control, it's very hard to make a profit. So both groups are marginalized, and they have to depend on each other in order to survive in this informal urban economy.

Another reason is language barrier. Chinese migrants don't speak English and Africans can only speak some simple Chinese, but it's not enough to understand very complicated issues. My conclusion is that this interactive racialization is more open-ended. It may reinforce some of the stereotypes but it also has the potential to

changes people's ideas and perceptions. Some of the Chinese migrants tell me "hey, African people they are stingy but they are enthusiastic and honest, it's very easy to do business with them." So as they get to know each other more and more, they discover the bad things but also the positive values. They treat each other as real people, right, not as some stories one heard. So I see a potential for transforming, or impacting, people's racial knowledge formation through these daily life interactions. I don't want to romanticize this grassroots interactions but I also see the positive side of it, for example both groups, Chinese migrants and African migrants, they criticize China's immigration policy, because they both want real businessmen to get long-term visa so that this transnational trade market in Guangzhou can thrive instead of disappear. Also these grassroots Chinese merchants, they acknowledge the contributions of African migrants. They would tell me that the Sanyuanli area used to be filled with Chinese drug dealers and there was no business but after the Africans came, so many trade markets started to emerge and flourish. The Africans provided business and job opportunities for Chinese. I heard that a lot, during my interviews, but if you look at the Chinese media, they seldom acknowledge the contributions of these petty transnational African businesspeople. Africans are merely constructed as undocumented, illegal who are causing all kinds of problems. So this Sino-African relationship is asymmetrical, China is acting as the big brother, "I'm helping you, you need my aid." At the governmental level, China is not treating African countries as its equal. That's why this grassroots interaction is so important because at least they are treating each other as equals. I have one example from a Chinese Muslim man, his name is Youssef. He kept calling Africans "barbaric", in Chinese "野蛮的," which, upon first hearing it you may think, "Hey, you are a racist!" when you keep calling Africans "barbaric". So one day I asked him, I said, "What do you mean by barbaric? Can you explain it to me?" And he said it means someone who has a bad temper, who likes to fight, who likes to argue, just like himself. So he is not aware of the racial connotation of calling a black African barbaric. The meaning of the term for him is more like quarrelsome, belligerent, aggressive. It's like himself because Youssef also quarrels a lot with his African clients. But I can see that even he didn't realize himself that he was placing those potentially troublesome African clients on the same level as himself. His reasoning was different from the elite Chinese perspective, which presumes Africans are inferior or lesser human beings.

Racism, color prejudice, and the importance of cultural context

A&A: *We would like you to speak more about your research in Guangzhou. In your article "The shifting meanings of race in China: a case study of the African diaspora communities in Guangzhou" (Lan 2016), you point out that the "existing literature on race in China is generally divided into two camps. The first believes that the discourse of race and racism has a long history in Chinese culture, while the second emphasizes distinctions between traditional Chinese ways of constructing difference and the Western pseudo-scientific notion of race" (p. 300). Could you elaborate on the distinction you make between "racism" and "color prejudice" following the book of St. Clair Drake (Drake 1987)? Could you also go back to the discourses on the "yellow race" in China since the end of the 19th century?*

Shanshan Lan: I think that racism has a history, an origin. It originated from the West. It's related to colonialism, there was the global slave trade, white supremacist movements in Western countries. I personally do not think that race is a universal construct. Although I think racialization can be universal. Racialization can happen

in different countries, but race has a history. Colour prejudice can be related to racism, if people are racists, you know they can also practice colour prejudice but colour prejudice can also be detached from racism, separated from racism. That's what St. Clair Drake's book is about. He studies the black diaspora in different parts of the world. The book really moves beyond the US context in defining race and blackness because you know whenever we talk about blackness, the black power movement, it's very US-centric, the understanding of race and racism. So St. Clair Drake adopts this transnational framework. He argues that in some black communities beyond the US even black people have colour-based prejudice, they will even say that a certain darker skin colour is less beautiful, but he made a distinction between this and anti-black racism practiced by white people. Colour prejudice practiced in the black community is a little bit hard for people to understand. That's because the definition of race and blackness has been so hegemonic, it has been established by Western discourses. It's very hard for people to come up with alternative ways of understanding any other discussions of blackness and whiteness.

