Construction and politicization of *waiqi* white-collar identity

Traveling knowledge about Chinese professionals in multinational corporations in China

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Introduction

It is well-known that Orientalism (Said [1978] 1979) refers to the manner in which the essentially functional distinction between Orient and Occident has been constructed. While the »Orient« involves categorizations of »foreignness,« »exoticness,« »backwardness,« »irrationality,« and »femininity,« the »Occident« carries a significant amount of contrasting properties that are attributed to Western civilization and modernity. However, orientalist knowledge about non-Western societies is not a simplified racial discrimination of the other, but an effective means of exerting an impact on the way in which the »Orient« perceives itself as being different. Carrier (1995) pointed out that the construction and interpretation of the essential attributes of »Orient« and »Occident« is affected by political-economic relations within and between Western and non-Western societies. This critique of Orientalism has been taken up by several scholars in order to critically reflect the knowledge production about China by Anglo-American academics and publishers (e.g., Mackerras 1989; Jones 2001; Hung 2003; and Vukovich 2012). These works, however, show that there is not a single simplified Western representation of China as a primitive society, but rather representations that vary with the period (Mackerras 1989) and that often are a matter of the changing political economy of the world system that manipulates the images of China (Hung 2003). Vukovich (2012) has even argued that the characteristic mode of knowledge production about China has already shifted from a focus on »otherness« to a focus

on »becoming-sameness« during the last decade, which comes as a result of the dynamics of global capitalism and the efforts of Chinese government to position China within it.

This, however, is not to be mistaken for »overcoming« Orientalism. Like before, Western knowledge production tends to essentialize groups, identities, and cultural difference in order to fit them into a political and ideological agenda. Vukovich argues that the new form of Orientalism, unlike the classic orientalist discourse that focused on distinguishing by negation, postulates China's convergence to the West. According to Vukovich (2012, 1), not only China's convergence to the West but also China's impossibility of being the West is the focus of »Sinological-orientalism.« Echoing Derrida (1982), we can say that a necessary dis-jointure between »being no longer« and »being not yet« has become a new resource for maintaining the superior position of the West over China. If taken seriously, we can even go so far as to say that »the becoming-sameness of China« (Vukovich 2012, 25) is what Raymond Williams (1977) called the »structure of feeling,« suggesting »a communal way of seeing the world in consistent terms, sharing a host of reference points which provide the basis for everyday discourse and action« (Edensor 2002, 19).

However, Vukovich mainly focuses on exploring the relationship between the represented and its representation in the process of knowledge production in the West, failing to discuss the Chinese transformation of this Western knowledge. That is, how Western knowledge is not discounted and delegitimized, but co-produced within the Chinese context. The aspect of Chinese co-production of orientalist knowledge is crucial for understanding how a new Orientalism is produced in China. This calls to mind Dirlik's (1996, 99) suggestion that Orientalism is not a Western ideological product, but rather »the product of an unfolding relationship between Euro-Americans and Asians, that required the complicity of the latter in endowing it with plausibility.«

This article seeks to fill this gap in Vukovich's argumentation by exploring a specific case of knowledge production in Anglo-American and Chinese academia: the knowledge produced on highly qualified Chinese working in multinational corporations (MNCs)—the *waiqi* white-collar professionals.

In the 1970s, multinational corporations—*waiguo qiye*, in short *waiqi*—were again allowed to invest in China. Since Deng Xiaoping's southern tour in 1992, the importance of foreign direct investment has increased substantially for the Chinese modernization process. These foreign direct investment flows exert a positive and significant impact on Chinese employment. According to Zhan and Li, the number of persons employed by foreign companies was 2 million in 1990.[1] It rose to 17.5 million in 1997. According to the statistics published by the Ministry of Commerce, total employment in foreign invested companies reached a new high of more than 42 million in 2008.[2] At that time, MNCs offered highly qualified Chinese the highest salaries in China and access to personnel training as well as to technological and managerial skills, and became a strong competitor to established Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) for the best-qualified Chinese employees. For a long time during the reform process, they were considered to be the best places to work (Schmidt 2011).[3] In this context, the significance of white-collar professionals working in these *waiguo qiye* triggered the interest of the Chinese mass media as well as Western scholars studying China. As this article will show using the example of Margaret Pearson's (1997) work *China's New Business Elite: The Political Consequences of Economic Reform*, the conceptual framework of the Western scholarship on *waiqi* white-collar professionals was derived from the discourse of becoming-sameness. As I will show, Pearson's work was largely informed by a liberal ideology and an interest in China's democratization dominant in US policy so that *waiqi* white-collar professionals as an object of research are imposed onto the space between the imaginaries of the past and the future. Accordingly, their collective quality is amplified,

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1   Guoqu Zhan and Zhengping Li, »Zhongguo ruhe xiyin waizi« [How does China attract foreign investment], *Economic Daily*, January 6, 1998.

2   »商务部办公厅关于2008年全国吸收外商投资工作的指导性意见,« Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), last modified 2008, accessed October 11, 2017. http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/b/f/200804 /20080405490869.shtml.

