3 Journeys of Escape

The Value of Slavic Female Bodies and the Trap of Marriage

> If someone asked me two years earlier if I'd have a Chinese husband, I'd have spat in their face. I used to say that I'd never have a Chinese husband, just as I never imagined that I would dance go-go. My experiences in China have taught me not to judge people.[1]

> I decided to listen to my heart, while my head was telling me something different: why do you need this marriage?[2]

In the previous chapters, I discussed how the ideas of Chinese–Slavic romance have been promoted in the Chinese media and cultural spheres as a prototype of the ideal transnational marriage. I have also shown how popular constructions of Chinese–Russian marriages in official and popular media permeate the spheres of TV representations where the topic has occupied a prominent place and marked important moments in time in the relations between Chinese and Russian political leadership. I further explained how the question of marriage with foreigners relates to national security and the dream of modernity that relies on and reproduces the racial hierarchy and gendered inequalities in the immigration regime in China. The image of Slavic (represented as Russian) brides emerged in this sphere to represent the ideal foreign wife for a Chinese man seeking love abroad.

In this chapter, I turn to the discussion of women's own narratives of their life experiences of migration and marriage journeys from the former Soviet republics to China. The in-person and online conversations with women whom I recruited through a snowballing interview method and WeChat groups focused on their life stories. They depict the complexities and nuances of intimate geopolitics that run through the women's search for self-fulfilment and better life prospects. The upheavals of post-socialist transitions in the former USSR and their impact on the system of values and social priorities in their home countries featured prominently in their stories of escape from family and societal pressures to the

[1] Interview with Oxana, WeChat, 20 August 2018.
[2] Interview with Katerina, WeChat, 19 August 2018.

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pursuit of better opportunities abroad. While these motives contributed to the women's decisions to leave for China, they cannot be separated from affective factors, including the break-up of their previous romantic relationships and their search for a new start away from the heartbreak. In the course of my fieldwork, I learned that these women negotiated their subjectivities at every stage of their journey by trying out different systems of values and laws to find one that would work to their advantage.

The women learned to capitalise on their white bodies that they discovered had value in the Chinese market. In Asia, the contested relationship with race is shaped by the ambivalent status of whiteness – at once desired and feared – functioning as both an enabling and limiting resource. Research on Japan shows that whiteness functions as a double-edged sword, conferring privilege while simultaneously offering only a limited form of capital.[3] In China, whiteness constitutes a form of embodied racial capital – a precarious source of privilege that is fragile and easily undermined in moments of crisis, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic.[4] An important aspect of whiteness in China that warrants academic scrutiny is the continued theme of gendered and racialised bodies in the articulation and service of the Chinese nation. White women's bodies are simultaneously celebrated as objects of sexual desire and national reproduction yet treated as foreign when it comes to immigration rights and status in China.

Many of my interlocutors ended up marrying Chinese nationals after realising that securing a family visa provided them with greater stability and long-term prospects in China compared to other available visa categories. While they recognised the value of their bodies, their legal status remained precarious and unstable. Just as the belief that post-Soviet women made ideal foreign wives became embedded in Chinese

[3] Miloš Debnár, *Migration Anthropology, Whiteness, and Cosmopolitanism: Europeans in Japan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Helena Hof, 'Intersections of Race and Skills in European Migration to Asia: Between White Cultural Capital and "Passive Whiteness"', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44, no. 5 (2020): 1–22; Špela Zorko and Miloš Debnár, 'Comparing the Racialization of Central-East European Migrants in Japan and the UK', *Comparative Migration Studies* 9, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00239-z.

[4] Shanshan Lan, 'Between Privileges and Precariousness: Remaking Whiteness in China's Teaching English as a Second Language Industry', *American Anthropologist* 124, no. 1 (2022): 118–129; Shanshan Lan, Willy Sier and Aldina Camenisch, 'Precarious Whiteness in Pandemic Times in China', *Asian Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2022): 161–170; Aldina Camenisch, 'Between Precarious Foreignness and Praise for China: The Citizenship Constellations of White Europeans in China during the Early Covid-19 Pandemic', *Asian Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2022): 184–196; Willy Sier, 'Stuck in Wuhan? White Mobility Capital and the Evacuation of Mixed-Status Families after the Covid-19 Outbreak', *Asian Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2022): 171–183.

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masculine ideals of success, obtaining a family visa became a highly sought-after goal for women, promising a future of stability and opportunity in China.

However, what many women overlooked when choosing to legalise their marriages were the underlying patriarchal norms of the Chinese immigration legislation and the potential implications of those norms for themselves and their children. I argue that the patriarchy of the immigration regime in China is maintained through a 'marriage trap' which appears to offer a faster and easier path to long-term residency yet is laden with hidden risks and unforeseen consequences for family visa holders. Although white femininity is a desirable asset that reinforces Chinese masculinity and nation, it is of value only to the extent that it serves the Chinese patriarchal family, which forms the foundation of its economic structure.

In the first section I discuss the women's routes to and their first impressions of China and their experiences there. I then turn to the women's stories about their marriages and how they decided on where to settle down to have a family, as well as their negotiation of Chinese marriage and immigration regimes.

3.1 In Search of Self-Fulfilment

The main routes, often closely related, to increased personal contacts between China and the post-Soviet states since the 1990s have been Chinese people moving to these states for business, trade and education and, from the post-Soviet perspective, the new opportunities that China's reforms and openness have brought about.[5] In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the dominant mobility routes between China and the post-Soviet states were educational exchanges and cross-border trade. These activities often overlapped. These new socioeconomic transformations generated occasions for more romantic encounters and the formation of new families. Zhanna (aged thirty-nine) was part of the first wave of migration to China when in 1999 she went from Khabarovsk to Beijing on a language exchange programme to improve her Chinese. In addition to studying, she quickly found a market niche for her language skills and started working as an interpreter at the main Russian trading hub in

[5] For detailed discussion of the dynamics and patterns of Chinese migration to Russia and other former Soviet states, see Olga Alexeeva, 'Chinese Migration in the Russian Far East: A Historical and Sociodemographic Analysis', *China Perspectives* 3 (2008): 20–32; Pál Nyíri, 'Chinese Migration to Eastern Europe', *International Migration* 41, no. 3 (2003): 239–265.

