

MARTIN, Fran. "Mobile self-fashioning and gendered risk: Rethinking Chinese students' motivations for overseas education," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 15.5 (2017): 706-720.

Accepted draft

International students make up a considerable mobile population globally today: in recent years, between four and five million have been studying outside their country of citizenship annually, with a majority travelling from Asian nations to wealthier western countries (OECD 2015: 352). Australian universities, struggling to deal with dwindling federal funding since the 1980s, have enthusiastically welcomed these students, who pay on average two to three times the fees charged to domestic students (Yew 2013). As a result, for several consecutive years, around one in five enrolments in Australian universities have been by international students, with the largest proportion coming from China, the world's biggest student-sending nation (Australian Government 2014).

The question of what motivates such students to pursue international education is of obvious pragmatic interest to governments and universities in receiving nations like Australia; it is also a significant question from the wider perspective of educational globalization as a series of lived processes with subjective and social effects for those involved. However, in contrast to the nuanced, qualitative research that has been conducted with other mobile groups such as China's internal labour migrants (Pun 2005; Yan 2008; Gaetano 2015), extant research into the motivations of students from China studying abroad has been dominated by somewhat simplistic quantitative approaches based on the 'push-pull' model of migrant motivation (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002). This magnetic model, which figures students as passively subject to external forces, identifies and ranks the most significant factors that 'push' them away from pursuing education in their nation of citizenship, and 'pull' them toward education abroad (see for e.g. Yan and Berliner 2011; Chirkov et al 2007; Li 2010; Yang 2007; but cf Li and Bray 2007 and Hao and Welch 2012, whose approach is more nuanced). Seeking a simple measure of what Chinese students consider to be the principal motivation(s) for their international education projects, such studies often conclude by attributing straightforwardly instrumentalist motives: better job opportunities, upward class mobility, migration to a wealthier nation (Li 2010; Yang 2007; Griner and Sobol 2014).

Without wishing to contest the validity of such findings, this style of analysis entails certain risks. Although it may be accurate to note that these students' most basic motivations for traveling abroad for study are often instrumental, such a crude measure does not provide

the whole picture. Alongside the pragmatism of wishing to increase one's earning power or open up a pathway toward migration there are likely also to co-exist significant 'fuzzy' or intangible motivations that make a period of time spent studying and living abroad seem like an attractive prospect to both the individual student and her family, which typically funds her venture. The project of studying overseas encompasses a complex assemblage of collective activities and effects that may include some or all of family financial (re)planning and management, the re-negotiation of a wide range of social relationships, the management of daily life in a new cultural setting, property acquisition, changes to residency and / or citizenship status, shifts in students' sense of identity, and so on. Like most other types of human mobility, when understood from the 'micro level' perspective of the networks of individuals involved, international education appears as a multi-dimensional enterprise whose motivations necessarily exceed the baldly instrumental (Li and Bray 2007: 792; Rizvi 2005). As I aim to show, for both students and their families, these motivations include not only economic opportunity maximization, but also calculative risk reduction and projects of reflexive self-fashioning (Giddens 1991; Qin 2012: 190; Conradson and Latham 2005). All of this is conditioned by students' pre-existing social positioning by a number of factors including their (generally middle or affluent) class status and--of particular interest for my analysis here--their gender.

The material presented in this paper is drawn from a longitudinal ethnographic study, funded by the Australian Research Council and still in progress at the time of writing, in which I am following 56 female tertiary students through several years of study in Melbourne, Australia, and, in some cases, on to their post-graduation destinations. The purpose of this study is to develop an in-depth picture of the social and subjective world of this group of students at the micro-level of individual experience, to determine whether and how study abroad impacts on their sense of cultural and gendered identity over the long term. I interviewed 30 of my participants in various cities in China in June-July 2015, before their departure for Australia; in 10 cases, I was also able to include in the interview students' parents or other family member(s) (9 mothers, 2 fathers, and 1 female cousin). I met and interviewed a further 20 participants for the first time in Melbourne, where they had already commenced study, in July-August 2015. The remaining 6 participants were part of a 15-person pilot study I completed in Melbourne in 2012: I interviewed them first then, and conducted follow-up meetings and interviews in 2015-16.

One reason for choosing female Chinese students as the focus of this study is that they are among the largest groups of international students studying in Australia today. Due to the

boom in its economy following the market reforms initiated in the late 1970s, which led to rising income levels and the creation of expanding middle and wealthy classes (Goodman ed. 2008), China has become the world's largest student-sending nation, and is by far Australia's biggest source of International students (OECD 2015: 352; Australian Government 2015). Furthermore, in spite of the sex-ratio skewing of the youth population in China toward males (between 114 - 120 males : 100 females at birth for the main birth years of my participants, 1990 - 1998: World Bank 2006: 4), over half the Chinese students in Australian higher education are now women (53.3% YTD in November 2015: Australian Government 2016). This raises the interesting question of why study abroad should be a *particularly* attractive project for women. My hypothesis is that, for these young women and their families, international education projects function, at least in part, as a means of managing gendered risks arising from current social conditions affecting the urban middle classes in China (see also Kim 2011).