Let me give you an example. During the 2018 Chinese New Year gala show, a Chinese actress performed an African mother by wearing blackface. This is a highly controversial case. The comments are divided into two camps. The majority of the English language media are saying, "Look, this is an example of Chinese racism." And the other is saying that you have to take the Chinese cultural context into consideration. This controversial shows the hegemonic meaning of blackface performance. Because in the US context, blackface performance is considered racist. You know, white people putting on blackface is considered racist and it has a long history in the US. However, when you see blackface performance in Japan or in China, does it still mean the same thing as in the US? Or are people allowed to interpret it in a different way?

We need to take into consideration the historical and cultural context in China to understand the specific meanings of blackface performance in China. During the Mao era the actors and actresses in the cultural troupe, they would perform blackface to ordinary Chinese. It's really for educational purposes, to show how our African brothers were suffering so much and we needed to help them. It was used as political propaganda to serve anti-colonial, anti-imperialist purposes. It has a totally different political meaning than the blackface performance in the US. There are also scholars who research hip-hop in Japan such as Ian Condry. In the US, hip-hop was used as a counterculture to fight against anti-black racism, urban poverty, and ghettoization. Well in Japan, hip-hop was appropriated by Korean-Japanese artists to fight against class differences. So there has to be a space for the same cultural format to be appropriated in a different cultural and political context for a different purpose. Right now this space is very limited because you have the mainstream voice who says that any blackface performance is racist. I prefer to call this kind of accusation an attempt to diagnose racism. We try to diagnose what is racism and what is not based on a narrowly defined US definition. Hey, I catch you, you are a racist. So it really wouldn't serve the long term agenda for anti-racist struggle. It will close the conversation, with people being panic and saying, hey I'm not a racist, I don't want to discuss this. So the irony of the Chinese New Year gala performance is that the purpose was really to glorify Sino-African relations and how China is trying to strengthen this relationship but it ended up being criticized because of the blackface

performance. So I'm not sure that the actress herself has the knowledge about the history of blackface performance in the US to really understand the complexity of the situation.

But I want to mention a more recent controversy about the slanted-eye Chinese model. Both BMW and also a Chinese brand Three Squirrels have images of Chinese models with slanted-eye in their advertisements. It caused a huge uproar in China. People in China are calling these advertisements racist because they highlight the smaller eyes of Chinese. Some even said, "there are so many beautiful Chinese women, why do you choose this one with small eyes, it really reproduces racial stereotypes of Chinese in western countries." Personally I think the controversy is both a good and a bad thing.

On the one hand, it shows that Chinese people, ordinary Chinese people, are becoming more sensitive to these Western discourses about race and racism, right, they quickly recognize "Hey, this is problematic, it may reproduce racial stereotypes against Chinese." You know, the slanted-eye stereotype has been discussed a lot in Asian American studies literature, but not so much by Chinese scholars or among Chinese internet users. So now things are changing. It really shows that, with more and more Chinese studying abroad, with globalization, Chinese people are also developing this sensitivity towards issues of race. On the other hand, I think they also overdid it. It has a lot to do with the recent rise of racial nationalism in China which is embedded in the official rhetoric of the Chinese Dream. There is also a rise of popular nationalism during the Covid-19 pandemic, with all the western critiques of China's Covid-19 containment policy, and racism against Chinese people in the western world. Also the US-China trade war. All these really helped the development of nationalistic sentiment in China. So anything against China will be labelled as racism or China-bashing, it's a very complicated phenomenon. So overall I think there should be more space for different interpretations of race-related subjects instead of just one voice, which reinforces the Western hegemonic meanings of race.

I realize that I didn't answer the yellow-race question. I really want to answer that question. So the yellow race issue is in chapter two of my first book. It's a great example of how Western racial discourse interacts with local discourse of ethno-nationalism. The idea that Chinese people are yellow was actually introduced by Western missionaries. If you read Frank Dikötter's book, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, he cited one example (Dikötter 1992). It's a small story but it's very interesting. A missionary asked a Chinese boy "what colour are Chinese people?" and the little boy said "human colour", because Chinese had no idea of this white/black distinction, you know, and the missionary said "no, Chinese people are yellow, you are yellow people" and so that was the moment when Chinese encountered the pseudo-scientific notion of race and the division of the world into five different colours.