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Beijing's Yabaolu district.[6] It was a bustling open-air market until 2008 when, during the global economic crisis, it went into decline and finally moved to a purpose-built structure in 2016. Zhanna met her husband in the sports grounds of Beijing University where she was on a student exchange. By the time we met for an interview in November 2015 she had become one of the long-term members of the 'Chinese wives' community in Beijing, running a successful Russian-language nursery and holiday and hiking clubs.

By the early 2000s, China's development boom and the proliferation of the beauty economy and public campaigns related to it (the most beautiful family, the most beautiful city and so forth) led to a growing demand for people with a European appearance to work in the bustling Chinese entertainment industry as singers, go-go dancers, animators, artists and models. The 2013 Immigration Law regularised this new niche in the market for foreign labour by offering a 90-day artist visa (category Z) which became a common way in which people could cross Chinese–Russian borders. Working in entertainment became a popular way to travel and earn money for (mostly female) university students and recent graduates from the former Soviet Union. These jobs, which were initially perceived as a short-term opportunity to earn extra money and get life experience abroad, became routes to marriage and family life in China, for many of my research participants.

Albina (aged twenty-seven) was a professional sportswoman and a master of sports who went to China in 2016 after an unhappy break-up with her boyfriend in Russia. She regarded this opportunity as a chance to escape her depression. She signed a three-month contract to work as an 'animator' in a night club – a job that involved creating a party atmosphere and developing entertainment scenarios for the club goers. She told me that she found this job very hard because it was new to her and she was older than the other girls in this business:

> I wasn't very young, twenty-five rather than eighteen, with two university degrees and a good job in Russia. I had been a manager before, and here I had to develop scenarios and wear zombie costumes on Halloween. I couldn't do it back home because my social status did not allow it. Here, away from home, nobody would judge me if I was running around in a cat's costume. The job wasn't great, but my aim was to go far, far away to get rid of my depression.[7]

Albina's main reason for going to China was to get away and earn some money and she told me that she was not interested in China as a state or

[6] Interview with Zhanna, Beijing, 11 November 2015.
[7] Interview with Albina, WeChat, 22 August 2018.

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society. The desire to escape by exposing herself to new experiences and travelling abroad was an important motive in Albina looking for job opportunities in China. Only a few of the women I interviewed had some or a good knowledge of Chinese culture and language before they travelled to China. The majority, like Albina, did not know anything about China at all.

Albina was not alone in searching for a way out of a personal crisis in China. Other women reported that running away from family and personal pressures or tensions was the main reason for their journey to China. Ana, for example, summed up her motivation as to escape from her parents: 'They were very over-protective and they wanted me to be a "nice girl".'[8] Similarly, Oxana from an industrial Siberian town told me that she craved a life away from the grey reality of her home, where she had graduated with a degree in tourism management.[9] During her studies she had been looking for opportunities to travel abroad and passed the exam to be a tour guide in Turkey and later Thailand. When the opportunities in tourism in these countries dried up, she agreed to work as a go-go dancer in China with the idea of spending the money she earned to train as an air hostess with Aeroflot. She didn't have any dancing experience but was assured that in China it was sufficient in order to succeed to have 'white skin and a white face' and signed a three-month entertainment contract. As another research participant observed, 'it is very easy to become a star here [in China] – the main criterion is a European appearance!' Soon after she arrived in China, Oxana met her future husband in the club and was still in China at the time of our interview.

These narratives point to the role of emotional reasons in influencing these women's initial decision to go to China in search of a break or a new start. Most of them did not regard China as a destination for long-term migration. Rather, they viewed it as a place where they could earn good money, and as a stopover to a new phase or a rupture with their old life. In China they could try to rediscover the self-worth that many felt their home countries did not nurture. They presented Russia as gloomy, depressing and stagnant. Lena (aged forty-seven) characterised Russians as pessimists: 'We don't have the same sense of optimism as people in China. We are sceptics and nihilists. This is our mentality. Maybe this is the aftermath of socialism?'[10] China, on the other hand, appeared to be

[8] Interview with Lana, WeChat, 3 June 2018.
[9] Interview with Oxana, WeChat, 20 August 2018.
[10] Interview with Lena, Jilin, 22 August 2018; themes of pessimism and despair as national sentiments in Russia are explored in Serguei A. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

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more dynamic, positive and reliable and it was easy enough to earn a living there. The women believed that China offered more opportunities and a brighter future than former Soviet countries. Additionally, for the women from the Far Eastern and Siberian regions of Russia, the sense of a never-ending sequence of post-Soviet economic disasters was exacerbated by their feeling that they were disconnected from the European part of Russia. Many observed that it was closer, cheaper and faster for them to travel home in the Far East from China than from Moscow. Women from Ukraine said that the appeal of better future prospects was a precursor to their decision to go to China. Alyona (aged forty-two) had a successful career as a film set designer in Kiev when she met her future husband on a film set. She then followed him to China. She observed that she felt that remaining in Ukraine meant that she was missing out on opportunities afforded by the fast-developing economy and creative spaces in China.[11] After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by economic sanctions and devaluation of the Russian rouble, several women found their way to China in search of new life opportunities there. Not making long-term plans for the future was a common sentiment. Living in the present and going with the flow was an attitude that the women adopted in response to personal pressures and wider geopolitical conditions that made it difficult to make long-term plans.

