The mobilities paradigm, propounded most influentially by sociologists including John Urry, Mimi Sheller, and Anthony Elliott, is based on the proposal that human and non-human mobilities, not geographically delimited societies, centrally define social life in today’s world (Sheller and Urry 2006, Urry 2007, Elliott and Urry 2010). Hence, sociology is tasked with moving ‘beyond societies’ and toward the study of all forms of movement (Urry 2000)—while recognizing that capacities for movement are unevenly distributed, and access to mobility and connectivity for some relies on the stasis and disconnection of others (Sheller and Urry 2006: 210, 211). Taking a cue from the insights of these scholars, my aim in this paper is to contribute to our understanding of human mobilities at the micro level of individual subjective experience through a case study on Chinese international students in Melbourne, Australia.

In my attempt to develop a theoretical framework adequate to the experiences of my research subjects, I am particularly interested in one of the key concepts that Urry developed in his efforts to capture what is new about social life in the era of mobilities: the concept of network capital. For Urry, network capital is a prerequisite to living in the complex, multi-networked world of late capitalism (2007: 196). This form of capital arises from access to the bureaucratic, economic, social, bodily, infrastructural and technological affordances that facilitate mobility. Network capital designates ‘the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate […] which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit’ (2007: 197-198; Elliott and Urry 2010: 9-11). The concept of network capital is a key one for Urry because it attempts to pinpoint mobility’s social consequences (2007: 196). Indeed, Urry proposes network capital as a replacement for the concept of social capital, as theorized by Robert Putnam (Urry 2007: 198-203). While Putnam sees social capital as being fostered through geographic propinquity in small communities, Urry insists that in the era of mobilities, relations of interpersonal trust and co-presence are routinely generated and sustained at a distance. In Urry’s and Elliott’s discussions, the advantageous effects of network capital for those hyper-mobile groups that possess high levels of it—their paradigmatic example is the new
class of ultra-rich ‘globals’ (Elliott and Urry 2010: 65-83)—exceed the benefits afforded by these groups’ economic and cultural capital alone (Urry 2007: 197).

Two key points can be drawn out from the above discussion. First, in framing the capacity to move and communicate across distance as capital, the network capital concept normatively associates mobility with advantage. With only brief mention made of disadvantaged forms of mobility (Elliott and Urry 2010: 6), mobility in these accounts appears to be inherently linked with power (Franquesa 2011: 1016). In other words, network capital is framed as paradigmatically a ‘strong’ form of capital, associated with strategic movements by powerful subjects. Second, this new version of social capital—network capital—is conceptualized as geographically untethered. I underline these points because, as I will show, they are open to question when considered in light of some groups’ lived experiences of mobility, hence the network capital concept may require rethinking in order to account for such cases.

A different strain of mobilities research from scholars across geography, anthropology, and cultural studies focuses detailed attention on specific groups’ embodied experiences of place and movement, throwing into question the equation of transnational mobility with social and spatial mastery that we see in the sociological network capital concept. For example, Michael Peter Smith (2001) and David Conradson and Alan Latham (2005) ‘eschew accounts of individuals traversing a somehow frictionless world, endorsing instead research that details the emplaced corporealities of such movement’ (Conradson and Latham 2005: 228). Conradson and Latham also draw our attention to what they term “middling” forms of transnationalism’ (2005: 229): the movement of those vast numbers of people who inhabit the wide middle ground between the elite ‘globals’, and the impoverished migrants who have been the focus of much other research in migration studies. More recently, Chris McMorran has called for the recognition that fixity and mobility may be embodied simultaneously by individuals who experience a ‘layering of mobilities and fixities’ such that their ‘mobility at one scale can co-exist with their fixity at another’ (McMorran 2015: 84; see also Schiller and Salazar 2013).