However, I would argue that Chinese reformers in the late nineteenth century, they took this idea of yellow but totally transformed its meaning. So in the Western racial system, yellow means inferiority or not as good as white. However the Chinese notion of yellow is endowed with Chinese cultural meanings. So instead of a symbol of racial inferiority, it became a symbol of ethnic pride because the colour yellow belongs to the emperor. In Chinese culture only the emperor can wear the colour yellow. It

became a symbol of authority, power, majesty, and royalty. And also it evokes the image of the yellow river, which is the cradle of Chinese civilisation. It also is related to the yellow emperor, who was a mythological, or semi-mythological figure, and has been worshipped as the ancestor of all the Chinese people. So this idea of the "yellow race", in my book I call it "yellow race- lineage", in order to distinguish it from the Western notion of yellow race. Because it's a mixture of both Western and Chinese ideas, it's race/lineage. If you think of the yellow emperor mythology, it's really about descentance. We are all descendants of the yellow emperor. It draws on the Chinese idea of lineage and bloodline, the family, the clan. So it's not the same as the Western idea of race because if you study the work of Liang Qichao (梁启超), a Chinese scholar and reformer of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), he used the Chinese term "黄族", "族" means lineage or clan, "黄" meaning yellow color. Frank W. Price's English translation of Sun Yat-sen's work invariably translated Chinese terms such as 人种 and 民族 into the same English word "race." But within the Chinese language we do not have a word for race. We have two words. One is "种", one is "族", and they have lots of meanings. "种" means "type", "seed", "species", if you read Dikötter's book, you will find there is no exact equivalence between the Western word of race and the Chinese term 种族. That's why I keep arguing that race in China is not the same as race in the West, but we don't have a new language to express it. If you use the same language as the race word, you run the risk of reproducing existing hegemonic ideas.

Theoretical framework and legacy

A&A: *So, could you tell us what is your relationship to post-colonial studies and de-colonial perspective because it has to do with the issue of Western social sciences.*

Shanshan Lan: Yes, I acknowledge my work has been heavily influenced by my academic training in the United States. But I don't think I am just passively receiving Western theory and trying to use it as a model to try to explain what's happening in China right now. Instead, I think I am trying to de-construct or challenge the universalism of Western theory. It's like a game. You first need to learn the rules of the game to be able to critique it. In order to criticize the West, you have to speak the language of the Western academia. One thing that I'm trying to show in my works is that race and racism in China is different from that in Western countries. One really needs to take into consideration changing historical, political, social, and cultural contexts to understand the re-articulation and the re-construction of racial meanings in China. Race is dynamic and relational. When it is introduced to the Chinese context, its meanings will change. That's something I'm struggling to find out.

I did not use post-colonial theories in my work, because, one major reason is because China has never been fully colonized by any Western country and there is no colonial institutional legacy in China. Scholars like James Farrer wrote about the post-colonial nostalgia of old-generation expats in Shanghai. That was just one article. Pauline Leonard wrote about the persistence of social privileges associated with whiteness in post-colonial Hong Kong. But Hong Kong's case is very different from Mainland China.

However, I want to emphasize that my current project is an ongoing project and I'm open to suggestions for new theoretical frameworks. In my most recent article

published in *the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, I was using DuBois' concept of double consciousness (Lan 2022-a). Basically I argue that white migrants in China also developed a kind of double consciousness under the disciplinary power of multiple Chinese gazes. On the one hand, they became highly aware of their whiteness, in the West it's invisible but in China they became highly aware that they are white. But on the other hand, they also know that this whiteness is no longer associated with a majority identity with structural domination. They become a minority. This whiteness, white privilege, becomes conditional, limited and precarious. That's my argument on privileges and precariousness of whiteness.

The other scholar I used is Ann Stoler. Ann Stoler's book *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (Stoler 2002). I really like it because it demonstrates the fuzziness of the boundaries of whiteness and how, you know, the interstitial position of poor white people and white women really fleshes out the internal tensions and contradictions within the white population. The definition of whiteness, even in the colonial era, was really messy and was not clearcut. That is tremendously useful to me to study the heterogeneity and stratification, the different layers, of whiteness in my work.