3   However, it seems to have changed during the last ten years, especially with the growth of Chinese domestic enterprises (e.g., Schmidt 2011).

and they ultimately become an implement to demonize communism in China as well as to celebrate Western superiority. Nevertheless, Pearson's idea of China's business elite is incorporated into the Chinese social and cultural circumstances, gaining the power to extend the existing social categorizations and to strengthen the political legitimacy of social control in China. This idea was taken up by Chinese scholars who did not subscribe to this liberal ideology at all, but rather appropriated Pearson's work for their own ideological project of modernizing and governing urban China. Although these authors disagreed on basic political positions, they nevertheless cooperated in essentializing the identity of *waiqi* white-collar professionals and in reproducing the notion that »China« can be described and understood through the framework of classical Western social science. In effect, both American observers such as Margaret Pearson and Chinese social scientists co-produce a primordial social identity of *waiqi* white-collar professionals, even though they do so based on very different political ideologies.

In exploring the knowledge production about *waiqi* white-collar professionals, I will not only criticize the essentialization of *waiqi* white-collar professionals that is cooperatively produced in Western and Chinese scholarship, but also contribute to a deeper understanding of the new modes in which the Anglo-American and Chinese academic discourses relate to each other in reform-era China. Particularly, the pursuit of Chinese modernity during the May Fourth Period was closely associated with the Western post-Enlightenment tradition of modernity, which was accompanied by a process in which China adopted the prescribed identity as »Orient« and conformed to Oriental attributes. In contrast, the Maoist modernization project primarily stressed the self-sufficiency and the functionality of a Chinese political and social order, which was directed against Western modernity, but did not ultimately challenge its very notions of emancipation and progress. In the case of contemporary China under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the economic reform and the policy of opening up to the outside world staged a comeback to occupy China's rightful place in the world (Hulme 2014). Barabantseva (2012) has even argued that China's modernization thinking relies on the rejection of other possible development

paths within China and subsumes Chinese development experiences under those of the generalized West. This ideological shift led to a fundamental rearticulation and reinterpretation of the West. In the Chinese Imagination of the world order and in Chinese semantics, the West is considered to be »developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern« (Hall 1992, 277). The Chinese project of modernization, which may be seen as the modernization of man and culture in order to catch up with the West, has consciously adapted images and concepts of modernity created in Western discourse in order to make sense of social change in China. Exploring the Chinese transformation of Western knowledge is intended in exactly this sense to illustrate the social material process of »China's becoming sameness.« Going beyond Vukovich's otherwise excellent study, I would thus like to suggest that if »becoming-sameness« has already become a new ideology in the West to understand and incorporate China and at the same time also has become a structure of feeling, which is leading Chinese to an infinite desire for self-identity, more attention must be paid to the interrelated knowledge that is no longer bound to fixed space either in the West or in China. For this purpose, I would like to echo Said's argument that an idea moving across different contexts gets partly or fully accommodated or incorporated and is »to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place.« (1983, 227) It is thus of significance to explore the political-institutional reception conditions that allow Chinese scholars to circulate Western knowledge in order to fit the local agenda.

The object of research and the epistemological and political context

After the Cultural Revolution, foreign enterprises were introduced in China again. Since the 1990s the importance of foreign direct investment has increased substantially for the Chinese modernization process. The politically controlled promotion of foreign investment is aimed to facilitate economic growth and China's modernization (Guthrie 2001). Foreign investments allow China access to foreign exchange, advanced technology, management know-how, and higher value products. The practice of capitalist industrial relations in foreign companies is the laboratory experiment

for Chinese labor reform (Gallagher 2004). Foreign companies implement »modern« human resource management, recognize individual performance, and support vocational training. By importing Western management models, the capitalist ideology »Time is Money, Efficiency is Life« (ibid.) has gained momentum in China, so that the capitalist labor reform in China is legitimized and justified (Li, Yu Yang, and Yue 2007). The societal self-description and the belief in the rise of China through catch-up modernization gave the idea of becoming modern great importance for the Chinese population and have, in the words of Michel Foucault (1991), their effects on the production of the disciplinary society (for empirical evidence see, e.g., Hansen 2015; Woronov 2016; Lin 2013; Bakken 2000). With modernization as the master signifier for Chinese desires since the 1980s, the Chinese state regime and the intelligentsia have promoted the idea that the Chinese must adopt new patterns of behavior and social attitudes in order to be modern citizens (Anagnost 2004; Farquhar and Zhang 2005; Hoffman 2010; Keane 2001; Yan 2003), and it was against the background of the project of achieving national modernization that highly qualified Chinese working in foreign enterprises receive considerable attention. In the popular discourse controlled by the state-owned mass media, the »social character« of highly qualified Chinese working in foreign enterprises is highlighted especially. As I argue elsewhere, there is a process of developing and crystallizing the symbolic meaning of highly qualified Chinese working in foreign enterprises by journalists and other cultural entrepreneurs who often regard them as the new standard of modern Chinese. For example, in 1993, Chinese director Qi Xing filmed a 20-episode TV series »Chinese staff« that made the melodramatic imagination of intercultural working life of highly qualified Chinese working in foreign enterprises accessible to a wide Chinese urban population for the first time. Further ciphers of being modern, such as a Western-oriented lifestyle or the consumption of Western products, were invoked in the representation of highly qualified Chinese working in foreign enterprises: from their favorite places for leisure activities, such as cafés, bars and fitness centers, to their favorite magazines such as Elle, Time, Forbes, and Fortune, or their high brand awareness of fashion and leather goods such as Gucci and Louis Vuitton, jewelry and watches such as De Beers,