For Anya (aged thirty) from Russia's Far East, travelling in search of new adventures was part of her way of life.[12] A descendant of German migrants in the Soviet Union who were exiled to the Far East at the start of the Second World War, she told me that she had never felt that she would stay in Russia and had planned to go abroad as soon as she had the means to do so. Going to China from the Far East was easier than going to Europe and the prospect of earning extra money was good. As a student, she agreed to take up a go-go position in a karaoke television (KTV) club in Anhui province. When she arrived in 2009, her impression was that all the locals were 'welcoming and kind'. She recalled that their group generated a lot of interest among the locals. 'People surrounded us, staring and pointing at us.' She felt that this welcoming reception helped to boost her self-esteem. As soon as she found another opportunity to earn a living as a model, she left the KTV club. Her height at 163 cm was not a barrier in China, where the demand for white models was high. Anya confessed that she was in demand: 'I could earn 2,000–3,000 RMB (200–300 USD) for a photo shoot and 2,000 RMB (200 USD) for forty minutes in a car advertisement. It was good money and not dirty work. I earned 10,000

[11] Interview with Alyona, Beijing, 31 May 2017.
[12] Interview with Anya, WeChat, 24 August 2018.

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to 15,000 RMB (1,400–2,100 USD) per month.'[13] At the beginning she enjoyed the feeling of being treated like a 'mini-star' but by her second year it had started to irritate her: 'I couldn't take it any more, because I could not stand Chinese people looking at me as if I were a "piece of meat" (*kusok myasa*).' She described her modelling experience as a cattle market: 'We call the men who come to these events cattle farmers. They don't say, "Excuse me, can I take a picture with you", but just yell, "Hey, come here" or try to covertly take a picture of you. This makes you very uncomfortable. You can't get used to it.'

The women also often said that they had not previously imagined dating, let alone marrying, a Chinese man. When I asked Oxana (aged twenty-eight) what had attracted her to her husband, she said that she had been surprised by her choice herself.[14] When I inquired of other women why they had never imagined marrying a Chinese man, the reason they gave was cultural differences, or that they did not find the Chinese type of men physically attractive. Some even evoked the attributes of an alien when describing their first impressions of Chinese people. When explaining their attraction, women often pointed out that they thought their husbands did not look Chinese, but looked more like Koreans, Japanese, Thais, Tatars or even Cubans. Kristina (aged thirty), for example, explained:

> When I met my husband, I noticed that I was attracted to him because he wasn't like other Chinese, beginning from his appearance. Everybody thinks he is Korean or Japanese, rather than Chinese. He is stylish, has different manners, is better dressed and is quiet. He likes Western films, music and culture, and even his home interior is very European.[15]

In contrast, when I asked Lana why she had become attracted to her husband, she said it was because she liked Chinese characters and he was helping her to master the language.[16] She went on to say that she liked the fact that he was interested in classical Chinese and calligraphy. However, when she managed to pass HSK 6,[17] she realised that she could carry on without his help and felt that the relationship between herself and her husband wasn't as strong as before.

Feeling the pressure of social and familial norms and not being appreciated and sufficiently valued in their home country were common

[13] Ibid.
[14] Interview with Oxana, WeChat, 20 August 2018.
[15] Interview with Kristina, WeChat, 21 August 2018.
[16] Interview with Lana, WeChat, 3 June 2018.
[17] HSK 6 was the highest level of language proficiency in the Chinese Language Examination before the 2022 reform changed the scale of assessment to 9.

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sentiments expressed by my interlocutors. While several women said that they went to China to escape a failed relationship, nobody mentioned that their decision to start a relationship with, and later marry, a Chinese man was prompted by their inability to find a husband in their home country. Rather, the main reason they gave was attraction to their husband and the values that the man represented in the women's eyes during their courtship. Furthermore, marrying appeared to be the best possible option available to them in the circumstances.

3.2 Encountering Chinese Marriage Norms

Among the most common reasons the women gave for deciding to register their relationship was in order to obtain a family visa and a long-term legal status in China. I was frequently told, in response to my question as to why they had decided to marry, 'I was afraid to be left without a visa.'[18] Those who became pregnant before they had registered their relationship felt that marrying was the most natural step in legitimising their relationship before giving birth.

Alina (aged thirty-eight) from Siberia met her future husband in her home town where he was working in the timber and metal trade.[19] She helped him with his accounts, banking operations and local contacts. After she became pregnant and gave birth to their first child in 2003, her husband decided that it was time to move back to China. Alina told me that she unwillingly agreed to go to China – initially for a visit – and enrolled in a Chinese language course at the local university. She then reluctantly settled down in Qiqihar, her husband's home town, where she invited me to visit her. A striking blonde, blue-eyed woman, she was wearing dark sunglasses when she met me at the railway station. We rushed to her car as soon as we met. She told me that she couldn't stand the stares that her presence in public spaces caused. Even after having lived in China for over ten years, she could not get used to the attention she attracted. Two years later in a different context, Sonya (aged thirty-two) from Belarus, who lived with her Chinese family near Beijing, observed that she felt like an animal in a zoo, because everyone was pointing at her. Even after having spent ten years in China, and although the city had become more cosmopolitan, she felt that people were still pointing at her in curiosity.[20] Being the object of an intense Chinese male gaze was a common thread in the stories of many of these women.

[18] Interview with Lana, WeChat, 3 June 2018.
[19] Interview with Alina, 4 August 2016.
[20] Interview with Sonya, 5 July 2018.