A&A: *In your book Mapping the new Africa Diaspora in China (Lan 2017), you say China is a key site of transnational racial knowledge production. Could we speak of a desire to decentralize the knowledge production from the West on your part? Or a will to propose an alternative way of approaching "race and racialization"? I think you partly answered that question but maybe you could give us more information about that. What do you think of the place of China and studies about China and Chinese migrants all over the world as a sight of production of knowledge? Could you also tell us more about the meanings of white privilege and white skin privilege in your work?*

Shanshan Lan: I think that by trying to use a new term "white skin privilege" I'm trying to move beyond the Western model, I'm trying to come up with new languages to talk about whiteness in China. As I said before, there is this difficulty of terminology, if you use existing terminology, you run the risk of perpetuating existing West-centric knowledge structure. So this is actually happening in some of the literature I cited in my recent article published in *American Anthropologist* (Lan 2022b). Even though they are talking about the decline of white privilege in Asia, by using the term "white privilege" they seem to take for granted that it means the same in Asia and in the West. So I'm really questioning that. Should we use the term "white privilege" without questioning its culturally-specific meaning in China? Or should we use a different term? Because it's well known that white privilege means structural domination in the western context. But when white people migrate to China they are no longer the majority, they no longer enjoy structural domination. They still enjoy some level of privilege, due to the transnational circulation of white supremacist ideology in local media or the local educational system. But they also encounter lots of limitations to this privilege.

That's why I use the term "white skin privilege." I want to show that whiteness is reduced to skin-deep, you know, so it's really white looks, white appearance that matters. Or they say "somatic whiteness", "physical whiteness." You probably know this interesting phenomenon of "white face jobs" or "white monkey jobs." This is really a type of commodification of white bodies, which leads to the de-valuing or depreciation of professional skills among some of the white knowledge migrants, for example, white English teachers. So I try to use this "white skin privilege" to really show that there is a shift of power relations, there is a shift of cultural context. It's no

longer the white privilege in the Western sense. I hope this is a small step. I'm not sure this contributes to an alternative way to research race or racialization because I'm worried that if you overthrow a hierarchy and you might replace it with another one. There is a danger in the claim that China is this key knowledge site, this Chinese way of understanding race is the only way. Then it becomes hegemonic and problematic again. So what I'm advocating is the diversification of racial meanings. There should be multiple ways, there should be a space, a space should open up for more diverse interpretations of racialization based on specific historical political cultural and social contexts. That's what I say in my *American Anthropologist* article. It's the pluralization of the meanings of whiteness. There shouldn't be only one way to understanding whiteness, i.e. whiteness means wealth, prestige, upward mobility. Because there are also different types of white people—poor whites studied by Ann Stoler, the Western English teachers studied by me and many other scholars, so they can perform multiple versions of whiteness, which point to the diversification of this racial formation process in different parts of the world. On the other hand, we should also not forget the persistence of white supremacy and it's spreading in different cultural contexts. That's why some scholars they would say the way Han Chinese treats the minorities are racism, with which I disagree. Of course it's very bad, but it's Han chauvinism within the Chinese context. It never spread all over the world. It never became a global trend. It doesn't really constitute a transnational structural domination. It's not comparable with this racism originated from the West, which has really impacted this global hierarchy in the business field, in the educational field, in the field of international migration. Today when we talk about migrants, we usually mean migrants from the global South. That's why my ChinaWhite project is so important, because I am treating white people, the so-called privileged white expats, as migrants, incorporating them into the migration paradigm. It really helps us to rethink racialization in our knowledge structure, the way we formulate research questions.

A&A: *You did fieldwork in Chicago. Many European students and scholars still focus on the first Chicago school of sociology. In your eyes, what remains interesting about the first Chicago School for understanding questions of race and racialization today, in Chicago as in the rest of the world?*

Shanshan Lan: The Chicago School is important, you know, because if you consider the historical pioneers, they pioneered the focus, they turned their attention to immigrants, to feature immigrants as the most important part of their study and they regarded the city as a laboratory. A very meticulous study of different immigrant communities. It's a model for community studies, which is very inspirational but I have to be honest, I'm trained as an anthropologist, not a sociologist. Basically I'm not a big fan of the assimilation paradigm. Robert E. Park, his race relation cycle is so influential, the contact, conflict, accommodation, assimilation cycle. Personally, I'm really not a big fan of the assimilation model. My intellectual heritage is in anthropology, so my focus is on racism against migrants. It's OK to study assimilation, but I think we put too much burden on migrants. It seems that it's entirely the migrants' responsibility to deal with all the challenges in the post-migration period, and to adjust to the new environment, with assimilation as the final goal. It's a very teleological argument.