The vast majority of my study participants' families belong to the professional, entrepreneurial, and managerial middle classes: the intermediate middle classes, in Goodman's terms (2014: 116-120). Parents work in state or private enterprises as managers or in a range of professional roles including engineer, editor, designer, teacher, doctor, accountant, and media worker; some are also entrepreneurs running their own trading, manufacturing or other small businesses. A handful are civil servants; an even smaller number--largely mothers--are non-professional employees (for a detailed discussion of the complexities of defining China's 'middle classes,' see Goodman 2014: 92-121). The class identity of my participants is also reflected in their overwhelmingly urban residency--with family household registrations (*hukou*) mainly in middle-to-large cities--and in the middling-to-elite character of the schools they have attended thus far. These include selective-entry state key schools and elite private and international schools, as well as some ordinary local government schools. These families' class background is also reflected, of course, in the simple fact of being able to finance overseas education for their children, which in itself tends to suggest membership of the middle to affluent classes (Goodman 2014: 57-59; 111). This class aspect is important to keep in mind, since the cultural capital that economic resources afford for these students' families may well bolster the intangible motivations they tended to emphasise for overseas study (see especially the discussion below on what I term the 'identity motivation').

In this article, I focus on data gleaned from the initial interviews with students and their family members in 2015, focusing especially on responses from students who either had not

yet left China at the time of interview, or were at a relatively early stage of their studies in Melbourne. Hence, the focus of our discussions was necessarily more on peoples' hopes for what overseas education could provide, rather than the extent to which it ultimately delivers on those promises (a question that will provide the focus for future work). These interviews included direct questions regarding their motivations and decision-making processes for studying in Melbourne, and were semi-structured. The interviews were in-depth, lasting between 35 and 100 minutes, with an average recorded length of about 50 minutes, but often included further conversation immediately before and after the recording. Some interviews were individual and some were arranged in small friendship groups or with family member(s). Most were conducted in Mandarin, except in a few cases where students were particularly keen to use English. This qualitative method enabled the emergence of complex and detailed reflections on people's motivations for studying abroad.

### **China's 'risk society' and gender re-traditionalisation**

Several scholars have put forward the view that post-socialist China can be seen as in transition toward risk society (Kohrman 2004; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010; Ren 2013; Hansen and Pang 2010; Lewis, Martin and Sun 2016; Yan 2010; Zhang and Ong 2008). As theorized in European sociology, this refers to that period in the modernization process when, material need having been objectively reduced, managing the risks generated by modernization itself becomes a central social project (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991, 1999). As the scholars cited above observe, the economic reforms initiated at the end of the 1970s set in motion the transition from a planned to a market economy, the introduction of profit motive in business and competition in employment markets, thoroughgoing economic and social privatization, and the withdrawal of the state from key areas of social provision. These reforms accelerated economic growth, significantly reducing overall poverty levels, but also exacerbated the divide between rich and poor and exposed the population to a new range and intensity of risks. The question of whether, to what extent, and in what sense(s) contemporary Chinese society can therefore be considered in transition toward risk society is too complex to explore in full detail here. However, the studies cited above do point to the presence of three key characteristics of risk society on the European definition--new kinds of risks as a consequence of modernization, the cultural centrality of representations of risk, and the emphasis on personal decision-making as a risk management strategy--together with the other two co-requisites for reflexive modernity: individualization and mobility (Beck 1992, 2007; Giddens 1991, 1999; Yan 2009; Nyíri 2010). This implies that one might indeed usefully

adapt a risk strategy framework as one tool to help understand people's social experience in China today, especially those relatively well-resourced, urban-dwelling people who are able to send children overseas for tertiary study.

My interviews suggest that young, middle-class Chinese women planning to study at universities in Australia and their families see educational mobility as a *combined wealth- and risk-management strategy*, intended to maximize educational and hence economic opportunities while also hedging as best as possible against a variety of risks they perceive as likely to affect their future lives. These risks are many, including risks common across genders, like downward social mobility as a result of poor performance in China's hyper-competitive university entrance exams, environmental and industrial risks (air pollution, food insecurity), and risks to psychological health and wellbeing resulting from highly pressurized education and work settings. In this article, I focus on a phenomenon that has not been substantively explored in the extant literature: *gendered* risks that study in Australia is seen as potentially mitigating; that is, risks pertaining to women in particular (for related discussions see Zheng 2016: 86-90; Shu and Hawthorne 1995; Ho 2009; Kenway and Bullen 2003). In taking this focus, I align myself broadly with those feminist critics who point out how the risk society thesis as articulated by its best known proponents--especially Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck--tends to elide contemporary women's lived experiences by painting an overly optimistic picture of gender inequality as the relic of a fast-vanishing past (Mulinari and Sandell 2009; Belliappa 2013: 35-39).