Rolex, and Omega, or perfume such as Chanel and Dior (Zheng 2001). In 1995, the first representative survey of the group of highly qualified Chinese working in MNCs was published in the state-owned newspaper *Youth Daily*. The social scientists Xu Jinquan and Li Zhigang (1995), who conducted the survey with 1,000 highly qualified Chinese working in MNCs, stress the social meaning of highly qualified Chinese working in foreign enterprises for Chinese modernization by endorsing the argument of the US sociologists Inkeles and Smith that »a nation is not modern unless its people are modern« (1974, 9). This discourse, and above all the media discourse, however, does not simply aim at representing an existing group, but is a performative discourse that aims to impose a new definition of Chinese subjects denoting a qualitative change in different spheres: from employment to consumption behavior. The act of representation reinforces essentialization, functionalization, and mystification of highly qualified Chinese working in foreign enterprises, and this process reaches a point where these people are described by the name: *wai qi bai ling* (literally: *waiqi* white-collar professionals). Within the context of China's decolonialization (Chen 2008), in particular after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese working in foreign enterprises of the treaty ports in China were condemned by the party as »class enemies.« According to Chinese writer Liang Xiaosheng (2011, 151), Chinese working for foreigners in China during this time were publicly perceived as a »despicable category of human being« (literally: *chou lei*). But in the new ideological context, the label *waiqi white-collar professional* relieved the negative, normative connotation of the past and simultaneously described highly qualified Chinese working in foreign enterprises in China as the new semantic figure of a neoliberal state-subject. The official media significantly places *waiqi* white-collar professionals in contrast to the *comprador bourgeoisie*, as the following example indicates (Tie 1999, 16): »the policy of reform and opening up in urban China has contributed to the emergence of a new social group: They are *waiqi* white-collar professionals.« Consequently, foreign enterprises, particularly western MNCs, appear to be imagined as the incarnation of Western modernity. *Waiqi* white-collar professionals have accordingly been stylized as the protagonists of China's modernization project. They are the modernizers, the innovators

of Chinese economic life; they present the conviction of efficiency, competence, and Chinese individualism. According to Renmin Wang (*People's Daily Online*), the label *waiqi white-collar worker* was one of the most popular terms during the 1990s.[4]

Hence, current literature on *waiqi* white-collar professionals tends to adopt foreign enterprises as a new opportunity structure for the formation of an upcoming collective identity and advances *waiqi* white-collar professionals as the epitome of Chinese modernization and globalization. At times they are considered a privileged political group for political liberalization in China (Pearson 1997; Tang, Woods, and Zhao 2009); at others they are recognized as a manifestation of globalization (Duthie 2005, 2007; Zhang 2005, 2006; Ong 2008). However, the remarkable fact is that numerous academic writings about *waiqi* white-collar professionals manifest a wide array of what Vukovich (2012) calls »Sinological-orientalism« which serves as a template for interpreting who *waiqi* white-collar professionals are and what they do. From this point of view, calling *waiqi* white-collar professionals »China's new business elite« (Pearson 1997) as well as »self-fashioning Shanghainese« (Ong 2008) is the result of situated representation and translation. In other words, *waiqi* white-collar professionals labeled as »China's new business elite« (Pearson 1997) as well as »self-fashioning Shanghainese« (Ong 2008) are to some extent haunted by the Western experiences in China.

Waiqi white-collar professionals in Anglo-American perspective

The way in which *waiqi* white-collar professionals are constructed in the Anglo-American discourse can best be understood by looking at the most extensive work written on them so far: the work on the political impact of the new business elite in China by American political scientist Margaret Pearson in 1997, which asked whether *waiqi* white-collar professionals would become a political force for democratic reforms in China. Pearson's

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4   Renmin Wang, »55 Economic Terms Since Founding of PRC—Part One,« *People's Daily*, 2004, accessed February 15, 2017, http://en.people.cn /200411/15/eng20041115_163921.html.

work was certainly placed within a general Western discourse on Chinese reform in the 1990s: against the background of Deng Xiaoping's policies of modernization and the reopening of China to the West after 1979, it is not surprising that Western observers often demarcate and create categories for understanding Chinese contemporary transformation emphasizing modernist historiography.[5] The primary framework of this knowledge production was, however, mainly a discourse of what Vukovich (2012, 1) calls »becoming-sameness«: an idea that questions whether categories describing Western history can be applied to China precisely because China is becoming like the West due to processes of modernization. From the modernization theoretical point of view, as critically reviewed by Jean-Louis Rocca (2015, 1), »Societies supposedly conform to evolutionary rules that China cannot escape. Economic development causes them to converge, from one stage to the next, on a common model—modernity— that combines the dominance of markets, electoral democracy and the triumph of individuality.« Since these Western observers presume that China could not be able to elude this fate, they also conclude that China presents nothing new, as Rocca (ibid., 2) comments critically: »The Chinese are like us; it's just that they are taking longer to reach the universal condition.« Hence the modernization paradigm privileges the Western observers to simplify the complexity of historical events in China and to characterize the Chinese transformation process according to an evolu-tionary conception of histories. It manifests itself in a kind of »imperialism of the same« (Levinas 1969), reducing the other in the categories of the same in order to possess the other.