In this article, I align myself with this latter strain of scholarship, and respond to McMorran’s call for researchers to pay closer attention to the widespread daily reality of living between mobility and stasis (ibid.). At the time of their overseas study, the Chinese students who are my research subjects are mobile in far more ‘middling’ ways than the elite ‘globals’ (Conradson and Latham 2005). Their work practices while they are living in Melbourne link them both into relatively fixed, localized, diasporic employment networks in
Melbourne’s Chinese restaurant sector; and into relatively mobile, transnational, digitally mediated trading networks in the micro-entrepreneurial activity of *daigou* or parallel trading: buying local goods on behalf of customers in China to whom they onsell at a percentage profit. I try to show how in these common types of work, students both encounter zones of disconnection and social exclusion at the local scale, and—partly in response—take up practices of hyper-connectivity and network building at the transnational scale involving mobile people, mobile media, mobile technologies, mobile goods, and mobile money. However, I underline that neither of these types of work can be seen as purely mobile or purely fixed: rather, each combines fixity and mobility.

The subjects of my study are young women, and both of the types of work I discuss are feminized in specific ways. I draw on Kate Huppatz’s work on another post-Bourdieuian form of capital—feminine capital—to contribute to my complication of the network capital concept in the case of these students’ parallel trading activities. Drawing on the earlier work of Skeggs (2004), Huppatz (2009) extends Bourdieu’s theory of the capitals to include gendered capitals; specifically, *female capital*—‘the gender advantage that is derived from being perceived to have a female […] body’—and *feminine capital*: ‘the gender advantage that is derived from a disposition or skill set learned via socialization, or from simply being hailed as feminine’ (50). Feminine capital, the type of gender capital that most interests me here, is thus associated with ‘learned competency’; ‘skills and aptitudes’ in particular activities that are culturally associated with femininity (53). In my case study analysis, I draw on both Huppatz and Skeggs, as well as on Lin Zhang’s (2015) work on the gendered aspects of parallel trading, in order to develop a new concept—feminine network capital—conceived as a ‘weak’ and tactical form.

Based on this case study, I develop three main inter-related claims, all of which complicate the network capital concept. First, I argue that *geographic and social mooring in place, as well as mobility, can generate benefit for individuals and groups, just as both fixity and mobility may generate various types of disadvantage or risk*. For example, while Chinese international students’ frequent sense of being ‘stuck’ in low-status hospitality work in Melbourne’s Chinese diasporic economy exemplifies a negative valuation of immobility, certain kinds of relatively geo-fixed social connections in Melbourne are desirable and beneficial for them, albeit also elusive. Second and as a corollary, I propose that *social capital cannot operate entirely independent of geography*, as Urry’s proposal of network capital as a replacement for the concept of social capital implies. For most mobile people, social capital—resources flowing from a durable network of human relationships (Bourdieu
does not function in a geographic vacuum, but works at local as well as global scales and in ‘tethered’ as well as mobile forms. Third, through my development of the feminine network capital concept, I show how network capital may take ‘weak’ and tactical, rather than ‘strong’ and strategic forms—underlining again the pitfalls of associating mobility and networking unilaterally with power and advantage.

Method

The material presented in this article is drawn from a five-year qualitative study, funded by the Australian Research Council and still in progress at the time of writing, in which I am following a group of 56 female tertiary students from pre-departure, in China, through several years of study in Melbourne, Australia, and on to their post-graduation destinations. A key reason for choosing female Chinese students as the focus for this study is that, in spite of the sex-ratio skewing of the youth population in China toward males (World Bank 2006: 4), Chinese female students have for several years outnumbered males, and represent the largest group of international students in Australia today (Australian Government 2016). It is therefore interesting to consider the gendered aspects of these students’ overseas experience: how does their gender mark their experiences of mobility? This is one of the core questions that underlie both the study as a whole, and the segment of analysis presented in this article.