One risk that emerged clearly from my interviews was that of gender bias in China's professional labour market: a phenomenon that increasingly affects the current generation of young urban women (Du and Dong 2009; Martin 2014). While the European risk society theorists assume that in late modernity, patriarchal relations tend to weaken, allowing women to participate more freely than ever in the labour market, the situation in post-reforms China paints, in some respects, an opposite picture (Mulinari and Sandell 2009: 494). Many social scientists argue that gender relations have become *re-*traditionalized in the post-socialist era, along with *increasing* gendered inequalities in the labour market. As feminist sociologist Xiaoying Wu notes in her classic analysis of transforming gender ideologies in contemporary China, the post-1979 period has witnessed a decline in married women's workforce participation as the state encourages women 'back to the family' in times of rising unemployment, and women workers have become the main losers in the state policy of 'labour flexibilisation' that has been in place since 2001 (Wu 2009; see also Hong Fincher 2014; Rofel 1999; Liu 2007; Hao 2012: 250-263; on rising graduate unemployment, see Hao

and Welch 2012). While the belief that family caregiving is women's work has persisted since the Maoist era, today's profit-motivated private sector employers are far less inclined than state-owned enterprises to accommodate women's caregiving needs (Cook and Dong 2011). These needs are also greater than they were under the planned economy, since childcare and elderly care have been privatised. Married women workers are thus at greater risk than male workers of lost earnings; they are also popularly framed as 'unreliable' due to employers' awareness of their additional caregiving duties within the family (Croll 1995: 117-24). All of this adds up to a situation in which gendered labour market risks have considerably increased since the economic reforms of the late 1970s, and it is not controversial to state that today, there exists significant gender bias in China's urban labour market, especially in the expanding private sector (Goodman 2014: 50-51).

In order to understand how students and their families viewed the young women's situation vis-à-vis their potential professional futures in China, I raised the issue of gender bias in the domestic job market during my interviews. While among the students, understandings of whether and how their gender might affect their life opportunities varied quite widely, most parents and many of the older students were well aware of the situation outlined above, and their responses often indicated the anxieties generated by this knowledge and the dilemmas it raises for them. Many told personal stories involving themselves, female friends, relatives or colleagues about gender discrimination in private sector workplaces. These included, for example, stories of a female job applicant with an outstanding GPA who lost out on a specific job offer 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; female graduates taking far longer to land desirable jobs than their male classmates; employers directly questioning female professional job applicants about when they planned to marry and have a baby, and being unwilling to hire them if that was likely to happen soon; job ads that stated directly that preference would be given to male applicants; successful female applicants being asked to sign contracts undertaking not to become pregnant within the period of their job contract; female employees being forced to accept unpaid maternity leave in return for a promise from their employer to keep the job open for them, and so on.

In response to my questions about how they would handle such gender bias when the time came for them or their daughters to seek work, responses from future students and their mothers showed that they felt that high quality overseas education could value-add to young women's natural abilities, which they hoped might then 'balance out' the structural gender disadvantage. Consider the responses below from students' mothers:

I think, as long as the child has the ability--I mean people, in general, appreciate talent. So, if you really do have the ability, then in terms of this [gender] issue, the company [employer] won't take any notice of it. [...] That's why people say, ability comes first, position follows. [...] Yes, I think that [going abroad for study] will improve [her advantage]. Because I think the purpose of her going is to master her major, improve herself, increase her abilities. (Mother of Zhenghui, 21, Chongqing, Master of Finance)<sup>1</sup>

In fact, I think a person's level of ability is very important, right? What your superiors will appreciate about you is most likely your ability. So even if, say [as a female employee], you want to get married, or you are going to have a baby, if your superiors see that your abilities cannot be supplied by anyone else in your place, then under those circumstances, they'd rather give you what's rightly yours; they'll feel [...] that you're worth it. To their company, you ... you're completely irreplaceable, so they will value you. So I feel that a person's abilities are really key. Especially for girls. (Mother of Xiaoyin, 20, Shanghai, joint bachelor's degree in Market Research)

[As a woman], nowadays, if you don't wear yourself out [with work], you've got no chance; nowadays the pressure is too great [...]. And in a way the pressure on girls is even greater; it's not so bad for boys. [...] [Because] work is hard to find. Because with the same educational qualifications, with the same [...] major, they [employers] will take the boy and won't take the girl. Unless the girl has [qualifications] that are higher than the boy's, then maybe they'd take on the girl, rather than the boy. (Mother of Liangliang, 18, Xinxiang, bachelor's degree in Animation)

Each of these women had a slightly different take on the question of labour market gender bias in China. In our further discussions, Xiaoyin's mother, who had spent her whole working life in the state sector, tended to minimise its impact, while Liangliang's mother, who worked in the private sector, was quite outspoken about the unfair disadvantages faced by female graduates and employees. But the common thread that runs through each of the statements above is these mothers' hope that extra effort on the part of the individual and her family to hone her abilities might overcome the structural disadvantages she faces entering the labour market as a woman (see also Hao 2012: 256).