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During our day-long conversation, Alina explained that she had married out of bureaucratic necessity. To apply for a two-year Chinese family visa she had to register the marriage. This was the main reason why she had decided to document her relationship, she told me, and she did not need it otherwise. Although their marriage choices were their own decisions after a period of romantic engagement, these women explained that their decisions were driven by a combination of economic, personal and social dimensions and by not having a better choice at the decisive moment. Expiring student or work visas were often mentioned as a reason for registering the marriage in order to qualify for a family visitor visa that was easier to get than a work, business or student visa. Furthermore, some pointed out that marrying in China did not mean that they were regarded as married back home. As Helga (aged twenty-four) explained, 'if you get married in China, but don't legalise your marriage in Russia or Ukraine, you are not legally married in your home country, so, if anything goes wrong, you are free'.[21]

Several women whose relationship or marriage in their home country had broken down actively sought out a Chinese husband. They told me that they became attracted by Chinese men's attitudes and behaviour towards women. For example, Olga (aged twenty-seven) from a small town in Belarus was divorced and living with her daughter in her flat while working as a cashier in a shop, where she met many Chinese men who were working on the construction of a paper plant in her native town. Despite having a university degree in law, she earned more money as a cashier in a shop than as a clerk in a court. After observing Chinese men's behaviour and having been continually impressed by their polite and attentive attitude, she registered on a dating application aimed at Chinese people but met her husband through WeChat when she looked for nearby contacts and he sent her a message. Their relationship progressed quickly and she became pregnant soon after they had moved in together, two weeks after their first meeting. She was impressed that her boyfriend would have a warm bath ready and prepare dinner for her when she came back from work. As his work visa in Belarus was expiring, they decided to register their marriage in Olga's home town, where it became a topic of conversation and media attention.[22]

In addition to securing their migrant status in China and legitimising their relationships, for some women who were employed in the nightclub industry, marrying officially meant that they could remedy their occupational stigma in China. For example, Anya met her future

[21] Interview with Helga, WeChat, 22 June 2018.
[22] Interview with Olga, WeChat, 21 August 2018.

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husband in a night club, and when they started dating, she gradually cut down on her performing and entertaining career, because it could, in her words, damage her boyfriend's reputation (she used the expression 'to lose face'). Subsequently, thanks to her university degree in social work, she found a job as a primary-school teacher in an international school, where she continued to work after her marriage had broken down and at the time of our interview in 2018.[23] Anya summarised the contradictory public perception of Russian women in China and the symbolism of marrying a Chinese husband in clear-cut terms:

> If you are white in China and say that you are from Russia, people assume you are a prostitute. Nobody cares that you have graduated from a university and speak three foreign languages. Nobody sees you as an individual. Everyone sees you as a white woman working in a karaoke bar and selling sex. At the same time, if you go somewhere with your Chinese boyfriend or husband and they know that you are together they will say: 'We love your president. Your country is so strong and great. You are very cool!'[24]

The dominant Chinese perceptions of post-Soviet femininity are related to global images of post-Soviet migrant women oscillating between the concepts of the sex worker and the domestic goddess that can be bought. Most of my interlocutors found this dominant stereotype deeply damaging to the reputation of all women from post-Soviet countries. The media framing of the women as sex workers shaped attitudes towards them in contexts that had witnessed waves of migrations from post-Soviet countries to Western Europe, the United States, Turkey and Israel.[25] These media images constructed post-Soviet female identity as educated, caring, oversexualised, deviant, and forced to undertake sex work or seek a commercial marriage out of necessity or desperation. In the European context, the social associations of post-Soviet femininity with 'vulgarity' translate to the labour to not look and sound 'Russian'.[26]

[23] Interview with Anya, WeChat, 24 August 2018.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Dafna Lemish, 'The Whore and the Other: Israeli Images of Female Immigrants from the Former USSR', *Gender and Society* 14, no. 2 (2000): 333–349; Alexia Bloch, *Sex, Love, and Migration: Postsocialism, Modernity, and Intimacy from Istanbul to the Arctic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 8; Maria E. Shpeer and William T. Howe, 'Exotic Beauty, Mail-Order Bride, Secret Agent: The Stereotyped Experiences of Russian Women Immigrating to the United States', *Russian Journal of Communication* 12, no. 3 (2020): 306–322; Deborah Golden, 'A National Cautionary Tale: Russian Women Newcomers to Israel Portrayed', *Nations and Nationalism* 9, no. 1 (2003): 83–104.
[26] Anastasia Diatlova, *Between Visibility and Invisibility: Russian-Speaking Women Engaged in Commercial Sex in Finland* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2019); Daria Krivonos and Anastasia Diatlova, 'What to Wear for Whiteness? "Whore" Stigma and the East/West Politics of Race, Sexuality, and Gender', *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and*

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The concept of 'Russian wives' has become a distinct area for research among scholars in the Russian Federation who define it as a particular sociocultural phenomenon or brand of Slavic women from the former Soviet Union in the global marriage market.[27] The circulation of these discursive tropes could be attributed to gender crises in both sending and receiving societies where the politics of gender mediate socioeconomic conditions, and expectations, as well as personal aspirations.[28]

In China, the gendered whiteness became an advantage point yet the socioeconomic and geopolitical factors that marked the women as ex-Soviet put them at a disadvantage compared to white foreigners from the West. This chimes with scholarship examining the role of whiteness in shaping European identity where 'true' Europeanness is associated with white Western Europe that erases Eastern Europe from Europe, producing Eastern Europe as a result of Western European othering practices. Eastern Europeans, and particularly people from the former Soviet Union, are tarnished by the failed sociopolitical projects that they or their parents lived under. At the same time as being portrayed as oversexualised, the women are assumed to be content with the domestic role of mother and housewife, which is one of the key attributes of 'genuine' women in popular discourse (along with that of the ideal mother, wife and hostess) after the collapse of the Soviet Union.[29]

The perceptions of post-Soviet women in the entertainment industry in China are paralleled by widespread admiration for their domestic qualities vis-à-vis powerful Russian masculinity, represented by the state and its leader. In her analysis of the changing status and multiple versions of whiteness that foreigners play in China, Lan Shanshan shows the existence of a demand for a specific type of whiteness in China.[30]

Politics 6, no. 3 (2020): 116–132, https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v6i3.660; Daria Krivonos, 'Swedish Surnames, British Accents: Passing among Post-Soviet Migrants in Helsinki', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 16 (2020): 288–406.