What I'm interested in is the anthropology of the State and also anthropology of immigration, for example, Nicholas De Genova's work on the legal production of

illegality. I'm interested in the unequal power relations in structural institutional arrangements, which make it difficult for migrants to develop a sense of belonging in the host country. Like immigration law, like global mobility regimes. Why is it so easy, for example, for these young Western college graduates to come to China to teach English? Why is it so difficult for the Syrian refugees to enter Europe? There is the issue of race and our immigration policy is racialized. It targets certain groups as desirable and other groups as problematic. So I'm more interested in these institutional inequalities which create opportunities or challenges for migrants in their daily life struggles, which is kind of different from the sociological perspective.

A&A: *The book from your PhD dissertation puts "class consciousness" before other social relations including race. What do you think of intersectionality approaches in relation to studies on overseas Chinese and China?*

Shanshan Lan: I think I am using an intersectional approach but I didn't really announce it directly and say "Hey I'm using intersectionality as my theoretical framework." The Chinese migrants in Chicago project and the Africans in Guangzhou project, they both flesh out class, class and place of origin. My recent article in *the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, that one deals with intersectionality (Lan 2022-a). It discusses the intersection of nationality, gender, and the field of employment (the public sector versus the private sector), and how that really impacted the formation of white identities in China. So it's embedded in my research but it's not highlighted. Also I recently edited a special issue, it's called "Precarious Whiteness in Pandemic Times in China" (<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/raan20/21/3>) and some of the papers by my PhDs dealing with gender and sexuality, nationality, Chinese language skills. Overall, I think intersectional analysis is very important to my research.

And how it is related to my study about overseas Chinese. Right now, my study about overseas Chinese is mainly about Chinese students who are studying abroad. One recently published article in *Pacific Affairs* is on rural origin Chinese students in South Korea. In that article, I did mention intersectionality (Lan 2021). It's about the intersection of class, place of origin, whether you are from urban China or rural China, and gender. That really helped mediate the different study abroad experiences of two groups of students, rural origin students and students from urban middle class backgrounds.

Future of immigration in China and scholarly responsibilities

A&A: *Our next question is about migration policies implemented in China. What would be the future of immigration in China, especially in relation to the aging of Chinese population, and the status of foreigners in China?*

Shanshan Lan: Well, I'm not sure I can predict the future, but I think in the future there will be more diversification of foreign populations. Not just Africans or white Westerners. I think there will be more Asian-Americans who have bilingual skills. They are in great demand in these transnational companies. With the aging of the Chinese population, there will be more migrant labour, especially from Vietnam, Southeast Asian countries. There was also talk about China introducing Filipino workers as domestic helpers and English teachers. So the foreign population in China will become more and more diversified.

Another trend will be the continuous decline of white skin privilege. White people, while they are still valued, there will be a depreciation of the value of white skin. Because in the past when you see a white person in the street, many people would go to them, taking photos, etc. Being white was exotic in China. But now, when I was doing research among some of the foreign English teachers in Beijing and Xi'an, we were sitting in Starbucks and nobody paid any attention to us. So people got used to seeing foreigners in China everywhere, so it was no longer a spectacle.

Chinese people are also developing more nuanced knowledge about different groups of foreigners. They know that some white people are not highly skilled, or highly-qualified. Especially in the English-teaching sector. There was this EF scandal, English First, which is the biggest English language training company in China. Some of their teachers were discovered to be taking drugs. That scandal really tarnished the image of foreign English teachers in China.

So, immigration policy. I think there is a tendency for China to learn from the West, to really tighten immigration control and to make distinctions between different groups of foreigners based on their desirability. It's already happening.

A&A: *As an academic and a citizen, how would you assess the current political situation in the world, notably the rise of nationalism, or nativism, and the rise of racist violence? How do you think social science academics could and should contribute to the future of society?*

Shanshan Lan: That's a difficult question, it's also a big question. I think what I can do is to contribute to knowledge production. As an academic, you can use your writing to educate people, to disseminate knowledge. I feel very sad because you know, racism is still a severe problem. If you see the Black Lives Matter movement, people are still dying from racist violence. You see that old-fashioned hardcore racism is still on the rise with issues of immigration being politicized. So, it also keeps me motivated to do research because what I'm doing is important. Maybe not immediately important but also through teaching students. Most of my students are white Dutch. At least I'm trying to raise awareness to help them reflect on this racialized knowledge structure in Anthropology and help them realize that what they are learning is not the whole picture. And even, as a Chinese, I'm probably their first Chinese teacher. I'm a living example to challenge those orientalist stereotypes about Chinese people and Chinese culture. I've told them many personal stories and they would say "wow! It's like that, I never realized it." So students, especially those educated in the Western system, they really need to know, to hear, a different perspective.