The Anglo-American discourse of the 1990s displayed a specific mode of this becoming-sameness discourse, which was often based on an essential-izing notion of strategic groups enacting modernization and democratiza-tion. As Vukovich (2012) has reminded us, what distinguishes the thought collective of American political scientists in the 1990s is that they seemed dizzy with the success of the Western model of democracy as the only

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5   For a general critique of the modernization paradigm applied to analyze the social, economic, and political transformation of Chinese society, see for example, Alpermann (2011, 2016) and Gransow (1995).

successful way to prosperity. From the very popular doctrine of »no bourgeoisie, no democracy« hypothesized by Barrington Moore (1966) to Fukuyama's claim in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), the middle-class revolution has become the given common sense or *doxa*. Extending this middle class *doxa* to »the Chinese case,« there have been many studies of the Chinese middle class and its relationship to democracy (for an overview and critique see Alpermann 2016). What is important to note here is the performative construction of Chinese social groups as avenues for political engagement in contemporary China. This group-based approach is indeed rooted in the study of Chinese political trans-formation that was first applied by Gordon Skilling (see overview in Brødsgaard 2013). Although the recent research activities seem to designate and assign various political groups, there is little agreement regarding ontological and methodological issues about the nature of these groups. A constructivist view that may ask how group identities are constructed or how individuals identify with such groups is largely absent from studies on Chinese reforms, even though a few exceptions exist (e.g., Alpermann 2013). Rather, the discourse is characterized by materialism and rationalism assuming that people living in similar circumstances will also develop a similar political consciousness. The performative search for the Chinese middle class coheres with the very premise which suggests, as Rocca (2017, 17) comments, that

> »in China as elsewhere, economic growth should lead to the emergence of bourgeoisie, which is capable of pressuring the ruling class and the state to democratize society. If things do not work out that way, it is because China is a victim of despotism that prevents China from entering the world of political modernity.«

Margaret Pearson's work must be understood in this discursive context. Pearson chose *waiqi* white-collar professionals under the assumption that their similar working environment—that is, foreign enterprises—produces a similar political consciousness. Even though several Western China specialists doubted whether it makes sense to start with the assumption that *waiqi* white-collar professionals should be at the forefront of political reform (Guthrie 1999, 503; see also Goodman 1998; Perry 1998; Wank

1998), they did not question the instrumentalist interpretation applied in Pearson's pursuit of knowledge about *waiqi* white-collar professionals. To me, Perry's review would seem to justify Pearson's findings, as she wrote: »If Pearson (like most of us!) is prone to inflate the significance of her object of study, her findings about the attitudes and actions of the contemporary Chinese business community are highly valuable nonetheless.« The problem for me is the error that the knowledge about *waiqi* white-collar professionals produced by Pearson collapses into the belief about *waiqi* white-collar professionals. Pearson's argument undermines a reductive position: *waiqi* white-collar professionals are a new strategic group if and only if it is useful to believe they are a strategic group. With discursively controlled referencing and signifying, *waiqi* white-collar professionals are positioned in the binary opposition between socialist despotism and capitalist liberalism and are identified as a sign of democratization in China. From the beginning, the Chinese subject labeled by Pearson as »China's new business elite« is understood as a Chinese equivalent to the European solution to a special European question of democratization (Brook and Blue 1999). It is epistemologically problematic when Pearson argues:

> »If we find that members of these most autonomous segments of the business elite have not in fact converted their economic position to political influence, or have done so under very limited conditions, then it is unlikely that other members of the business elite who are more bound to the status quo of the state, or other non-elite economic groups, will be able or willing to do so either.« (Pearson 1997, 8–9)

No wonder, according to Pearson, that »China's new business elite« is characterized by a very weak democratic orientation. She comes to the conclusion that the Chinese economic reform is not leading to political democracy, and she explains this by drawing on the structural entanglement of the Chinese economic system with the state, a state-society relationship expressed as »state corporatist strategies« (ibid., 60) and »clientelism« (ibid., 60, 87). However, Pearson cannot convince us how corporatism works exactly in this case in order to repress China's new business elite, and it does not seem necessary to do so, because corporatism and

clientelism are preexisting knowledge about contemporary China which Pearson's audience was already aware of. For this reason, Pearson's explanation proves to be what Vukovich (2012, 83) calls »empty platitudes.« Here Pearson follows a very typical new Orientalism narrative: positioning the Western experience as the normative starting point for the production of general knowledge about *waiqi* white-collar professionals, reducing this group to an analytical category, then measuring their performance in terms of the Western ideal; and finally articulating their lack of the »proper« convictions. Eight years after Pearson, in an article by He Li titled »Emergence of the Chinese Middle Class and Its Implications,« highly qualified Chinese working in MNCs have even been stigmatized (2006, 72):