A related logic can be seen in statements made by some of the daughters, as well. One prospective Masters student observed that female university students were generally more studious than their male classmates partly because they were aware that they needed to achieve higher marks to make them competitive job applicants. Statements by others came very close to those by the mothers quoted above:

Well there's always a gender problem, like in the whole world. [...] It's like really common. You have to accept this kind of thing. Like you always want women [to] be equal to men, but sometimes [it's] just not there. You have to accept it. And there's always women trying to get to a high position, but it's not easy compared to men. [...] I think [the way is to] better yourself. [...] If you get improved and you are a better you, you are better prepared, the opportunity will come. [...] You can't change others, but you can change yourself. (Shuangshuang, 22, Chengdu, Master of Management Accounting and Finance, original statement in English)

If I were to experience [gender] discrimination when looking for work, well, I know it definitely exists, and as a girl, right, I'm not too, y'know [assertive]. But with this sort of thing, all you can do is rely on your own abilities. I think if I were really amazing, then even if this place didn't want me, somebody else would. So all I can do to resolve this is rely on studying hard. (Xinling, 19, Hangzhou, Bachelor of Nursing)

Such statements resonate remarkably clearly with a discourse that Wu has identified as central to the dominant cultural logic of gender in post-reforms China: one that holds that individual hard work and ability create a level playing field across gender lines. Having distinguished three key discourses on gender in modern Chinese society whose inter-relations have become reconfigured since the economic reforms--the state discourse, the market discourse, and the traditional discourse--Wu writes:

The market discourse [on gender] appeared in the context of the market economy that arose in the wake of reform and liberalisation. At its heart, based on the principle of individualism, lie the concepts of *suzhi* [a state promulgated term meaning 'human quality'] and ability, and the assumption that the market can provide for anyone, whether male or female, a level playing field. If one's *suzhi* is high and one has the requisite ability, then on this playing field one can win better opportunities and flourish [*fazhan*]. (Wu 2009: 8, my translation)



The mothers and daughters quoted above reiterate the central feature of this discourse: the idea that individual-level efforts to improve oneself are the most effective tool to maximise one's opportunities in the competitive market economy. Where the statements diverge from the state-supported market discourse as analysed by Wu, however, is in the ambivalence of their shared recognition--to varying degrees--that the playing field is in fact *not* level in terms of gender, and that female students and job applicants must work *extra* hard to bring themselves to the same starting line as men. For these families, sending daughters to Australia for tertiary study was one tactic they hoped might help counter-balance their daughters' structural gender disadvantage (see also Zheng 2016: 86-90; for a discussion of the gender bias that nevertheless still disadvantages Australian-educated women returnees in Chinese employment markets, see Hao 2012: 250-267 and 278).

### **Standard feminine life course versus mobile self-fashioning**

In addition to gender bias in China's labour market, interviewees also identified a range of other gendered risks that they hoped study abroad might mitigate. For example, one young woman who, unusually, had given up a place in China's most prestigious film studies institution to study in Australia, cited gender bias in China's university system: her desire to study abroad had arisen largely from her strong sense that her former lecturers didn't take female students seriously. Several others, framing quality education as 'marital capital' (To 2015: 19-21), voiced the perception that a wife whose academic achievements and earning power fell too far below those of her husband would be relegated to an inferior position in the hierarchy of her marital family, and possibly therefore be subject to disrespect and even abuse (as was the case with one student's female relative).<sup>2</sup> Some of the slightly older students in the group also saw study in Australia as a means of adjusting their gendered work-family balance. One 26-year-old found that she was working so much overtime in her advertising industry job in Shanghai that she had no social life, and worried she would never find a fiancé; she saw postgraduate study in comparatively laid-back Melbourne as a way of getting her life 'back on track.' Conversely, others worried that unless they extended their education into Masters study abroad, they risked simply becoming somebody's wife, and effectively abandoning their own career prospects.

This fear connects to a wider theme in the interviews, in which students expressed the idea that study abroad represented a means to escape--either temporarily or permanently--from the social regulation of women's behaviour within Chinese society (cf Kelsky 2001: 85-

132; Farrer 2002: 158).<sup>3</sup> While the decision to study abroad is almost always a collective family decision, supported by financial resources provided by parents, this aspect of international education was one that particularly appealed to some of the students (but interestingly, was occasionally also highlighted by parents: see below). One prospective student looked eagerly forward to life in Australia far from the web of surveillance from her elder female relatives, who kept a close eye on her gendered propriety, discussing daily among themselves what she wore (was it too revealing?), when she came home at night (was it too late?), and so on. Voicing a gender-inflected ‘occidental counter-discourse’ (Chen 1995), she stated: ‘I just feel that there’s more freedom overseas; that people can live out their true selves. Also they’re more independent. In China, the web of the extended family, and of the household, is too big. It’s repressive, very repressive’ (Meng, 20, Guangzhou, joint bachelor’s degree in Accounting). Other students who I interviewed after several months living in Melbourne found that being geographically distanced from one’s family did indeed result in a diminution of parental control, and that therefore, women who studied abroad were likely to have their life course landmarks--especially marriage and childbirth--delayed by several years:

If you’re working in China, then even if your parents are in Shandong and you’re working in Shanghai, they can ring you once a day and give you a push [toward marriage], but overseas, it’s just too far away. This is a very important reason why everyone [here] does everything late; it’s because they can’t be controlled, and so their own views can be expressed more. (Huisheng, 23, Weifang, Master of Marketing Communication)