The study is designed as a longitudinal ethnography as practiced in cultural anthropology, intended to enable a holistic understanding of participants’ everyday experience in the informal domain and reveal the cultural logics structuring this group’s experiences of themselves and their situation (Geertz 1972, 1998; Willis 2000). My methods include audio recorded interviews (in the first and final years, and whenever warranted for particular purposes throughout); hundreds of hours of regular, non-audio recorded ‘hanging out’ with participants both one-on-one and in small friendship groups, sometimes including participants’ non-participating friends, classmates and family members; participant-observation at full-day large-group activities that I have organised every 6-12 weeks for the first 18 months of the project; and ongoing daily virtual interactions with all participants, plus around 150 additional contacts in Melbourne’s Chinese student community, via Facebook, Instagram, and the Chinese social media app WeChat, which provides a text messaging service as well as a personal Moments feed to share links, thoughts, audio and photographs with one’s network. This array of methods ensures that while my core participant group comprises 56 people (6 of whom also participated in a pilot study in 2012), I am also in regular, semi-immersive contact with my participants’ wider social circles in Melbourne,
incorporating many male as well as female students. I capture all of the non-audio-recorded data in detailed field notes, supplemented with photographs (at group events) and social media screen captures. To move from raw data to theorized analysis, I first code data from interviews, social media posts and field notes inductively, seeking recurring narratives and themes that link meaningfully to my research questions. I then test emerging patterns through focused coding before making interpretations with reference to key concepts. In this paper, these include mobility, fixity, femininity and networks.

My relationship with my participants is symbolically structured partly by a teacher-student model, since I am an academic at an Australian university, and my participants are tertiary students. I recruited participants through channels directly connected with their overseas study plans (five Australian and three Chinese universities, and four commercial education agents in China), and some participants may in the first instance have been disposed to have contact with me partly because I represented a personal, ‘high-status’ contact at a fairly prestigious university in Australia. However, while some of my participants address me as ‘teacher’ (laoshi, which can be used much more casually in Chinese than in English), in my interactions with them I aim for a more informal friend-and-mentor role, and some have referred to me as a ‘friend,’ ‘sister,’ or even ‘mother away from home’ (I am around the age of some of the younger students’ mothers); most simply call me ‘Fran’ and use the informal for of ‘you’ (ni rather than nǐ). The vast majority of my participants’ families belong to the professional, entrepreneurial, and managerial middle classes: the intermediate middle classes, in Goodman’s terms (2014: 116-120). Hence, our class positions are roughly comparable.

‘Chinatown work’: Emotional labour in a zone of exception

In my pre-departure interviews with participants in China, most spoke of their plans to find work in ‘local’ (dangdi, implying non-Chinese run) businesses in Melbourne in the area of their major. They saw this as a means of forging local friendships, improving their colloquial English, proving their worth in a job market where Chinese-style guanxi (social relationship) connections could not be relied upon, and strengthening their CV. However, the general pattern was that after arriving in Melbourne, students found that the types of professional work experience they had hoped for are largely out of their reach. For example, Yining, a 22 year old enrolling in a Master of Media program, had significant experience in the television industry in China and hoped to gain additional experience in her field of study while in Melbourne. But after a few months she concluded that it was virtually impossible to
access that type of opportunity, and instead, accepted an underpaid casual job with a Chinese entrepreneur selling clothing and accessories at a stall in a subway station. She also applied for jobs in McDonalds and KFC—about which she was never contacted after submitting her applications. Yining mused:

I’m actually not very clear about why. Because I personally think that among Chinese [students], my English is comparatively good. But maybe when a lot of people see you have a Chinese name, they’re not willing [to hire you]. [...] It’s not [open] prejudice. They just, very politely, reject your resumé. (WeChat audio message, Feb. 19 2016)

Such stories were very common. Students wistfully observed the desirable jobs that their Australian-born classmates seemed readily to access—sales assistant at an Apple Store, intern at a major bank, waitress for a fast food franchise paying the legal minimum wage—while, for the most part, gradually relinquishing their own hopes of landing such jobs. Banks and other businesses in the professional sectors for which the students were training routinely demanded certificates of Permanent Residency or Australian citizenship as a condition of being offered an internship (Marginson et al 2010: 124), while non-Chinese hospitality businesses almost always rejected students’ applications. One participant told the story of a friend who was a qualified barista and sought work in an Italian-style café, only to be told by the owner that employees with ‘Asian faces’ were not suitable for the café. Such a direct statement of (illegal) racial discrimination, though, is comparatively rare: more commonly, as Yining describes above, non-Chinese employers seem simply, ‘very politely,’ to reject or fail to respond to applicants with Chinese-sounding names. Such anti-Chinese racism in Australian employment markets has been corroborated robustly by a recent statistical study (Booth, Leigh and Varganova 2012).3 Thus while some participants started out by seeing the lack of Chinese-style guanxi relations in Australia as ethically desirable, in practice it was precisely a lack of local social capital, combined with racism, that frustrated their hopes to benefit from the supposedly free and fair Australian job market.

