Foreigner in China

Economic Transition and the Chinese State's Vision of Immigration and Race

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Lin Huayou calls Nio Gioacchini 'dad' during the birthday party Gioacchini plans for him. Screenshot from *Foreigner in China*.

China's recently proposed immigration reforms highlight the country's need for foreign talent in its transition to a knowledge-intensive economy. The state's vision, however, seems to be coloured by issues of race. Examining the representations of foreigners of different ethnicities and backgrounds on Chinese Central Television, this essay argues that while the state may be relaxing permanent residency restrictions, it favours white foreigners because of the racialised assumptions about the high levels of education and expertise that supposedly come with their whiteness.

In a 2019 episode of *Foreigner in China* (外国人在中国), a program made by Chinese Central Television (CCTV), the audience is introduced to an unconventional father-and-son relationship (CCTV 2019). In 2016, Lin Huayou, a Zhejiang entrepreneur, hired Nilo Gioacchini, an Italian industrial designer, to design his bathroom fixtures. In the following years, their relationship blossomed, becoming family-like in nature. The end of the episode makes this closeness very clear, by showing a surprise birthday party Gioacchini has planned for Lin. On that occasion, the Italian man learns to say 'Happy birthday, child' in Chinese, while Lin, in tears, kneels and embraces Gioacchini as he exclaims: 'Dad!' This anecdote is interesting because the embedded power dynamics associated with Gioacchini's whiteness and technical expertise reveal which foreigners the Chinese state considers to be desirable additions to a Chinese family, which, in turn, functions as a metaphor for the nation.

In this essay, I examine representations on Chinese state television of foreigners living in China to understand both the state's vision for the country's future and its attitude towards immigration. Currently, even foreigners like Gioacchini find it difficult to live in China because of the country's highly exclusive policies on permanent residency, but immigration reforms are on the way. Underlying such reforms are China's transition towards a knowledge-intensive economy and the related growing demand for international talent. As illustrated by Gioacchini's story, the state seems to associate such talent with whiteness—a bias that may privilege white people in landing those high-paying technical jobs necessary to qualify foreigners for permanent residency.

Drawing mostly from CCTV Channel 4's *Foreigner in China*, this essay compares the show's representations of foreigners of different ethnicities and backgrounds. I focus on the program's association of whiteness with technical expertise and its naturalisation of white agency. These aspects are accentuated by the show's portrayals of African women, which link them with rural life. Although all the stories are based on real experiences and interviews, I contend that these stories are also heavily scripted in the selection of featured protagonists and the aspects of their lives that are highlighted. According to its official description, the show reflects the Chinese spirit of openness and tolerance (CCTV n.d.), but different foreigners receive very different treatment. Examining these scripted stories thus sheds light on how the state envisions a future that is becoming increasingly diverse.

China's Economic Transition and Immigration Future

In the past few years, much has been written about China's economic transition, with many Chinese scholars and government representatives arguing that technological advancement and creativity are poised to replace labour-intensive manufac-

turing to become the main drivers of the country's economic growth (Sun et al. 2017). This is due to China's increasing demand for high-quality products and services, and the gradual depletion of the 'reserve army' of young rural migrants who have kept Chinese factories running for the past decades. This transition, however, will require a new army of highly educated experts with advanced technical skills. Aware of this, Chinese authorities have been creating programs to develop such talent domestically and to woo global elites to China. The country's immigration laws, however, are lagging and the government has until recently maintained that China is not a country of immigration (Eastday 2004).

Currently, China's immigration regulations do not provide a practical route to permanent residency for most foreigners. To qualify, one must make significant investments, hold key titles (such as deputy director of a factory or associate professor), or have made major contributions to the country (China Consular Affairs 2006). A family reunion provision does exist, which in theory qualifies those with direct family members who are Chinese citizens or permanent residents for permanent residency, but very few, if any at all, have been able to secure permanent residency through this provision alone. Considering this, a 2014 news report even called China's permanent residency the 'most exclusive green card in the world' (Yangzi Evening Post 2014). To work in such a system, foreigners in China generally need to seek a work permit that is tied to their employer—an inconvenient measure as every change of job requires an arduous application process. In some cases, a foreigner must even exit and re-enter the country when reapplying. On top of this, foreigners also need to renew their residence permit—a separate document—usually on an annual basis.

However, policies are changing. In February 2020, two years after the establishment of the National Immigration Administration (NIA), the Ministry of Justice released draft 'Regulations on the Administration of Foreigners' Permanent Residency' to gauge public opinion. Compared with the current regulations, which were issued in 2004, the new proposal provides more routes for employment-based applications and eliminates

outdated qualifications such as ‘factory director’. Whereas investment is the number-one qualification under the current law, the new version prioritises contributions to science and technology, education, and culture. Although many people, including Hu Xijin (2020a), the Chief Editor of *Global Times*, have criticised the new threshold as being too low and inclusive, the updated proposal remains highly exclusive and targets those with graduate degrees and high salaries. For example, the minimum salary requirement for an employment-based residency applicant must be three times the average salary of local workers in the same position. In fact, some of the requirements in the new proposal are based on a special immigration program announced a year earlier with the aim of hiring highly educated foreign experts for the development of new free-trade zones (自贸区) in major cities (State Council 2019).