[27] Sergey Ryazantsev and Svetlana Sivoplyasova, 'Russian Women in the International Marriage Market: Ways of Migration and Adaptation in Host Societies', *Migration* 147, no. 5 (2018): 183–203; Sergey Ryazantsev and Svetlana Sivoplyasova, 'Russian Wives on the International Marriage Market' ['Russkiye zheny na mezhdunarodnom brachnom rynke'], *Sociological Investigations* [Sotsiologicheskiye Issledovaniya] 2 (2020): 84–95.

[28] Jennifer Patico, 'Kinship and Crisis: Embedded Economic Pressures and Gender Ideals in Postsocialist International Matchmaking', *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (2017): 21–22.

[29] Tatiana Zhurzhenko, 'Free Market Ideology and New Women's Identities in Post-socialist Ukraine', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 8, no. 1 (2001): 29–49, p. 40; Holly Porteous, 'From Barbie to the Oligarch's Wife: Reading Fantasy Femininity and Globalisation', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 2 (2016): 180–198.

[30] Shanshan Lan, 'The Foreign Bully, the Guest and the Low-Income Knowledge Worker: Performing Multiple Versions of Whiteness in China', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, no. 15 (2022): 3544–3560.

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White femininity symbolises a specific identity that valorises Chinese masculinity. This was often highlighted in my conversations with women when they observed that the level of public interest and attention to them was much higher when they were with their Chinese boyfriend or husband than when they were alone: 'When I am walking by myself, only some people look at me, but if I am walking with my husband, then absolutely everyone stares at us.'[31] This suggests that white femininity plays an important role in validating Chinese masculinity in the eyes of the public. It is through the prism of the woman's place next to the Chinese man that these men attract attention and admiration.

The role of whiteness has been changing and there are various versions of whiteness that foreigners can play in China, including in the spheres of education, retail, entertainment and marriage. This range of possible occupations exposes the foreigner's legal precarity and the demand in China for a specific type of whiteness.[32] For example, to marry a foreign woman raises a man's social status. As one of my interlocutors put it, 'when a Chinese man marries a white woman, people admire him, saying: "how did you manage to convince her?"'[33] Similarly, another participant felt that people in China liked Russia more than other countries because 'in massage parlours people tell my husband how lucky he is to have a Russian wife. At my wedding, one guest asked me through my husband if I could introduce her son to a friend.'[34] When I asked if she had agreed, she replied that if he had not yet learned how to start a conversation with a woman, he would never have any luck with women.

To understand these women's stories, it is important to consider the constructions of masculinity in Xi's China and Putin's Russia. I discussed earlier how Russian president Vladimir Putin has been widely presented as a model of modern masculinity for Chinese men to follow.[35] As Ed Pulford observes, in China the overwhelmingly favourable portrait of Putin as being loved by 'all women' conveys more information about China and its relationship with the world.[36] Lana (aged thirty) illustrated this point with reflections on her family experience: 'My husband's parents love Russia. To them Putin is like an idol or a god. They love

[31] Interview with Kristina, WeChat, 21 August 2018.
[32] Lan, 'The Foreign Bully', 3545; Aldina Camenisch, 'Middling Whiteness: The Shifting Positionalities of Europeans in China', *Ethnicities* 22, no. 1 (2022): 128–145.
[33] Interview with Lena, Jilin, 22 August 2018.
[34] Interview with Olya, WeChat, 20 August 2018.
[35] Ed Pulford, 'How the Russian president became China's ultimate self-help muse', New East Digital Archive, 17 May 2021, www.new-east-archive.org/articles/show/12775/putins-chinese-literary-cult-self-help-books-ideal-russian-man.
[36] Ibid.

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him very much. My mother-in-law repeatedly says: "Yes, she is foreign, from Russia", she stresses. She loves it whenever I go somewhere with them.'[37]

Some women were uncomfortable about the impact that their marriage had had on the social status of their husbands among their peer groups. Alesya voiced this discomfort in an observation that 'by marrying a European woman Chinese men flatter themselves and, in reality, they don't need her'; they flatter themselves by scoring higher symbolic capital and 'earning face' among their social and business circles.[38] Lena agreed that in business circles marrying a foreign white woman is perceived as a personal achievement, along with a business opportunity to go to international markets.[39] Similarly, Viktoria noted that she thought that Chinese women paid more attention to her husband now that he had a foreign wife: 'He became cool in their eyes.'[40] At this point in our conversation, Lana was in the process of getting a divorce, because she felt that her husband had started taking her for granted and had become lazy. Yet she observed that even after they were divorced, her husband's status among Chinese women would increase, because he had experience with a foreign woman.

Alesya came to the conclusion that Chinese men don't pursue all European women, because 'they have a serious inferiority complex and choose only someone who is accessible and affordable'.[41] In a somewhat similar way Natasha attributed her husband's spur-of-the-moment decision to marry her to her background: 'We met two weeks before he was leaving Ukraine for China and he decided straightaway that he wanted to marry me. They don't think twice about it, particularly if the potential wife is Russian. I didn't know this before, but I realise now that it is their cultural peculiarity.'[42] Olya, who met her future husband in Belarus, made a similar observation: 'When I worked in the shop where we had many Chinese clients, all my Chinese friends wanted to find a local wife.'[43] At the same time Lena, who was an active member of the Russian community in Jilin province, commented that a Russian friend of hers was married to someone in the Communist Party and according to her, his career was not progressing because his wife was a foreigner.[44] As a Russian Korean, Lena was in a unique position to assess the role of

[37] Interview with Lana, WeChat, 3 June 2018.
[38] Interview with Alesya, Beijing, 20 August 2016.
[39] Interview with Lena, WeChat, 15 March 2018.
[40] Interview with Viktoria, WeChat, 21 June 2018.
[41] Interview with Alesya, Beijing, 20 August 2016.
[42] Interview with Natasha, Beijing, 4 June 2017.
[43] Interview with Olya, WeChat, 21 August 2018.
[44] Interview with Lena, Jilin, 22 August 2018.