So, this is getting personal but it's also important. I'm the only Chinese woman in the Anthropology Department teaching a white majority student body and I just feel... you're hugely burdened with this responsibility to tell them what you know about Chinese society. I had to tell them that I don't really know Confucianism. When I was working in Hong Kong, I was once asked to give a lecture on traditional Chinese culture to a group of visiting students from the US. I had to go to the internet to learn more about Confucianism myself before preparing the lecture. Some of my Dutch students were just shocked by what I told them. You know I have to tell them that women in China have lots of rights. When I went to school I had the same opportunities as my brother. I even did better in school than my brother. Some of them still think that women in China are oppressed and have little rights. China is so big, of course in some rural areas, this is true, but you have to give students a more

balanced picture instead of what they read in the news or watched on TV. So even these small steps, I think, is quite useful. It's quite important. It kept me motivated as a scholar, and as a teacher.

Challenges in conducting ethnographic research in pandemic times

A&A: *Thank you so much for sharing. So the next question is about the Covid impact on scientific knowledge production. How do you and your ERC team conduct your research localized in China? Do you carry out online ethnographies? Do you think the pandemic will have an impact on the way ethnographers will invest in distant fieldwork or conduct transnational fieldwork?*

Shanshan Lan: Yes, of course. That's the biggest trouble for my team now. One of my PhD students, she cannot go to China because China's borders are closed to international travellers. I didn't do any online ethnography because I did some research just before Covid so I'm still writing articles based on that set of data, but my PhDs and postdocs, they did some online research. This special issue I co-edited with my two postdoctoral researchers, it's mostly based on online ethnography. It's a crisis moment but also an opportunity, I think. For example, this article I co-authored with my PhD Christina Kefala, who studies young Western entrepreneurs and their experience of leaving China because of the outbreak of Covid-19 (Kefala & Lan 2022). So it's about their experience of leaving China and returning to Europe, and how that impacted their "China dream," their future career expectations, and their identities as transnational migrants. I personally think it is a very interesting article.

Also another piece by my PhD Ke Ma, she studies white Western vloggers in China (Ma 2022). They post videos on Chinese websites sharing their daily life, also sharing their opinions on Covid and on anti-Chinese racism in Western countries. The paper examines how they perform white masculinity, and how that white masculinity is evaluated by Chinese youth. So Covid opens up a new field, like this digital ethnography and also shifts our research site to the online domain. But our major research question remain more or less the same. It's really about the social construction of whiteness in China and the changing meanings of whiteness in China. Another PhD Raviv Litman did online participant observation research. He worked as an online English teacher, teaching English to students in China. Through this process he learned the business models of the online English teaching companies in China, how whiteness is valued or exploited in this process (Litman 2022). So those are really productive aspects of the projects. But, in order to graduate as a PhD in anthropology you have to do some "real" fieldwork and this is a challenge.

New research agendas and advices for young scholars

A&A: *What are the three books/articles that you consider essential and that you would suggest to young researchers working on issues of race and racialization in the context of China and Chinese diasporas?*

Shanshan Lan: The first one would be Frank Dikötter's book *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Dikötter 1992). It's a controversial book. I don't agree to all his arguments, but it's the only monograph dealing with racial discourse in modern China and it can serve as a good background reading. Another is by Kowner and Demel, they are two historians, they edited two volumes. The name is *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia*. Volume one is called *Western and Eastern Constructions*, volume two

is called *Interactions, Nationalism, Gender and Lineage*. For me, volume two is more interesting, but the two edited volumes contain several pieces about race in China, which can be highly interesting. And I also agree to the two author's major arguments. They acknowledge that there is racism in Asia but they also note that racism in Asia is different from that in the West. I highly recommend these two edited volumes.

The third one would be Ann Stoler's book *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Stoler 2002). It's not about China but it can serve as a good theoretical foundation, especially for students in China studies who have no knowledge about race. Because Stoler, she does a beautiful job in really showing the messiness of racial categorization. Race is not stable, it's changing all the time. There are all kinds of tensions and dilemmas in this colonial racial categorization which really push students in race studies to rethink unequal power relations embedded in institutional categorization practices. I love the book and my PhDs they also like the book.