Huisheng expresses a hope that was also voiced by many other respondents: that study abroad could provide a means for them to avoid getting ‘trapped’ into a standard feminine life course. Currently in China, while robust social norms make heterosexual marriage effectively compulsory (Kam 2012), there is much intensive debate among social scientists, popular media, and ordinary young women and their families of urban women’s rising age at first marriage (China Daily 2012). While educated women in the large cities of eastern China are now ‘delaying’ marriage, on average, until well into their late twenties, Leta Hong Fincher demonstrates how over recent years, state media have promulgated a discourse stigmatising so-called ‘leftover women’ (*shengnü*)--a caricature of educated, professional women who remain unmarried at age 27-30--thereby encouraging women to stick closely to a normative, marriage-and-family centred life course (Hong Fincher 2014; To 2015; Zhang and Sun 2014).

This life course was narrated for me, with varying degrees of irony and exasperation, by many respondents. Below is one example:

Before, everyone felt, including parents, that when a woman was 20 she should do certain things, when she was 25 she should do certain things, when she was 30 she should do certain things. Like for example you graduate from university at 20, and from then until 25 you can start having boyfriends, falling in love, so that you definitely establish your family before you're 30: you establish your family at 28, so that by 30 you have a baby. [...] But now I think that a lot of women, including those in my own generation, born [...] around 1990 [...] don't think that way. [...] They feel that work is more important: why [...] can't you look for [family] after you're 30, or get married a few years later? Since after all, for example, say [...] I get married at 28, and have a baby by 30. That time is often the exact moment when you're reaching a peak in your career. I could keep working my way up a bit further. But at that moment, because I have a baby, it might mean that all I can ever do is stop at that level. (Cihui, 22, Shanghai, Masters of Accounting and Finance)

Cihui at once outlines the standard feminine life progression, and offers a sharp analysis of the generational shift that sees career-minded women in her own generation come into direct conflict with the still-dominant ideology of their elders. It was clear from discussions with other interviewees, too, that taking on the project of studying abroad in their twenties represented, in part, a means for them to distance themselves from the pressures pushing them toward that standard life course. For students like Cihui (above) and Suyin, Ruomei and Yuli (below), their overseas education ventures connected with a desire for female individualisation: a move from 'living for others' (especially family members, including both elders in one's natal family and future husbands and children) toward 'a life of one's own' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 54-84; Wu 2012; Kim 2011; Qin 2009; Martin 2014).<sup>4</sup>

These women framed educational travel as a means of fashioning a certain kind of self, marked by both self-determination and mobility (Conradson and Latham 2005; Elliott and Urry 2010). Overlaid onto the two types of motivation I touched on above (wealth motivation and risk motivation), then, there emerges what we might call an *identity motivation*: the hope that education abroad would fundamentally transform the kind of person one is. Specifically, students and their families hoped that study in Australia would help the young women cosmopolitanise themselves by widening their horizons (*kaikuo shiye*) and assimilating

knowledge of other cultures (Rizvi 2005);<sup>5</sup> become more independent (*duli*); more self-confident (*zixin*); better able to recognise and actively maximise career opportunities; and thereby more effective in the kinds of self-entrepreneurship demanded by China's post-reforms economy and society (Yan 2009, 2010; Hansen and Svarerud eds 2010; Zhang and Ong 2008). Echoing a discourse central to China's public culture in the current era, they often linked their international education projects with the concept of self-development (*ziwo fazhan*); a few parents also used the state's language of 'improving human quality' (*tigao suzhi*) to describe one aim of the study abroad project (Yan 2008: 187-216; Bakken 2000). Although the discourses of self-development and self-cosmopolitanisation are often linked, in China's public culture, with specifically middle-class aspirations (Lewis, Martin and Sun 2016), this identity motivation was remarkably consistent across students and parents with different levels of educational and economic capital--though it was articulated more clearly and forcefully by those richer in both. Below, I consider how the identity motivation, especially the focus on cultivating mobile cosmopolitan selfhood, articulates with the gender motivations discussed above.

Suyin and Ruomei, both 22 and studying Masters degrees in Finance Management, attended the same school in Chengdu and met again, by chance, in Melbourne, where they became close friends. They shared both a strong Chengdu city-based identity and a nascent feminist consciousness: when we conducted our first interview in a café in Carlton, Melbourne, the conversation turned several times toward their puzzlement at those women who give up their careers at an early age for the sake of marriage and children, a choice that they said they couldn't fathom. For both of these young women, the allure of undertaking postgraduate study abroad was strongly linked with their twin desires to sidestep gendered convention in China, and to fashion a more self-determined, cosmopolitan identity. Illustrating this, Suyin explained her decision to study abroad as follows:

Actually my reason at the time was very simple. I thought: I've spent my whole life growing up in Chengdu. When I was little I went to school in Chengdu; I went to high school in Chengdu, and I went to university in Chengdu [...]. And I thought: I don't want to stay in this same place forever, I want to go out and take a look. My Dad once said to me [...]: do you want to stay in Chengdu forever? Or do you want to have your own dream? He said, if you stay in Chengdu, then after you graduate you'll work here, and find someone to marry, and that will be your life. And then he said: do you have a dream? If you have a dream, then you should follow it; go off and realise your dream yourself. [...] Actually, he said all

that very casually, but at the time, I did take notice. I thought about that question a bit. And then I said: I don't want to spend my whole life there. I don't want to be like ordinary girls and just pass my life in a very ordinary way, so I thought: I want to go out, I want to take a look around, take a look at this world [laughs]. [...] Yes, I really wanted to see what this world is like, so I started to consider going abroad for study.