Many students, like Yining, were therefore forced to settle for casual labouring work (da gong) in Melbourne’s Chinese diasporic economy, where connections are easier to make due to shared ethnic background. Student-workers thus experience a kind of ‘contradictory class mobility’ in educational migration: while overseas study is intended to help them maintain or improve their (middle) class status in China, they experience downward mobility
in Melbourne when effectively corralled into labouring jobs (Parreñas 2001: 150-196; see also Johnson 2010). The low-status jobs that many of my research participants have taken in restaurants in Chinatown and related zones of the city are characterized by a number of common features. At the time of writing, the standard hourly rate of pay in Chinese-run restaurants in Melbourne was AUD $10, with some starting wages of $8 or less: significantly below the legal minimum wage for this type of casual work (currently between $15.85 and $25.09); and overtime and penalty rates are not applied. Indeed, the many conversations I have had with Chinese student-workers about their working conditions reveal that most employers make no reference to the locally applicable legal requirements of employment. They enforce unpaid and sometimes lengthy ‘trial’ periods; do not offer written employment contracts; pay cash-in-hand with no record of amounts paid for hours worked; do not request employees’ Tax File Numbers; and make no reference to the student visas that allow students to work only 20 hours per week during semester. Yaqi (23), a student with several years’ waitressing experience, explained that these employers feel licensed to ignore the Australian regulatory frameworks because the assumption is, on both sides, that this is ‘black labour’ (hei gong): work done outside legal frameworks, so an unstated ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ arrangement is implied. The employers know that they are guilty of underpayment, but the student-workers—even when, as is often the case, they do not breach the 20-hours-per-week rule—assume that they are guilty of tax avoidance, so neither side is inclined to report the other to authorities. As one would expect in such an unregulated environment, petty deception, breaking of verbal contracts, and short-changing by employers is relatively common. Yaqi recalled one employer who demanded a $200 ‘bond’ up-front as a condition of being given the job, which was very difficult to reclaim when she resigned; others told of employers refusing to pay wages owed or tricking them out of promised supplementary payments for specific tasks performed.

However, despite their knowledge of their own exploitation, none of my participants, nor anyone else they know, has ever initiated legal action against their employers. Reasons given include the off-putting difficulty of negotiating Australia’s unfamiliar legal system; the risk to future employment prospects in a tight-knit community where ‘word gets around’; a sense of loyalty toward employers who in other ways take on a mentorly role toward student-workers; reluctance, which they interpret as culturally specific, to challenge authority; the assumption, also interpreted as culturally specific, that it is ‘normal’ for bosses to treat workers harshly; the idea that when compared to wages in China, AUD$10 per hour is a reasonable wage; and transient students’ sense of the futility of embarking on attempts to
improve working conditions in Melbourne when, by the time such improvements were realized, they would probably no longer be around to enjoy them. In Australia, the regulation of wages and workers’ employment conditions is undertaken on a complaints-driven model—meaning, essentially, that in the absence of complaints from workers, wages and working conditions will not be checked by government regulators.⁶

All in all, the situation of my participants in these jobs strongly confirms the conclusions of Marginson, Nyland, Sawir and Forbes-Mewett, that international student workers occupy a zone of ‘invisibility’ in Australia, segregated into low-status work in small businesses, often trapped in exploitative or illegal conditions, and:

crowded into a narrower range of jobs than those available to locals. They commonly offset their disadvantages by working for less than the legally defined minimum wage. Relatively few students believe these difficulties are a product of racism, partly because many employers who pay illegally low rates have the same ethnicity as those they exploit. (Marginson et al 2010: 142)

However, as we have seen, while it is true that the employers who most commonly exploit Chinese international students’ labour through underpayment are themselves ethnically Chinese—complicating any romanticised view of the ‘supportive’ nature of urban ethnic economies (Smith 2001: 86-91)—nevertheless, the broader context that sees students forced to accept such conditions is their exclusion from the more professional jobs they initially aspired to in non-Chinese-run businesses.