> »With the large inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) and expanding of the market economy, the ranks of the middle class have grown with the inclusion of middle-level managers working in the private sector, joint-venture, and foreign-owned enterprises. Their compensation packages are higher than those in the public sector. Yet, unlike their counterparts in the public sector, they do not enjoy a strong sense of security. They are interested in three zis (*fangzi*, *chezi*, and *piaozi*, i.e., house, car, and money), and few of them have any interest in politics.«

Now, we need to think about how the essentialization of *waiqi* white-collar professionals works. To make this political agent intelligible, Pearson devotes a lot of space to historicize *waiqi* white-collar professionals. As she notes, »China's post-Mao business elite is part of a contemporary international phenomenon—the emergence of an international managerial bourgeoisie.« (Pearson 1997, 44). For Pearson, the false start of Chinese capitalism at the end of the Qing Dynasty lies in its strong entanglement with the structure of Chinese feudal society, resulting in a lack of independence of the development of a new social space. Pearson emphasizes the role of Chinese Merchants in the Qing Dynasty's (1911–1927) treaty ports for capitalist economic development and identifies them as predecessors of Chinese corporate executives in the post-Mao era. Pearson, however, hardly mentions the interweaving of China's foreign trade history with European colonialism. The historic period from 1920

to 1945 is consequently oversimplified as a decline of capitalist develop-
ment, implicitly assuming the absence of liberal democracy. Then Pearson
goes directly to Maoist socialist China, where the ideological struggle
between socialism and capitalism is considered to be the feature of this
phase in Chinese history. Pearson contrasts the isolation policy toward
foreign investment, especially during the Cultural Revolution, with the
policy of openness since the 1980s, and argues that a new independent
social space is created by global capital expansion in which a »new
Chinese« is nurtured. Privileging the idea of »becoming-sameness,« *waiqi*
white-collar professionals are thus expected to be like the Western self—
a knowing subject. Their emergence, according to Pearson's narration, is
an effect of Chinese modernization that is brought out by external
conditions. Consequently, the current Chinese transformation is interpreted
merely as »a gentle, natural process of sensuous, cultural absorption,«
both implicitly and explicitly as a process in which »the inferior learned
to desire to emulate the superior« (Barlow 1993, 380). Here it is worth
noting that Pearson's historicizing and contextualizing of Chinese profes-
sionals leads to a trivial parallelization of the so-called »Western impact
and Chinese response« approach of Chinese historiography that was
explicitly implemented by Teng and Fairbank (1954) and others (Fairbank,
Reischauer, and Craig 1965; Clyde and Beers 1966). According to Cohen
([1984] 2010, 11), the essential problem of this approach lies in its
distortion of Chinese modern history in a way in which it only addresses
»Western-related facts of the history,« and the Chinese transformation of
traditional society was only considered to be a response to external
conditions. A typical example is shown in Fairbank's historiography of
treaty ports in which the treaty ports, according to Barlow (1993, 385–
94), were characterized primarily as a hybrid culture between a »Chinese«
and a »British« culture. From the point of view of postcolonial criticism,
there is an unequal relationship instead. Fairbank privileges the role of
the West in the administration of treaty ports based on having superior
knowledge, and trivializes colonial violence and imperialism for the life
of the treaty ports in Shanghai. He contemplates the opening of the
treaty ports in comparison with the American westward movement and
considers traditional Chinese society as the problem:

»The opening of the treaty ports in the early 1840's, like the contemporary opening of the American West, was adventurous pioneer work on a frontier. The problem of the frontier in China, however, was not now to overcome nature but how to deal with the ancient Chinese way of life. Like his cousins on the Great Plains, the Western frontiersman in Shanghai had to adjust himself to the local scene while still pursuing his expansive and acquisitive ends. The treaty ports were the answer to this problem; they can also be fruitfully compared with the trading posts and mining camps, the forts and pony express stations of the American West.« (Fairbank 1969, 155)

For Fairbank, nationality and ethnicity had no effect on the treaty community, both Chinese and Westerner are so-called »Shanghailander« (ibid., 466), working in a harmonious and liberal teacher-student relationship. What we know today is exactly the opposite: despite shared consumption, the Western »Shanghailander« indeed discriminated against the local »Shanghainese« using an ethnic distinction (Clifford 1991). They sought to represent themselves as alien community with cosmopolitical mentality, and avoided social integration in Chinese context (Lamson 1936). Similarly, Pearson determined the Chinese Merchant to be modern and cosmopolitan, but with considerable limitations: »even as [the Chinese merchants] became progressively more modern and cosmopolitan in their outlook, traditional forms of group organization and behavior remained at the core« (Pearson 1997, 62). For Pearson, *waiqi* white-collar professionals seem to be comparable with »Shanghailander«—they are modern and cosmopolitan not only in their outlook, but also at their core; and MNCs, incorporating a very romanticizing nature, seem to be analogized to treaty ports in which democratic domestication of Chinese people takes place. Yet we know today that the expansion of MNCs is increasingly seen as the continuation of neo-colonialism and that they are criticized as agents of new imperialism (e.g., Boussebaa and Morgan 2014). Indeed, Pearson argues that *waiqi* white-collar professionals often employ a strategic motive in identifying with MNCs: »Many foreign-sector managers choose jobs in foreign business precisely in order to escape

politics, with several citing this as the primary reason for their job choice« (Pearson 1997, 93). It is not hard to see that this notion of *waiqi* white-collar professionals as »escapees« condenses these people into a liberal feature, and at the same time is meant to amplify their collective quality. From Pearson's point of view, democratic awareness among Chinese professionals grows once they get contact to »the outside world« (see ibid., 94).