Suyin makes an especially clear connection between the desire to escape gendered life-course convention--here associated with geographic stasis in her insistent repetition of the place name 'Chengdu'--and an educational mobility project that will let her 'see what this world is like.' Her statement also illustrates the complexity of roles played by parents in shaping young women's motivations, underlining the pitfalls of assuming that the patriarchal family acts simply as a repressive force dominating Chinese women (Pun 2005: 60-63; Belliappa 2013: 68-91). While in some cases, parents and other elders were indeed described as pressuring young women toward 'timely' marriage, in this case it is the seed of an idea sown by her father that directs Suyin *away from* what they both perceive as a somewhat stultifying standard feminine life course in Chengdu, and toward the 'dream' of international mobility as a means of avoiding 'passing her life in a very ordinary way.'<sup>6</sup> Underlining once again the paradoxically familial inflection of her own desire for individualisation, later in our interview, Suyin emotionally described the deep filial gratitude she feels toward her parents as another motivating factor for her studies: she hoped her overseas qualifications would help her get a highly-paid job so that she could readily buy them the things they want, as an expression of her love and gratitude (see also Hansen and Pang 2010).

To illustrate her own motivations for studying in Australia, Suyin's friend Ruomei, even more outspoken on her desire to sidestep the standard feminine life course, told two contrasting stories about older women she knew. First, like several other interviewees, she described a talented friend whose promising career had ended with marriage and childbirth before the age of thirty:

Ruomei: I had a very accomplished elder sister [ie: friend], and she passed the entrance exam for a very good university we have in Chengdu, it's called the Southwestern University of Finance and Economics. Then after she graduated, she went to Shanghai to work; she got a job at Deloitte. After she finished at Deloitte, she worked as an auditor, and after that, she just sort of found somebody to marry. Once she'd married she was 28 or 29, and now she has a

child. And now her home life revolves completely around her child. [...] I think this is basically not--

Suyin: The life you want.

Ruomei: Correct. When I heard about it, I was--because I thought, right now I'm just at that age, where if I stayed in China, I guess you know, it's about the time when they try to force you to marry and stuff. I don't want to get match-made, or anything like that, I find it totally annoying.

While this friend provided for Ruomei a negative example of the risks of staying in China and succumbing to the socially prescribed feminine life course, another friend provided a positive example of the benefits of self-cosmopolitanisation through overseas study.

I have a very good friend, an elder sister, the two of us have grown up together since we were little. First she went to study in Hong Kong, but then she found she didn't like Hong Kong, she found education in Hong Kong too rigid, so she [...] transferred to America, where she lived a life of struggle. Because she studied subjects in the humanities, she studied [...] philosophy and politics. Originally, she'd been studying engineering, but later she felt that her own interests were more [in the humanities], so she went to study at an Arts college in America. I think she's influenced me very deeply. [...] After I watched her go off, I felt that each time she came back she brought me something new. And I felt that I wanted to become someone like that, too. [...] I felt that I too wanted to bring those kinds of new things to other people. I felt that I needed to go out and create something new myself, and then become an influence on others.

Ruomei most admires in her friend her self-forged role of 'bringing something new' back to China from abroad. Like several other interviewees who similarly discussed changes they noticed in female friends after several years' study abroad, Ruomei feels that her friend has been transformed by her assimilation of new ways of thinking gleaned from other cultures, and it is this self-cosmopolitanisation that Ruomei wishes to emulate.

At 29 at the time of our first interview, Yuli from Guangzhou is among the oldest of my participants. Despite having already worked for several years in the advertising industry in China, Yuli had persuaded her parents to support her coming to Australia to complete a Bachelor's degree in Graphic Design. For her, the decision to study abroad was linked very

directly with her desire to escape the strong pressures toward marriage being brought to bear on her as a 29-year-old single woman:

Y: My philosophy was: I want to become [someone who does] not follow the ordinary steps. Maybe I [could] do study and go to work and get married, blah blah blah: [this] is [supposed to be] a thing for everyone. But everybody should have a different approach to their life. [...] So far, I think I'm right. [...] Most of my friends in China are now worrying about marriage, worrying about how to build the family. I'm the only one that still can chase after my dream [laughs]. [...]

F: So what is the most important thing that you hope to get from studying here instead of studying in China?

Y: Freedom, I think. No, I'll say the will [to] freedom. The will [to] freedom. [...] The freedom of understanding the world. [...] Because in China, you are told. Everything is told. You are told to get married before the age of 30. You're told. That's the point. But in western countries you're not told. [...] Actually it's your choice. In China you have no choice. [...]