Elsewhere, Simon Marginson has characterized international students as inhabiting a ‘grey zone’ with regard to their (non)protection by national regulatory regimes based on the norm of citizenship (Marginson 2012). Taking this idea further with specific reference to international students’ working lives in Melbourne, Aihwa Ong’s work on ‘zones of exception’ proves useful (Ong 2006: 97-118). Ong analyzes zoning technologies in China—the creation of Special Economic Zones and Special Administrative Regions—as a state strategy aimed at proliferating cross-border networks with Chinese-dominated economic and political entities abroad (Ong 2006: 98). These zoning practices create ‘spatially fixed and distinctive enclaves’ through which ‘sovereign states can create or accommodate islands of distinct governing regimes within the broader landscape of normalized rule’ (Ong 2006: 103). While the example of Chinese international students working in Australian cities is obviously a very different one to those that Ong analyzes, nonetheless, the ‘grey zone’ that
these students inhabit vis-à-vis their (non)protection by national regulatory frameworks has a certain resonance with Ong’s concept of the zone of exception. The effect is similar: the urban diasporic economy in Chinatown and other such enclaves functions as an ‘island’ within the broader landscape of state regulation, with the student-migrant workers in this economy routinely subject to wages and working conditions that are illegal under Australian Commonwealth legislation. Given the extreme difficulties they tend to face finding better-paid work elsewhere, student-migrant workers find themselves ‘stuck’ in this zone. In discussing their reasons for agreeing to illegally low rates of pay, expressions of helplessness and lack of choice (wumai; mei banfa) are common: their own systemic underpayment appears to them like an established, unshakeable system that they lack the power to challenge. Below, to provide a richer sense of the ‘everyday texture’ of these mobile subjects’ emplaced experience, I present one participant’s story (Conradson and Latham 2005: 228).

Zhenghui’s story

I first met 21-year-old Zhenghui and her mother at a café in Shanghai in mid-2015; they were passing through from their hometown of Chongqing in China’s southwest on the way to see Zhenghui off to Melbourne, where she was heading to undertake a Masters degree in Finance. Zhenghui is an earnest, articulate young woman with a certain intensity of manner. In our interview, both she and her mother emphasized personal self-development and self-strengthening as key motivations for her journey. By studying abroad and experiencing another culture, she hoped to develop a cosmopolitanized and self-reliant identity that would not simply enhance her career prospects, but more importantly, enrich and diversify her life experience (Martin 2014).

During her first semester in Melbourne, Zhenghui took on some part-time hospitality work in Chinese restaurants for the standard rate of $10 per hour. By October, she was working regular shifts in two jobs to help defray her living expenses, which she saw as desirable to ease the financial burden of her overseas study on her parents.

Zhenghui invited me to come and visit her at her job in a small family-run Chinese restaurant in the outer eastern suburb of Chadstone. This restaurant, located in a quiet suburban shopping strip, consisted of a single small room with a plate-glass window onto the street, backed by a counter and a kitchen behind. The four or five pairs of other diners were a mix of Chinese and Caucasian, and Zhenghui moved between tables chatting amiably with them all, code-switching dexterously between Mandarin and English. She had to work
quickly as the restaurant filled up: they were short-staffed that evening, and Zhenghui had to cover the whole restaurant on her own. She ran efficiently from task to task: welcoming customers, taking orders, running them back to kitchen, serving food, totaling bills, taking payment, and clearing and setting tables. Zhenghui told me that although this work was physically exhausting and underpaid, she liked her current boss a lot more than her former employer in Chinatown, and especially enjoyed the chance to interact with ‘local’ (non-Chinese) customers.

