In most of the developed western countries that are popular destinations for international students, including the USA, the UK, and Australia, students from the People’s Republic of China have for several years been the biggest group, by a wide margin (OECD, *Education At A Glance* 2015: 360). Partly as a result of the one child policy in force when the current generation was born, meaning that relatively few daughters had brothers to compete with for parental resources, young women make up at least half of Chinese students abroad (Fong 2002). In the case of Australian higher education, female Chinese students account for around 54% (Australian Government 2016), despite the sex-ratio skewing of China’s youth population toward males (World Bank 2006). This apparent feminization of Chinese educational migration to Australia raises some interesting questions, which I am currently investigating as part of a five-year ethnographic study funded by the Australian Research Council. First: why does study abroad seem like a particularly attractive option for young women? Second, what impacts will several years spent living away from China have on the way these young women understand their gendered identity and life course?

My interviews with 30 future students and their families, conducted in several eastern Chinese cities in mid-2015, reveal some interesting answers. On one hand, both future students and (especially) some of their mothers focussed on gendered risks in China’s urban professional job markets that they hoped would be mitigated by increasing female graduates’ competitiveness with an international university qualification (Martin 2017). Social scientists have demonstrated that in many respects, gender relations have effectively become re-traditionalized with the end of high socialism in China (after 1979), and gendered inequalities in urban labour markets have significantly increased (Wu 2009; Cook and Dong 2011). Students’ mothers verified this with personal stories: job ads stating directly that preference would be given to male applicants; a female job applicant with an outstanding GPA who lost out on a job to a male ex-classmate with a lower GPA; pregnant white-collar workers either being fired or finding themselves unable to advance professionally.
after returning from maternity leave, and so on. Commencing students and their parents hoped that an overseas degree could provide the extra CV embellishment needed to make a female job applicant competitive against less qualified male applicants.

The impact of studying abroad on these young women’s understanding of themselves and their gendered life course is still being researched, but data gathered thus far provides some clues. On one hand, even before leaving China, some of my research participants were already highly critical of the currently standard middle-class female life course in China. This was caricatured by many as a strictly sequenced pathway through higher education, finding a boyfriend, working professionally for a few years, marrying and bearing child(ren) between ages 24 and 30, and thenceforth redirecting one’s main energies toward the family. Some of the young women I interviewed hoped that time away from China would help them elaborate alternative life pathways, for example through later marriage, non-marriage, a heightened focus on career, or extended periods of overseas travel and work forestalling the standard feminine “settling down.”

During the two years I have followed my 50 core participants to date, some changes in how they understand themselves in gendered terms are indeed becoming apparent. For some participants, time abroad seems to create a “zone of suspension” in the sense that the full force of Chinese sex-gender norms vis-à-vis both life course and relationships becomes somewhat suspended as a result of geographic distance (Martin n.d). For example, in terms of intimate relationships, many participants have remarked on the commonness of boyfriends and girlfriends living together in Australia: a situation that remains relatively uncommon, and morally “dangerous” for young women, in many areas of China. Living abroad and far from the prying eyes of gossiping neighbours back home, some young women feel freer to explore de facto relationships, cohabitation with boyfriends they don’t intend to marry, and same-sex attraction.

Interestingly, however, this doesn’t remove fears about reputation at home: often, such explorations of alternative forms of intimacy are kept secret from friends and extended family in China. Given the ubiquity of transnational social media connections that allow daily conversations with people back home, this means that these young women are effectively negotiating, day to day, a liminal space in between two contrasting regimes of sex-gender norms. Meanwhile, with regard to students’
developing understandings of gendered life course, our conversations to date reveal that for some, an alternative ideal life script seems to be emerging that is characterised not only by the increasing de-linking of sexuality from marriage but also by relative flexibility in the timing of life transitions, self-development rather than family-focus as a core value, and a greater diversity of life pathways for adult women.

The really interesting question, though, is how such transformations in these young women’s gendered self-understandings as a result of their educational mobility will play out over years to come, especially for those who ultimately return to China to live.

Works Cited
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Martin, F

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