This cultural essentialism goes hand in hand with a structural reductionism, as Pearson argued that since the Chinese economic policy of openness, foreign companies have gained large autonomy in China in comparison to Chinese SOEs. According to Pearson, autonomy means »the absence of structural ties to the state and the independence from the predomi-nantly reformist line of the post-Mao era« (ibid., 66). In her opinion, Chinese professionals' economic autonomy causes them to develop a new relationship with the communist state in order to represent their political interests. Pearson reverts to reproducing Andrew G. Walder's explanation in his study *Communist Neo-traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (1988) suggesting that a power dependence relationship in Chinese SOEs can be observed using four indicators: »the dominance of the party cell within the enterprise; the influence of personnel dossiers in the lives of employees; the constraints on labor mobility; and the reliance of employees upon the factory for welfare benefits« (cited in Pearson 1997, 67). Based on Walder's suggestion, Pearson argues that *waiqi* white-collar professionals are more autonomous than the Chinese managers working in SOEs: First, ideological control does not play a role in foreign companies because »there is no Chinese state participation in these businesses« (ibid., 71). Secondly, even though the personnel file is officially created for all citizens, its influence on corporate personnel policy is different in the foreign investment sector. It depends on the forms of ownership, but plays a smaller role than in SOEs. Thirdly, *waiqi* white-collar professionals have experienced extremely high mobility compared to members of the state sector. The legal guarantee of independent recruitment, the establishment of industrial parks with their own job centers, and the weakened role of personnel files have significantly

promoted the professional mobility of Chinese employees. In foreign companies, status as a party member or political performance can hardly provide privileges (ibid., 81, 83). All of these points indicate from Pearson's point of view a decoupling of state control and increasing individual freedom. *Finally*, Pearson claims that *waiqi* white-collar professionals are less reliant on the Chinese social services than the Chinese managers working in SOEs. There are other possibilities, such as the high income and travel abroad, which are to compensate social benefits that are exclusively distributed within China's labor institutions (ibid., 85). For Pearson *waiqi* white-collar professionals thus are typically these Chinese »[…] who are relatively young and see alternatives, have chosen a riskier route in exchange for the chance to earn higher salaries, travel abroad, and manage relatively free of Chinese state authority« (ibid., 86). Obviously, Pearson's claim of MNCs« structural autonomy, which is predominantly based on negating control mechanisms in Chinese SOEs, cannot explain the process of group formation. However, it is not Pearson's aim to engage in a scholarly inquiry into group formation or evolution, but rather, as we have suggested, is given an example of Western bias toward contemporary China. Hence, the essentialization of *waiqi* white-collar professionals goes hand in hand with the functionalization of their group identity.

Waiqi white-collar professionals in the Chinese perspective and the metamorphosis of »China's new business elite«

Having investigated the essentialization and functionalization of the group identity of *waiqi* white-collar professionals in the Anglo-American discourse, I now turn to the discussion about *waiqi* white-collar professionals in the Chinese context since the 1990s. Within the cultural discourse of modernity, as we will see, Pearson's construction of the Chinese business elite as a new strategic group is removed from its US intellectual environment and placed in a Chinese one in which the questions of how to stabilize the political system and how to modernize the nation are the key issues.

Particularly since the late 1990s, Chinese public attention to *waiqi* white-collar professionals has gained a new aspect by being embedded in the emerging academic discourse on the Chinese middle class. As several Western scholars have pointed out, the emergence of the Chinese middle class is not the »natural« result of Chinese catch-up modernization, but a discursive formation of a new social group attempting to create an ideal society (Rocca 2017; Anagnost 2008; Tomba 2004). In 2002, General Secretary of the Communist Party Jiang Zemin introduced the idea of a Chinese middle class as a new social force for Chinese modernization in his speech at the 16th Congress of the Communist Party of China. Ever since then, one can recognize an ongoing process of referring to the Chinese middle class in which a new subject, to borrow Foucault's phrase, »is gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted« (Foucault and Gordon 1980, 97). In the course of the public focus on the middle class since the end of the 1990s, particularly in official documents, academic articles, and media productions, however, Chinese social scientists have increasingly turned their attention to the middle class as a double-edged sword facilitating the modernization process and simultaneously challenging the political system in China. A discursive shift from the one-sided emphasis of economic importance of middle class toward problematization of the middle class's political participation is clearly visible (Rocca 2017). From the standpoint of the idea of social engineering (literally: *shehui zhili*), the Chinese social scientists formulate an agenda for research into the political behavior and attitudes of diverse subgroups of the Chinese middle class in their relationship and function for modernization and system stabilization (for an overview of the discussion among Chinese social scientists, see Rocca 2017, 69–100).