For Hu Xijin, one of the most controversial aspects of the draft is a new family reunion provision, which he believes would open the door to chain migration and cheap imported labour (Hu Xijin 2020b). However, it is still too early to tell whether the acquisition of a new low-cost workforce is part of the state’s long-term plan, especially considering that, as mentioned before, such a provision already exists in the current law and, so far, few, if any, have obtained permanent residency through this route alone. As contended by Tabitha Speelman (2020), the draft and the NIA’s establishment should be interpreted as the state’s acknowledgement of China as an immigrant destination country, rather than an immigration country. Indeed, the trend of low birth rates may mean that labour demand cannot be satisfied by Chinese workers and, to date, there has been at least one state program to legally import Vietnamese workers (Hu 2019). But it seems that rather than betting on immigration reforms, many manufacturers are turning to automation and robotics to solve the labour shortage (Xu 2020), which further fuels the demand for technical expertise. It is in this context that we should interpret CCTV’s representations of foreigners in China.

White Expertise

Foreigner in China is a long-running series of short documentaries that started in 2013. It includes a wide range of foreigners’ experiences in China, but episodes featuring non-whites are relatively rare and often focus on their cultural identities and assimilation. Episodes featuring white foreigners, on the other hand, are both predominant and more varied. White foreigners are also more likely to be portrayed as modern individuals with knowledge and technical skills. For example, most of the distinguished experts featured in the programs are white. A representative episode interviews Dave Cote, the former CEO of Honeywell, an aerospace technology company. Another tells the story of Yves Tiberghien, a professor of political science and the Director Emeritus of the Institute of Asian Research at the University of British Columbia.

But the program’s association of whiteness with knowledge and technical expertise is usually more subtle. Mike, for example, is a Canadian pizza restaurateur in Chengdu (CCTV 2018a). Formerly an aerospace engineer, Mike requires all the ingredients to be blemish-free and correctly labelled with purchase dates. Any food prepared improperly must be thrown away—a rule that has angered his Chinese in-laws, who think it is wasteful. Despite their disagreements, the in-laws try their best to meet Mike’s standards, and the narrator compliments Mike for treating cooking with the precision of aircraft manufacturing. Sometimes, the authority of white expertise can manifest in more mundane ways. Jos is a Dutch writer who has lived in Dali, Yunnan Province, for more than 30 years and is said to know more about Chinese history than his Chinese wife (CCTV 2018b). The couple used to disagree about how to educate their children. While Jos advocates embedding education in fun activities and would let their daughters miss school for a trip to the countryside, his wife is a believer in strict discipline. Eventually, Jos compromises and agrees not to encourage their children to miss classes, but his wife also admits that Jos’s approach is superior because he has a degree in developmental psychology.

[Top Left] Abohoui explains how he plans to convince the local master to teach him the art of the dragon lantern dance. [Top Right] Tina carries cabbages over her head, surprising both her husband and her mother-in-law. [Bottom Left] Dev Raturi decides to use Indian culture to attract customers to his restaurant. [Bottom Right] Sandra explains that she married her Chinese husband out of love and that she does not care if he is a farmer. Screenshots from *Foreigner in China*.

Now compare Mike's story with Dev Raturi's (CCTV 2014b). Like Mike, Raturi is a restaurateur, but he runs an Indian restaurant in Xi'an. While the story depicts Raturi as a devoted and meticulous owner with good business acumen, it also attributes his success to the historical ties between India and Xi'an. According to the narrator, Xi'an, the starting point of the ancient Silk Road, was the gateway through which Indian culture was introduced to China. To market this history to tourists, the Xi'an Government has built a multicultural commercial district on the original site of ancient Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty. Seeing the area's potential, Raturi chooses to locate his restaurant there and 'play the Indian culture card'. In other words, Dev's success is not so much the outcome of his individual skills and expertise, as it is the result of him acting out his ethnic identity in a space designated by the state.

White Agency

Assimilation is a main theme of the program. Experiencing the Chinese New Year, having a traditional Chinese wedding, learning to cook regional dishes, and mastering an ancient craft are all common topics. Due to their education and knowledge, however, white foreigners have more power in demanding accommodations, whereas non-whites face stronger expectations to assimilate.

Natasha, for example, is a Ukrainian woman with a doctoral degree in music (CCTV 2018c). She gave up her well-respected job at the University of Luhansk to be with her husband in Zhangjiajie, Hunan Province. Her mother-in-law is an ethnic Tujia and a renowned folk singer who wants to teach Natasha Tujia singing. Natasha, however, keeps rejecting her offer because she cannot get

along with her. The root of their conflict, according to Natasha's husband, is the difference in their educations. Because Natasha is highly educated and has high 'quality' (素质), the husband's family, as mountain people, cannot live up to her standards. Although the episode ends with Natasha agreeing to learn Tujia singing for her wedding, it also reaffirms white foreigners' agency that comes with their education and allows them to express their independence vis-a-vis Chinese cultural traditions.