A week later, Zhenghui sent me a WeChat message saying that she had quit the Chadstone job, and related the story of why over a series of chat messages stretching from late that night over to the next morning. It had been a busy night and once again she was the only waitress on duty. A large table ordered multiple dishes, and Zhenghui checked the complex order with them several times. But when the boss entered the restaurant, the customers asked him about a scallion pancake they said they’d ordered but not received. The boss took Zhenghui out to the kitchen and shouted at her angrily, accusing her of having forgotten the table’s order. She maintained that she hadn’t forgotten any dishes; it was the customers’ own mistake, and walked off. Later, while working in the kitchen, she burst into tears. She felt she had been mistreated and humiliated; her impulse was to quit right away, but she didn’t do so, instead staying to help the boss finish the busy shift. She later regretted this, feeling she had shown weakness in the face of pressure. Having overheard the boss shouting at her, the customers left Zhenghui a large ($20) tip, causing her to burst into tears once more. The ‘moral’ of this experience, as Zhenghui saw it, was that she must continue to make herself stronger, and fight the weakness in herself that she felt the experience brought out. Early the following morning, she sent me a short chat message: ‘For my own self-respect, I just couldn’t keep working there.’ Later, she told me that the boss still owed her $100 in wages, and tried to trick her by inviting her to drop by to get the money, but then saying that he would only pay it back if she agreed to work there again. Zhenghui felt that the $100 was not worth fighting for, despised the boss’s petty trickery, and proudly vowed, ‘I will never go back to work for him.’

Zhenghui plans to complete a barista course and obtain a license to serve alcohol; she hopes that working in a non-Chinese café or bar will help her ‘integrate’ into local society, rather than being stuck in the Chinese community, but is apprehensive about whether this plan is realistic. In November, she began to do some small-scale parallel trading (daigou) in the hope that it would be a less exhausting way of earning money, as well as a chance to develop entrepreneurial skills useful for her future career.
Two points in particular in Zhenghui’s story typify many Chinese students’ experiences of waitressing work in Melbourne. First, the labour of food serving is highly feminized: female students are directed into these customer-facing service tasks, while male students are more likely to get work as kitchen hands or dishwashers, or in other forms of less socially interactive manual labour. Waitressing work, while physically demanding, centers around the performance of emotional labour: that array of indicatively feminine tasks connected with caring for the customer that Arlie Hochschild characterizes as the provision of ‘commercial love’ (Hochschild 2003): the double performance of ‘caring’ emotion and lightly sexualized self-display through feminized uniforms.

In addition to these performative aspects, emotional labour also encompasses the work of managing other people’s emotions: both absorbing the aggression and hostility of disgruntled customers, and accepting tirades from angry bosses. Zhenghui’s self-defensive reaction to the latter was to assert her own self-respect and pride in response to her boss’s unreasonable treatment, pro-actively quitting the job and expressing scorn for the boss’s petty trickery; this allows her to claim moral superiority in symbolic compensation for the poor treatment and money owed. The intensity of the negative emotions that these workers are called upon to manage, which we see in Zhenghui’s story of being unfairly yelled at and publicly humiliated, testifies to the low-status nature of their work: as Hochschild observes, ‘persons in low-status categories—women, people of colour, children—lack a status shield against poorer treatment of their feelings,’ hence are likely to be both more open to and more affected by poor treatment from others (2003: 174). These workers’ low status arises from a combination of their gender (in common with all female service-sector workers), sometimes their race (in encounters with racist customers), and sometimes their status as young students (in encounters with bosses of their same ethnicity).

Second, Zhenghui’s story illustrates the prominence of states of relative fixity in this type of restaurant work. This fixity operates in two senses. First, in a geographic sense, the availability of these kinds of jobs is to a large extent territorially restricted to particular zones of Melbourne’s city and suburbs, especially Chinatown (when Zhenghui worked in her earlier job), the surrounding CBD, and specific areas in the suburbs with a significant Chinese population (like Chadstone, the location of Zhenghui’s second job). As embodied, face-to-face service work, waitressing is also inherently tied to the worker’s live, physical presence in the specific geographic territory of the restaurant. The second sense of fixity is
connected with students-workers’ commonly voiced sense of being ‘stuck’ in this sector of Melbourne’s economy. With a deficit of localized social capital beyond the Chinese community that compounds difficulties finding employment in higher-status jobs, service jobs paying a legal wage, or jobs with non-Chinese employers, and hindered from legally challenging their own exploitation, the students tend to feel that they lack other choices and become ‘trapped’ in the diasporic Chinese restaurant sector. We see this reflected in Zhenghui’s anxieties over whether it is realistic to hope for work in a non-Chinese café or bar, even if she obtains the requisite local qualifications.