It was against this background that *waiqi* white-collar professionals were actively involved in the academic discourse on the emerging Chinese middle class (e.g., Li 2005; Wang 2007; Qi 2010; Wang and Che 2011; Sun and Lei 2012). As mentioned above, in the 1990s, *waiqi* white-collar professionals were often portrayed in newspaper articles as cosmopolitan subjects and ideals for the modern Chinese self. However, since the growing discourse of the Chinese middle class has become dominant,

the social meaning of *waiqi* white-collar professionals as representatives of modern Chinese has dwindled in importance. One important reason is no doubt that the Chinese middle class has become a generic term for modern Chinese, and is generally viewed as an ideal class that determines Chinese economic development and Chinese modernity. Even though *waiqi* white-collar professionals still enjoy a certain special status in the public mind (Xue and Zhu 1999; Zhou 2002, 2005), they have increasingly been replaced by and subsumed into the construct of a Chinese middle class. Moreover, they are not only seen as merely a part of the new middle class, but their internationality is even perceived as a risk factor for development. The social scientists who engage in portraying *waiqi* white-collar professionals conceptualize them as social beings whose integration into the Chinese project of modernization might be prevented. As the prominent sociologist Li Youmei (2005, 107) pointed out,

> »there is a great disparity between the value orientation of Chinese white-collar professionals and the system of social values advocated by the mainstream ideology. Chinese white-collar professionals tend to internalize consumer attitudes and behavior of the West, to hold individualistic values and to seek personal growth and freedom. *Waiqi* white-collar professionals have been influenced by the Western business culture and thus have a rather reserved attitude to main-stream social values like responsibility and sacrifice.« [translation by the author]

In this context, some Chinese authors have taken up Pearson's statement concerning *waiqi* white-collar professionals as a political group (Zhou 2002, 2005; Lü 2008). These indigenous scholars suggest with reference to Pearson (1997) that more research should be directed toward evaluating and assessing the political attitudes of *waiqi* white-collar professionals. Chinese sociologist Zhou Xiaohong, prominent researcher of the Chinese middle class and translator of Charles Wright Mills's (1951) book *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, also addresses *waiqi* white-collar professionals in his article »Middle Class: Why and How can they grow?« (2002). Zhou considers *waiqi* white-collar professionals as having a new

social identity that is located within the contradiction between modernization and industrialization. He understands them as part of a global phenomenon which is the reason for the growing Chinese middle class, and of a local social-cultural transformation which is the context and the way in which the Chinese middle class is growing. He argues, following Pearson, that Chinese modernization and industrialization accelerated by the expansion of foreign investment has resulted in the development of *waiqi* white-collar professionals. Further, Zhou emphasizes that the political socialization of *waiqi* white-collar professionals—the ways of learning to be Chinese middle class—is one important issue of Chinese modernity. As long as this tension between global universality and local particularity exists, as Zhou argues, it is reasonable to facilitate risk calculation. Especially interesting is also the remark of Lü Peng, a young scholar from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. In his article »Top Chinese Managers in Foreign Enterprises: A New Social Class Far From Politics?—An Investigation of Top Chinese Managers in Top World 500 Foreign Enterprises in Beijing« (2008), Lü Peng notes, even though Pearson (1997) found that *waiqi* white-collar professionals are characterized by their lack of political awareness, that there is still, however, a strong basis for the further development as a political group. Their capability to serve the capitalist class and to influence the government's political decision-making is therefore not unlikely. Thus, it is an urgent objective to regulate their interests, to direct the development of their political consciousness, and to approach valid measurement in order to predict their visibility and capacity in Chinese public life.

In arguing in this manner, both Zhou Xiaopeng and Lü Peng successfully appropriate Pearson's thesis into a new political agenda by reframing the social character of *waiqi* white-collar professionals and then mediating it into Chinese public policy. This dissolves the binary opposition between Western democracy and Chinese despotism as well as the »Western impact—Chinese response« framework that is inherent to Pearson's knowledge production of *waiqi* white-collar professionals. However, they do so without any epistemological and methodological discussion of Pearson's idea and her statement explaining *waiqi* white-collar professionals.

The fundamental identity of *waiqi* white-collar professionals across individuals and over time hypothesized by Pearson has become the very precondition of the Chinese sociologists' belief about these people. It becomes an aspiration, suggesting the way of thinking, supplying the Chinese theorization and rationalization of the relationship of *waiqi* white-collar professionals to the state. In other words: the essentialization of *waiqi* white-collar professionals in the West is attaining the power to categorize and to name *waiqi* white-collar professionals in China, which is linked to the micro practice of social control (Hacking 1986). What this Chinese reception in its conspicuous way nicely enacts is on the one hand the tendency among Chinese scholars to use »Western« references to legitimize their own research as »science,« and on the other to reframe the Western idea, having become a scientific category, which is meant to engage with the ambitious programs of social engineering. It cannot be understood apart from the revival of sociology in post-Mao China, which has been established as a positive discipline with US sociology as its great role model (Steinmetz 2005), that is, more specifically, echoing the Western declaration of the death of class analysis, referring to Weberian analysis, and implying an awareness of social tension inherent in the current political modernization project (Ngai and Chan 2008, 76–78). From a historical point of view, it is also similar to the regulation approach of *Polizeiwissenschaft* that Foucault (2007) sketched out (for overviews of the history of sociology in China, see Wong 1979; Chu 1983; Gransow 1992). In my opinion, the transformation and reformulation of such Western knowledge in the Chinese academic discourse is given as an example of the current debate whether theory building and development in a non-Western context such as China challenges Eurocentric knowledge production. While the rebirth of social scientific thinking is celebrated by Roulleau-Berger (2016) as the decline of Western hegemony, my micro study of knowledge production and reproduction across geopolitical borders, particularly the traveling process of *waiqi* white-collar professionals, turns out to be somewhat disillusioning.