On the other hand, assimilation is expected of non-whites and is portrayed as something aspirational for them. Abohoui is a trader from Benin who, like Natasha, is also living in Hunan Province (CCTV 2017). Unlike Natasha, who barely speaks Chinese, he speaks both Mandarin and the Hunan dialect fluently. While Natasha refuses to learn Tujia singing, Abohoui's story is a two-part saga about his quest to learn the Tujia dragon lantern dance from a local master. To prove his worthiness, Abohoui must demonstrate his good character and complete assimilation by participating in various traditional rituals and performances. Thanks to his talent in singing and dancing, he successfully passes all the tests and becomes an official apprentice of the master. In both Natasha's and Abohoui's stories, Tujia tradition is embodied by a cultural authority—the mother-in-law and the local master. Whereas Natasha holds the power to challenge this authority because of her education, Abohoui submits to it and humbly receives its teachings. Like Gioacchini, Natasha is someone a Chinese family pursues; Abohoui is not.

African Women's Rural Ties

The countryside figures prominently in the program, usually as the ultimate testing ground of foreigners' assimilation. In most cases, foreigners' stays in the countryside are brief and enjoyable, but for African women, there is generally an additional expectation that they stay there and completely assimilate into rural life. Lin Huayou, for example, takes Gioacchini to his home village in Zhejiang

Province, where the Italian man experiences the harvesting of grapefruit—a local specialty—and learns about the life of local fishermen. It is a fun sojourn and Gioacchini is received as a distinguished guest.

African women's relationship with rural China, however, is very different. The program implicitly presents them as the solution to rural problems such as a lack of farmhands, caregivers for the elderly, and educational resources. Tina, a Zimbabwean English teacher in Beijing, for example, moves to her husband's hometown in rural Henan to support his plan of starting an English school there (CCTV 2016). While she displays little interest in living in the countryside, her efficiency in farmwork becomes the focus of the episode. We see her lift 25 kg of cabbages over her head—which both shocks and pleases her mother-in-law—and complete her work on the chicken farm while enduring pungent smells and feeling unwell. Linda, a Kenyan who married into a rural family in northeastern China, on the other hand, wins the hearts of her in-laws by washing their feet for five years—a ritual that epitomises filial piety (CCTV 2014a).

The program also implies that African women may be the solution to the glut of rural Chinese bachelors. Currently, many men in the countryside are struggling to find a spouse due to the gender imbalance created by the one-child policy and poverty (Brant 2016). The problem is so serious that recently a senior think tank official caused an uproar by proposing to matchmake single women in cities with rural bachelors (Yan 2021). In the program, African women are seen as not only suitable for rural life, but also indiscriminate in choosing husbands. They marry men who are much older than them and do not have much money. Representations like these may encourage more rural men to seek out African women as potential spouses, if the family reunion provision of the new regulations is indeed put into practice. But regardless of whether this is the program's intention, there is a stark and noticeable contrast between the depictions of African women and those of white foreigners, who are shown as educated urban professionals with the potential to bring positive changes to Chinese society through their modern expertise.

A More Diverse China

As a program produced for a global audience, *Foreigner in China* represents the Chinese Government's attempt to present a more diverse face to the world. It is also a step towards a future Chinese society where citizenship is separated from Chinese racial identity. In this vision, even an Italian can become the father figure—a role filled with symbolic and political meaning in Chinese tradition. This relatively liberal attitude is the result of China's transition towards a knowledge-intensive economy that is supported by highly educated professionals and experts. To attract such talent, China is reforming its immigration regulations, and programs like *Foreigner in China* are paving the way for such reforms.

However, as the program shows, the state seems to associate the talent it is seeking with whiteness. White foreigners, who appear most often in the program, are likely to be modern professionals with tertiary education or postgraduate degrees. Their expertise gives them more power to defy expectations about assimilation and challenge social norms. Their quirks and demands, as in Mike's case, are also more likely to be accommodated because their professional expertise is perceived to be what China needs. Non-whites, however, cannot offer such expertise and do not command the same kind of agency and respect.

The difference in portrayals not only reflects how race colours the state's vision, but also sheds light on some of the reasons white foreigners may receive more opportunities for high-paying technical jobs and preferential treatment in applications for permanent residency. Non-whites, by contrast, may be confined to niche professions based on their ethnic or racial identities. Indeed, in addition to Dev, the program also features a tea-seller from Sri Lanka, a black singer from the Bahamas, and a South Korean restaurant owner. Such success stories, however, are all contingent on help from powerful individuals. In other words, they are extremely difficult to replicate and not a practical route to permanent residency. The situation may look particularly grim for African women, with the state seemingly envisioning a more rural

role for them. This hints at the likelihood that, should the state eventually relax its measures on permanent residency, white foreigners will remain the privileged target of such policies because of racialised assumptions about high levels of education and expertise that supposedly come with their whiteness. ■

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