A&A: *We would like to ask what topics are important for you today? If you were a young PhD researcher what would you study?*

Shanshan Lan: I would join the ChinaWhite team. I think it's really important to study the global circulation of "white privilege" because, I keep coming back to this, but it's based on my personal experience of being a woman of colour, being a Chinese woman, living among groups of white people and white colleagues and my white students. I'm highly conscious of my identity as, what you call an outsider, or a racialized body. Because it creates, you know, a unique perspective for me to study this white culture, this white institution, and white knowledge structure, so I really love this project. I hope it can generate important findings and it can make an impact in the field of race and migration studies.

A&A: *Finally, we have one more question about the legitimacy for a researcher to choose a particular research topic, because when you started to present your PhD topic choice, you mentioned a hint made by your professors about the connection between the topic to be studied and your ethnic background. We would therefore like to know more about your opinion on the legitimacy of choosing a research topic for researchers with a migration background.*

Shanshan Lan: It also reflects the racialization of knowledge production in academia. I don't know, it's a hard question. I don't think the professors who told me to study Chinatown intentionally meant anything unkind. Actually I think they were being very kind. And I also don't know if I chose another topic I would do better. It's a dilemma. You know, on the one hand, it's called native anthropology, because you already have the language skills and it could be easier for you to study people from the same ethnic background as you. Because in the good old past it was mainly white Westerners who went to study the so-called indigenous people, usually in non-western societies. It took many years for them to learn the language in order to conduct fieldwork. Of course it was related to colonialism and unequal power relations. But nowadays people can study their own society, their own culture. You don't have to learn the language. You have the bilingual skills, you have the cultural knowledge, it can also be a plus. But the minus is that it's very hard to achieve this de-familiarisation. You can take things for granted and miss a lot of interesting findings.

I had a PhD, Willy Sier, she already graduated. She's a Dutch lady who studies rural to urban student migrants in Wuhan. When I read her writing, it was so inspirational, because what she discovered are all the things I took for granted. I thought, hey, I never thought about it this way. You need a new pair of eyes, a new perspective, an outsider's perspective to discover new things. So I'm not against native anthropology, but I think there should be a healthy combination of scholars from different backgrounds, with more space for them to choose what they want to do instead of you know, their imagination of the future possible topics being limited by their ethnic background, that can be problematic. Like, if I were a young PhD now, if I wanted to study French people eating some kind of fancy food, I should be encouraged to explore the feasibility of the project instead of being told, "Hey, this is not your topic. You should choose a topic related to China."

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NOTES

1. TN: The city of Guangzhou (广州) is usually known as "Canton" in the West. Nevertheless, we have chosen to write it in Roman characters as it is pronounced in standard Chinese. This choice results not only from the growing use of "Guangzhou" well beyond China's borders, but also from the desire to rectify the frequent error, originating in the mid-19th century, of confusing the province of Guangdong (广东, whose pronunciation in standard Chinese is close to "Canton") where Guangzhou is located, with this city of Guangzhou itself.

2. TN: It is question of the complex and often conflictual relations between Chinese city dwellers and migrant workers (*mingong*) who come from the countryside to work in urban areas. The latter suffer, on the one hand, from social prejudices that describe them as backward and inferior, and, on the other hand, from a difference in institutional treatment, particularly in access to social rights. Chinese law considers that an individual can only benefit from certain public services (such as health and education for children) in the administrative area where he or she was registered at birth. According to the 2021 Migrant Workers Follow-up Survey Report (2021年农民工监测调查报告) released in 2022 by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, 292.51 million people are counted as *mingong*. Source: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202204/t20220429_1830126.html.

ABSTRACTS

Shanshan Lan is an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. She has been conducting researches for nearly twenty years on Chinese migration to the United States, on Africans in the Chinese metropolis of Guangzhou and on whiteness in China. In the following interview, Shanshan Lan introduces her biographical and scholarly background, her training as an anthropologist in the United States and her distanced use of Western social sciences. She also discusses several concepts that she has developed from empirical investigations: "racial knowledge", "overlapping racialization", "grassroots interracial interaction", and the difference she makes between "white privilege" and "white skin privilege".

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Keywords: race, racism, whiteness, concepts, circulation, migration, Chinese migrants, African migrants, China, Chicago, Guangzhou

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