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foreignness in the private and public spheres in China. She felt that she had to work harder to prove that she was a native Russian speaker and was qualified to teach the Russian language at the university. She told me that it was easier for women with a European appearance to find jobs in education in China. She concluded that foreigners who look European are in demand in the fields of public relations, marketing and advertising, while her own Asian appearance wasn't suitable for promoting her university's international ties.[45]

Lina, who comes from Luhansk, met a Chinese man through a dating site when her marriage in Ukraine broke down after the escalation of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. She explained that, in her decision to move to China, she was driven by her efforts to make her and her children's lives more comfortable in a very difficult situation.[46] When we talked, she was on a student visa studying Chinese, but was thinking about registering her marriage to facilitate visa issues. She observed that many Chinese men wanted to meet women from Ukraine and she had recently been asked by a Chinese friend of her daughter to introduce him to a woman from Ukraine. 'I think they believe that our women make more effort than Chinese women to build a family home. Our women aren't legally protected in China and … I don't think they appreciate themselves as much as others and aren't as demanding.'[47] But, she continued, 'I think it is best if our women marry Ukrainian men.'

3.3 Deciding Where to Settle

For women who had met their husbands in Russia, Ukraine or Belarus the decision over where to live as a Chinese–foreign family was not easy. The couple's choices were not only informed by the wife's language proficiency, job opportunities and educational prospects but also by their daily experiences, including the extent to which they, as a couple, felt safe, accepted and acknowledged in society. For most of these women the option of living in their home country after their marriage was not attractive. Some said that their husbands had no links with their home country except for their wife and family. Others thought that it was more challenging for their husbands to accept social and cultural norms in their home country, where culinary diversity was very limited compared to that in China. As one of my respondents put it, food is everything for the Chinese. Furthermore, the issues of racial prejudice, everyday abuse

[45] Ibid.
[46] Interview with Lena, WeChat, 15 March 2018.
[47] Ibid.

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and discrimination featured prominently in the women's explanation as to why they had decided to settle in China with their husbands. So, the decision to live in China was the best option:

> I started noticing racism towards us in Ukraine about two years after we started dating. And once on the metro, someone attacked me with the words 'bitch' and 'slut'. I did not expect this at all because I was dressed decently and we never hugged or held hands in public. I never expressed any feelings for him in public. Of course, some people knew, but we did not show our feelings. Honestly, I could not show my affection for my Chinese boyfriend in public. But after such incidents, including when skinheads attacked my husband, I realised it was not possible for a couple like us to live in Ukraine permanently. I could not bear the thought of being constantly afraid that we might be attacked and if our child looked Asian, not Slavic, they would experience humiliation. After those incidents, I realised that it would be easier for us to live in China.[48]

Olya's experience in Belarus was similar:

> When Chinese workers arrived to work at a paper plant, there were many negative reactions from the locals towards them. They were treated as a 'lower' race. When I started my relationship, I was the first girl in my town to have a Chinese boyfriend and everyone kept pointing at us, humiliating us and saying offensive things. I endured so much dirt from people but I got used to it. When we married, I asked the local newspaper not to publish a note about our marriage because I didn't want to have more negative comments directed at us.

Despite the presence of large numbers of Chinese men working in the town at the time, only three marriages resulted. As soon as her husband's job contract came to an end, they started preparations for moving to China.[49]

Others were concerned about the future of their children, based on their partners' experiences. Alyona (aged thirty-eight) who was married to a Chinese man of Russian-Chinese heritage recalled that, although her husband did not complain about his years as a student in Moscow, he vividly remembered occasions when people harassed him because of his skin colour and almond-shaped eyes. He was the target of skinhead attacks and subjected to regular document checks. Because of these humiliating experiences, as soon as he graduated from university, he went back to China where he felt safer and more comfortable. Alyona concluded that in Russia mixed-race people have second-class status, whereas in China they are treated as first-class people. 'It is reverse logic', concurred another research participant, Lena, when I asked whether she would consider going back to Russia after divorcing her husband in

[48] Interview with Olya, Beijing, 5 June 2017.
[49] Interview with Olya, WeChat, 21 August 2018.

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China. She responded without hesitation: 'My son would be a *kitajoza* ("chink") in Russia, while here he is a *hunxue*. There is a difference, isn't there?'

These reflections pointed to the acute awareness of the racial hierarchies permeating and organising social relations in the women's home countries and in China. Whiteness was a privileged status category in the Soviet Union, where people from the Slavic and Baltic republics occupied higher social status than those from the Caucasus or Central Asia.[50] Having a mixed-race child would mean exposing yourself to the possibility of social scrutiny and judgement that was difficult to accept for many of these women. In China, just as in the West, post-Soviet migrants have been racialised and associated with the ideas of a pan-European whiteness linked to privilege yet did not avoid discrimination in the area of labour and social rights. Lena, the participant with Russian-Korean origins, grew up in Khabarovsk, and said she was still traumatised by being the only Asian-looking girl in her secondary school in Russia. She married her husband, who had Chinese-Korean origins, in 2005 after meeting him in Khabarovsk in 1999 when he was undertaking a language course. She reflected that she had experienced being 'the other amongst your own, and your own amongst the others'.[51] She said she instantly felt very comfortable when she moved to China with her husband. While her white compatriots suffered from the keen attention they attracted in China, she felt relaxed.[52]

3.4 To Marry for a Legal Stay

China's rigid citizenship regime, the lack of naturalisation options for foreigners, constantly changing rules and procedures and different practices in different parts of China made the topic of legal status in China a source of confusion for some and of despair for others. The women I spoke to shared very different and often conflicting views and had had very different experiences from each other, depending on their family situation and where they lived in China. Women living in big cities felt that there were fewer loopholes there to negotiate the system, whereas those living in smaller urban centres where there were fewer foreigners said that finding ways around the legal regime was easier. In both cases, personal connections with individuals in local state organs could help,

[50] Claudia Sadowski-Smith, *The New Immigrant Whiteness: Race, Neoliberalism, and Post-Soviet Migration to the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 6.
[51] Interview with Lena, Jilin, 22 August 2018.
[52] Ibid.