People like my grandma blame my parents: why did they let me [...] come to Australia? Because I'm old enough to get married. 'Let her settle down.' That's my grandma's words. 'Why she's going away? Let her settle down, get married.' [...] My parents told me. [...] I think they told me because they have similar concerns but they just can't say it. [...] So I pretend I didn't hear. I ignore it. [...] Because as I mentioned, I compare my life with and my friends' life. [...] I can tell I'm better [off]. [...] Because they're busy rais[ing] their kids, which means in some respects they lose a lot of personal space, lose a lot of time. [...] Most of the problem is how to deal with their families. After you get married, you need to deal with your husband's parents. That's Chinese tradition. Some even live with the husband's parents, but I think it doesn't happen here in Australia. [...] There are invasions from their mother-in-law. They will tell you what is the good way to raise your kids [laughs]. Or why are you so lazy, or why are you blah blah blah. They will criticise and judge. [...] I think my generation can escape from that. My generation can. (Original statement in English)

Yuli's account reveals clearly how, unmarried at 29, she is located at the sharp end of the pressure toward marriage and, perhaps as a result of that, has become highly reflexive about and critical of Chinese gendered conventions. Feeling that her married female friends lose their autonomy as they become absorbed into their husbands' families, where their place as

young wives is low in the hierarchy, Yuli has chosen educational mobility as the means to 'escape,' and pursue 'freedom' and her 'dream.' Like Meng (above), in the face of disagreeable gendered pressures she experiences within her own family and Chinese society more broadly, Yuli articulates a gendered occidentalist discourse that idealises western nations like Australia as the locus of 'choice' and 'freedom' for women.

If for Yuli the potential to escape from the standard feminine life course is generational ('my generation can escape from that'), then it is clear enough that this is partly because well-resourced women in Yuli's generation, to a far greater extent than previous generations, are able to travel outside China and thereby not only distance themselves from family pressures, but also increase their reflexive understanding of the culture-bound character of gendered conventions, as Yuli sees herself doing (Qin 2009; Martin 2014). Indeed, having thus far rejected the standard feminine life course, Yuli painted a picture of her desired future life as having geographic mobility at its centre. In a subsequent conversation, just after her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, Yuli expressed her strong desire to stay and work in Australia long-term, if possible. She had by now made a new group of friends in her course: English, Malaysian and Australian women in their forties, whose life courses vis-à-vis marriage strayed decidedly from the normative Chinese model. One was a lesbian; another's long-term de facto partner had died, and she lived as a single woman dedicating herself to her career. 'I look at them and, well, they seem to be doing fine,' Yuli told me. 'I don't want to go back to China. If I did, everyone would say to me: ohh, you are 31 already,<sup>7</sup> you should [be married].' Instead, Yuli wanted to stay and work in Melbourne and if possible also travel to Japan to complete a Masters degree; she also had travels planned for America and Spain. She, like many other interviewees, saw overseas travel, whether for study or for leisure, as a means of self-fashioning (Conradson and Latham 2005): the type of 'lifestyle mobility' she aspired to would be personally enriching, Yuli explained, as it would allow her to integrate an understanding of the different ways of thinking that underlie each culture (Cohen, Duncan and Thulemark 2015).

### **Conclusion: Mobility as a gendered tactic**

In making such statements, Yuli and the many other interviewees who spoke to me about the inherent enriching value of travel echo aspects of Chinese state discourse in the reforms era, which, as Pál Nyíri has demonstrated, increasingly frames mobility as a value in itself, definitionally linked with modernity, individual success, and China's globalisation (Nyíri 2010). Indeed, occupying a central position in the worldviews and practices of an extraordinarily wide array of subjects, from impoverished rural migrant labourers and ethnic



minorities in remote border regions to international students and billionaire corporate executives, geographic mobility appears as a quasi-universal value in China's public culture today (Hansen and Pang 2010; Lyttleton, Deng and Zhang 2011; Fong 2011; Ong 1999). And in key respects, the ideal of the mobile, flexible, self-fashioning subject resonates with neoliberal-style ideologies of self-entrepreneurship that are as prevalent in post-reforms China as in Euro-American contexts (Zhang and Ong 2008; Lewis, Martin and Sun 2016).

Yet, as I hope to have reinforced in this article, the social position from which people embark on their mobility projects makes a difference. By focusing on young women's appropriations of educational mobility for projects of gendered risk management, my analysis has highlighted 'minor' uses of mobility; that is, uses of mobility by subjects who are, in at least one respect (vis-à-vis gender, albeit not class), minoritised. The statements I have analyzed by students and their families about their complex and multifactorial motivations for international study reveal that--in this respect analogously to the female labour migrants studied by Gaetano (2015: 99-129) and Pun (2005: 49-75)--they try to use mobility tactically, to negotiate their gendered predicament vis-à-vis the sexism of both the labour market and the standard feminine life course (de Certeau 1984). Within the larger system of China's post-socialist society, they thereby manage as best they can the contradictions between what this system simultaneously *demand*s them to be (individualised, self-determined, self-fashioning), and *blocks* them from embodying fully. In striving to embody ever more fully the type of self-entrepreneurial subjecthood demanded of them, they take up the tools available against the contradictions inherent in the system, wielding the potentials of mobility and self-determination against the imposed limitations of gender.