Conclusion

As Vicente L. Rafael (1994, 96) commented, most area studies in the United States were developed »at a moment in American history when liberal ambitions for enforcing a global peace necessary for capitalist expansion coincided with liberal anxieties over desegregation, spurred by the successes of the civil rights movement.« Put in highly simplified terms, Chinese Studies, which is imbued with the politics of othering, is no exception in this respect (Barlow 1993). Hence, research on China is inspired by a »why/why not« logic (Kim 2004); to name just a few examples: why the scientific revolution did not take place in China (Sivin 1982), why China did not respond to the Western challenge (Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig 1965; see also Cohen 2010), or why China is not a democratic country—a question raised by Margaret Pearson's (1997) study *Chinese New Business Elite*. The problem inherent in such research programs is, as Wang Hui (2008) once criticized, that China always remains silent and cannot speak. We are confronted with the same problem in the case of Pearson's representation of *waiqi* white-collar professionals. In this article, I began with a critical realist reading of Pearson's study, examining the specific ways in which Pearson essentializes »Chinese business elites« as other's other in order to measure these elites against what Mizoguchi (2016, 516) called »the world's standards.« These people were defined and essentialized by Pearson because it provides a compelling way of theorizing the agency of becoming-sameness. Grounded in the notion of »structural autonomy« derived from a »Western impact and Chinese response« approach, a new social group was constructed by reference to MNCs which are assumed to reflect the ideal of democracy. I suggested that Pearson's research on *waiqi* white-collar professionals, constrained by modernization theory, does expose its deficiency and the inability of Western imagination to capture the social-cultural changes in contemporary Chinese society.

Nevertheless, the knowledge about *waiqi* white-collar professionals is not simply produced by the West and forced upon China. Rather, Chinese scholars have appropriated this discourse within their own political agenda, without challenging the fundamental assumption that *waiqi* white-collar

professionals are indeed a group with coherent values. They thus have cooperated in essentializing this group, even if they did so from a different position and within a different political ideology than Pearson. The Western idea of *waiqi* white-collar professionals is, as I have shown, introduced by Chinese scholars and adapted to a new socio-cultural specificity to meet the Chinese desire of modernization and national stability. Hence, the essentialization of *waiqi* white-collar professionals in the West is attaining the power to categorize *waiqi* white-collar professionals in China. Because the political interest, characterized by technocracy, meritocracy, and achievement orientation, inhabits the construction of the identity of *waiqi* white-collar professionals and justifies its social recognition, this gives birth to a social entity and acts as a hegemonic practice. The *waiqi* white-collar professionals are therefore not, as Pearson would have us believe, agents of democratization and resistance against domination, but their construction as a group is rather part of hegemonic knowledge production in which Western and Chinese social scientists cooperate. Following Spivak's (1988) critique of Indian nationalist representation of *sati*, it might be concluded that the Chinese *waiqi* white-collar professionals cannot speak either, because there is no representation of *waiqi* white-collar professionals in the Chinese academic discourse that allows one to account for the possibility that this group might be contradictory, inconsistent, or fragmented. However, there is no need for us to be unduly pessimistic due to the fact that unlike Hindu women who were burned, Chinese *waiqi* white-collar professionals are still alive and can indeed speak. However, any attempt to recover the authentic voice and to excavate the true identity of *waiqi* white-collar professionals is fruitless, from a radical point of view. Rather, further research must address the self-identification of *waiqi* white-collar professionals, which is dialectically implicated in social categorization. It appears to be even more necessary under the current circumstances. For several years we have been able to observe an increased thematization of Western MNCs and the group of *waiqi* white-collar professionals again that is embedded in the societal discussion about the changing position of China in the global political and economic hierarchy, which can be summarized under »The Chinese Dream« (for an explanation, see, for example, Mahoney

2014; Wang 2014; Bislev 2015). In this context, the Chinese media are talking, for example, about »the post foreign companies epoch« (literally: *hou waiqi shidai*) in which the image of the Western MNCs and their role as promised guarantors of social advancement for highly qualified urban Chinese loses its credibility in China (»后外企时代,« 38–39). These circumstances are repeatedly mentioned as a cause for anxiety among *waiqi* white-collar professionals. It can easily be seen from the emotionally charged language used in the headings of reports such as »What's Wrong with Foreign Enterprises?« (Yang 2012) or »White Collars of No Permanent Estate, Determination and Career« (Hou 2003). It is reasonable to assume that the discursive change in current Chinese society has a dysfunctional impact on the authenticity of *waiqi* white-collar professionals. An investigation of the capacity that the *waiqi* white-collar professionals have to mediate the contexts within which they are embedded and the social control approached through categorization would make an interesting contribution to the research on the state-citizen relationship in contemporary China.

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