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but they were not easy to build as they required strong social and familial capital.

As I stated earlier, one of the main motivating factors for women to marry in China was to secure a family visitor visa (Q1), because it was relatively easy to arrange and could be used as a springboard for long-term residence status which other categories of visa do not allow. The women I interviewed also drew portraits of the contrast between the immigration regimes in Russia and China. In Russia it was easier to get a business visa than a family visa, while in China it was the other way round. Some research participants who had initially considered obtaining a family visa for their husbands in Russia found out that it was much faster and more straightforward for them to apply for a Russian business visa: 'In Russia the visa procedures for international marriages are more complicated than for business. … A family visa entails an invitation on an official form that can take up to a month to arrange, while a three-month business visa can be sorted out quickly through a local tourist agency.'[53] In China arranging a family visitor visa did not require an invitation, but it needed proof of familial ties. Family visa terms vary across the country. For example, Tatiana, who was living with her husband and daughter in Mudanjiang when I met her, complained that she had to renew her family visa and the visa for her daughter every year, unlike in the neighbouring Harbin, where my interviewees only needed to repeat the procedure every two years. To renew her visa, she had to undergo a medical check-up that cost 500 RMB and then pay 800 RMB for the visa. She needed to submit her marriage certificate, her husband's ID card and his *hukou* registration. She told me that she was tired of doing it every year and wanted to get a residence permit.[54] These experiences of navigating different state regulatory regimes that scholars in other regional contexts have called 'transgovernmental friction'[55] have shaped how these women acted to secure their status in China. The majority aspired to get a long-term residence permit for the benefits and labour rights that it guaranteed.

Out of the fifty-three women I spoke to, only three had secured a Chinese green card. All of them lived in the Beijing area. Other participants had heard of successful applications, but they were few and far between. According to Lena, who was well acquainted with the Russian-

[53] Interview with Oxana, WeChat, 20 August 2018.
[54] Interview with Tatiana, Jilin, 16 November 2015.
[55] Juan Zhang, Melody Chia-Wen Lu and Brenda S. A. Yeoh. 'Cross-Border Marriage, Transgovernmental Friction, and Waiting', *Environment and Planning D* 33 (2015): 229–246.

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speaking community in Changchun, only one couple had managed to get a green card for the foreign spouse thanks to their 关系 *guanxi* (connections), but the others who had tried to do so had not been successful. The unsuccessful couples did not know why their applications had been turned down.[56] In other big cities, including Guilin, Xiamen and Chongqing, my interlocutors did not know anyone who had received a long-term residence permit.

While the Chinese family visitor visa Q1 was easier to arrange and promised to lead to a long-term residence permit, its main limitation was that it banned the applicant from entering the Chinese labour market until a long-term residence permit was granted. Some women did not realise that they were not allowed to work officially on family visas until it had been pointed out to them by other women, their husbands or the local authorities. Some feared that, if they were found to be violating the immigration regime, they could face a fine or deportation. Others, like Viktoria, took the risk because they thought that they could trust their employer. Viktoria worked as a singer in a restaurant. She renewed her family visa annually and worked informally in restaurants and clubs where her husband had relations of trust with the local police. Similarly, in Guilin, Masha continued working as an English-language teacher even after the new criteria set out in the immigration law made it more challenging for non-native speakers working as foreign-language teachers. However, since it was difficult to find foreign-language teachers in small towns, some places continued to hire people with whom they had previously worked and whom they trusted.[57]

Viktoria recognised that she had no rights, even to work legally, and accepted the fact that she depended on her husband. She explained that at one point she had to transfer her earnings to her husband's bank account, because her 'foreigner's' bank card had been blocked without warning. She did not receive an explanation as to why her card had been blocked and so she reached the conclusion that it was best for her husband to keep her money in his account because 'foreigners' cards can be blocked at any time'.[58] They ran into another complication when they decided to buy a flat. She discovered that, although she contributed financially to the purchase, her name could not be included on the title deeds because she was a foreigner. Getting a mortgage for her husband was not straightforward, because of her status. She said that they were

[56] Interview with Lena, Jilin, 22 August 2018.
[57] Interview with Masha, WeChat, 19 August 2018.
[58] Interview with Viktoria, WeChat, 21 June 2018.

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even advised to get a divorce and marry again after finalising their mortgage application and the purchase of the flat.[59]

On the same topic, Kristina explained:

> We started discussing registering our marriage two months after meeting, largely because of the family visa. China doesn't like to be influenced by foreign pressures. That is why foreign companies, such as Google and WhatsApp, are banned. You can't become Chinese through marriage and dual citizenship is prohibited. You can get a green card after five years of marriage, but what happens if you change your family visa to a work visa, you can't apply for a green card. You can only renew a family visa with the support of your spouse. So you are tied to your husband. You are put into a state of dependence on your husband. You can't have equal rights here, as you can in other countries.[60]

The women also said they felt stifled by these administrative restrictions and cultural differences that prevented them from being included in China. Natasha noted that she felt 'like a bird in a cage, without any choice. My freedom is very limited by all these political things, [so] I feel as if I have signed myself up to a prison sentence.'[61] Her recognition that her family life was closely bound up with the political structures that limited the way she could belong in China echoes the experiences of immigrant spouses in other Asian contexts.[62] The distinctions between those who belong and those who do not, which are in part shaped by the state migration laws and structures, permeate the private sphere and erect lines of exclusion within families. These barriers were not easy to break down and required not only financial resources but also family ties, determination and the time required to prepare the documents and then wait several years for a decision. This was not a challenge that the women could handle without the support of their husbands. Unlike most of these post-Soviet migrants, who typically stay in China on two-year family visas, Natasha received a Chinese green card in 2016 after being married to her Chinese husband for five years and she recalled the long-drawn-out trouble that she had faced in securing the document. Yet, like Kristina, whom I quoted earlier, she questioned the value of the card:

[59] Ibid.
[60] Interview with Kristina, WeChat, 21 August 2018.
[61] Interview with Natasha, Beijing, 4 June 2017.
[62] Sara L. Friedman, 'Regulating Cross-Border Intimacy: Authenticity Paradigms and the Specter of Illegality among Chinese Marital Immigrants to Taiwan', in *Migrant Encounters: Intimate Labor, the State, and Mobility across Asia*, ed. Sara L. Friedman and Pardis Mahdavi (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 206–229; Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Heng Leng Chee, 'Migrant Wives, Migrant Workers, and the Negotiation of (Il)legality in Singapore', in *Migrant Encounters: Intimate Labor, the State, and Mobility across Asia*, ed. Sara L. Friedman and Pardis Mahdavi (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 184–205.

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I even wrote a resume explaining why I would be useful in China … I had to wait for the card for nearly two years. I had to get a certificate in Ukraine stating that I didn't have a criminal past. This certificate is only valid for one month. At the time, the Orange Revolution was unfolding in Ukraine. My father went through the barricades. He had to pay 1,000 USD in order to get this certificate as I could not be there in person. So, it cost me a lot of money and anxiety to get this card. But I don't even know if it is of any use … For example, if I divorce my husband, what do I do with this card? Will they take it away from me? I don't even know the answer to that.[63]

Not everyone was as determined and lucky as Natasha. Another research participant, Anya, realised that she qualified for a green card after having been married for more than five years when she was in the process of divorcing. She wanted to apply for the card, because she believed that it would give her the right to work legally in China. It took her two months to get a document from Russia confirming that she had no criminal past. When she went to her local immigration office she was told it would take six months for the local authorities to consider her documents, and then they would send her documents to Beijing, where it would take another one to two years to process. She could not wait, because she and her husband had both started new relationships. So, she got a two-year family visa instead as it was a faster and easier procedure. In Anya's words: 'One day at 9 a.m. we went to get a two-year family visa and the same day at 2 p.m. we filed for a divorce. The migration and civil affairs offices do not exchange databases, so they did not know that we had divorced that very morning.'[64] She then explained that she had considered applying for a Chinese visa through her son, but this was problematic, because with a son who was a Chinese citizen she could only apply for a three-month family visitor visa (Q2). Anya therefore concluded that it was more important to have a husband than a son in China, because if you are married, you can have a two-year visa. She was bemused by this logic: 'Husbands aren't constant; they come and go, but a son will be yours forever. Why can't you have a green card if you have a child in China? But no, you can only have a green card if you are married.'[65] These visa regulations reflect a system rooted in patriarchal values and gendered relations, which only guarantees rights for foreign spouses as long as they remain in the documented marriage. Their parental rights are given less importance. The Chinese nation values foreign wives, not foreign parents.

[63] Interview with Natasha, Beijing, 4 June 2017.
[64] Interview with Anya, WeChat, 24 August 2018.
[65] Ibid.

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3.5 Conclusion

The stories that the women shared with me about their mobility, marriage and visa decisions were unleashed by the seismic geopolitical shifts they experienced, as well as their new life and development opportunities, personal tragedies and adventurous pursuits that allowed them to rediscover themselves. While most of these women had not initially planned to start a relationship with a Chinese man before travelling to China, for many who were in no rush to return to their home countries and wanted to prolong their stay, marrying and obtaining a family visitor visa became the default choice.

Marriage to a Chinese national appeared as a logical choice because of the favourable immigration status that it provided. It required less paperwork than other visa categories and offered better migration status in China, along with the prospect of obtaining a ten-year residence permit, which included access to labour and social rights. Some particularly shrewd women chose to register their marriage in China without legalising it in their home country, preferring to keep their single status there.

The women's choices were constrained by the immigration regimes and their life opportunities. China's current immigration regime does not grant holders of family visitor visas (Q1 and Q2) permission to work, which places migrant spouses in a position of dependence or pushes them into the grey zone of illegal employment. The immigration system draws a clear distinction between visa categories: if you come to China to work, then you must have a working visa; if you come on a family visitor visa, then you must stay at home and care for your husband and children.

For some highly educated and independent women, who had been actively pursuing careers before moving to China, the economic dependence on a husband's income was difficult to accept. The immigration laws make it explicit that work permits are only issued to foreigners whose 'labour meets the needs of the socioeconomic development of China'.[66] As Anya noted, this law is 'stupid, because it means that we need to marry rich men. We can't have our own money.'[67]

A common thread in these women's experiences was the stark contrast between the high value attributed to their physical appearance and the lack of recognition for their personal traits, skills and qualifications. They discovered that Slavic appearance was a valuable asset in China, whether in the expanding beauty economy and entertainment market or as social

[66] Guofu Liu and Björn Ahl, 'Recent Reform of the Chinese Employment-Stream Migration Law Regime', *China and WTO Review* 4, no. 2 (2018): 215–243.
[67] Interview with Anya, WeChat, 24 August 2018.

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capital to boost their employer or the status of their Chinese male partners. However, they realised that they were not recognised or valued by a system that confined their roles to the private sphere of the family.

Racial hierarchies, prevalent in both their home and host countries, played a role in determining their decisions about where to live and how to navigate social expectations. For many, China emerged as a safer and more secure place for mixed families and their children. Marrying a Chinese national and obtaining a family visa created a hyperreal situation – one that seemed like the perfect solution for securing their stay and paperwork, granting them long-term residency rights in China, but at the expense of their labour rights for at least five years.

As such, settling in China is shaped by gendered and racialised socio-economic inequalities. In response to this new reality, the women have begun learning how to navigate the intricacies of Chinese patriarchal structures.

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