With regard to the risk society theory with which this article has been in implicit conversation throughout, I hope to have both complicated that theory with a non-European example that illustrates distinct socio-historical processes and outcomes; and contributed to feminist work that challenges the masculinism of some influential theories of late modernity by highlighting how gendered power relations continue to matter in ostensibly late-modern societies (Mulinari and Sandell 2009). First, I have underlined that in some ways, gender relations in post-reforms China follow an opposite logic to that (polemically) described by Beck and Giddens in western Europe. Instead of a steadily advancing de-traditionalisation, in China's post-socialist period we see a *re*-traditionalisation of gender relations, along with increasing gendered inequalities in the labour market. Second, my research lends weight to the idea that among middle-class, educated young women in urban China, strengthening desires for individualisation are indeed evident; and I have tried to show how these may be

linked with their international education projects. But third, in an apparent paradox that echoes some work done in other Asian contexts (e.g. Belliappa 2013), I have suggested that the self-individualising practices these young women engage in may be thoroughly interwoven with family connections and loyalties. Far from a neat, linear transition from ‘tradition’ through ‘modernity’ toward ultimate freedom from gendered constraints, the result of all this for the current generation of Chinese women students resembles more a convoluted web of intensifying contradictions. Thus, while certain phenomena that appear consonant with those observed in Euro-American contexts are indeed evident in this example concerning young women from China--the centrality of risk considerations; women’s desires for more individualised forms of identity; the idealization of mobility and cosmopolitan selfhood; and the ubiquity of the language of self-development--the distinctive forms in which these phenomena manifest should caution us against viewing them, *a priori*, as evidence of some globally homogeneous form of late modernity. Rather, I would argue that the appearance of these concepts in Chinese students’ and their families’ accounts of their motivations for overseas study should be understood as a case of such concepts’ ‘parallel evolution’ within locally prevalent conditions (Beck and Grande 2010; Martin and Lewis 2016).

As a means of negotiating the contradictions they face as young middle-class women in China today, the gendered motivation for study abroad emerged strongly from my interviews with both students and their families. However, it is worth underlining that it is just one among several themes to emerge; others await exploration in future writing. In offering a detailed study of this example, though, I hope to have demonstrated the capacity of this type of qualitative research to uncover a far richer and more complex picture of the current generation of Chinese international tertiary students’ motivations than the currently dominant instrumentalist model can provide.

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms. The data in brackets refer to the student's age, city of residence in China, and planned major in Australia. Unless stated otherwise, quotes from interviewees were in Mandarin and have been translated by the author.

<sup>2</sup> These interviewees framed women's education less as a lure for prospective husbands than as a safeguard against mistreatment post-marriage. Indeed, public discussion of women's education in China today tends to focus on the opposite problem: women being unable to find husbands willing to 'marry up' to a woman more educated than themselves. These interviewees did not suggest that a woman's education should equal or exceed her husband's, only that it should not fall very significantly below it.

<sup>3</sup> When asked in our initial interviews whether they wished to emigrate permanently to Australia after their studies, the majority of my respondents professed a very open attitude, with a standard statement being that one would value the chance to stay and work for a couple of years--as current student visas allow--and then evaluate whether one wanted to try to stay long-term. However, since they recognized the myriad difficulties involved--finding work in the professional field of their major, amassing enough points for a Permanent Residency application, what to do about aging parents back home who might not be willing to follow, et cetera--with some exceptions, they tended to frame staying permanently as a tentative interest rather than a firm plan. Thus, while it would be interesting to see how plans to emigrate might impact on these students' gendered life plans, at this stage of the study this aspect is difficult to extrapolate.

<sup>4</sup> This should not be taken to mean that students hoped that overseas education would weaken their bonds with their natal families, and nor does that appear to be the case in practice, albeit that some were glad to distance themselves from familial pressures toward marriage. Instead, beneath the strong individualizing discourse in our interviews ran a perhaps equally strong undercurrent of family feeling (see Hansen and Pang 2010, and the discussion of my interview with Suyin, below).

<sup>5</sup> The self-cosmopolitanization discourse is in itself a significant and complex topic; comprehensive analysis of material pertaining to it from these interviews will provide material for a separate paper.

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<sup>6</sup> This fatherly support for a daughter's self-development is consistent with Vanessa Fong's findings on new educational and other resources available to girls in the single-child generations (Fong 2002). Possibly more than any conscious commitment to feminist principles, it reflects a family's strong emotional and financial investment in the future of their only child.

<sup>7</sup> Yuli used the Chinese age calculation method, which effectively adds a year to one's age (one is considered "31" after having passed one's 30<sup>th</sup> birthday).



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Mobile self-fashioning and gendered risk: Rethinking Chinese students' motivations for overseas education

**Date:**

2017

**Citation:**

MARTIN, F. (2017). Mobile self-fashioning and gendered risk: Rethinking Chinese students' motivations for overseas education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 15 (5), pp.706-720. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2016.1264291>.

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