However, although in the above ways we might describe this type of work as dominated by states of social and geographic fixity, it is important to avoid reifying such work as completely geo-fixed, with no aspects of mobility. For example, while from the point of view of recent student-migrants, the diasporic Chinese economy in Melbourne appears as a restrictive, localized space, in fact the restaurant owners and managers themselves have personal or family histories of transnational mobility, having arrived in Australia as part of earlier waves of migration--often from Hong Kong, China’s Guangdong province, Taiwan, Malaysia or Singapore--and maintain links with those places (see Smith 2001: 91-97; 119-121). And while from one angle the ‘enclave’-like quality of concentrations of Chinese-run businesses in particular pockets of the city can be seen as a type of geo-fixing, from another angle, the territorial dispersion of the various Chinese communities sees student-workers becoming quite mobile across urban space, as when Zhenghui worked in both Chinatown and Chadstone, while studying at a university at the northern end of the CBD. Further, the personal capacities that Zhenghui hoped to develop as a result of participating in this work--especially her desire to become ‘stronger,’ more resilient and more self-sufficient--link directly to her (and many other students’) stated motivations for undertaking education abroad (Martin in press 2017). In this sense, their work practices can be seen as part of these students’ broader, transnational project of self-fashioning (Martin 2014). Nevertheless, for obvious reasons, many ultimately tire of this type of work and seek other alternatives. Zhenghui, like many others, finally decided to try daigou as a less exhausting and (she hoped) better-paid alternative, and it is to this phenomenon that I now turn.

**Feminine network capital in parallel trading**

Commencing my research project in mid-2015, I soon noticed the prevalence of DIY ads for Australian health products and milk powder appearing in my contacts’ WeChat feeds, evidently targeted to their social networks back in China. This onselling activity is
known as *daigou* (literally ‘proxy purchase’) and involves students buying local products that are either unavailable or very expensive in China, selling them on to customers via social media at a percentage profit, then shipping the products to customers or onselling agents in China via discount courier services (*kuaidi*) run by members of the local Chinese community. Each nation in which Chinese students study has a ‘brand’ in terms of which products are most in demand. For example, in western Europe, high-end luxury fashion and accessories dominate the market (*Zhang* 2015), students in Korea and Japan tend to sell cosmetics and beauty products, and Australia’s national *daigou* ‘brand’ is defined by particular in-demand brands of health supplements, vitamins, personal healthcare products and pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, infant and toddler milk powder and sheepskin products, but *daigou*-ers also sell a whole range of basic supermarket items, from breakfast cereal to sweet biscuits, cake mix, and chocolate.

The volume of this informal trade is enormous. In late 2015, a single *kuaidi* courier business in Melbourne’s CBD reported sending six tonnes of goods to China every week (*Battersby* and *Zhou* 2015). In mid-2016, an employee working in the freight section of a major airline on Australia’s west coast estimated that each of four major Chinese export companies, linked to the *kuaidi* couriers and through them to individual *daigou* sellers, was freighting 50 tonnes of packages to China per week from Perth alone, with volumes from the three big east coast cities each significantly exceeding this (anonymous informant, May 31 2016). This spike in *daigou* exports over recent years has led to temporary shortages on the Australian side as supply fails to keep pace with demand, with discount pharmacies frequently sold out of popular items and news media indignantly reporting a ‘drought’ in the popular baby formula brands (see e.g. *Irvine* 2015).

The explanation for the rise in popularity of Australian-made food and health products among Chinese consumers is found in multiple food and pharmaceutical safety scandals in China over the past decade that have significantly undermined consumer confidence in locally produced goods. These include a series of highly publicized cases uncovered between 2005 and 2011 in which hundreds of small dairies across several provinces were found to have adulterated milk powder with a melamine-like substance derived from industrially processed leather waste (*Wangyi Xinwen* 2011); in 2008, this led to six deaths and 54,000 hospitalizations (*China.com.cn* 2010). Safety issues have also plagued locally produced pharmaceuticals. Harbin Pharmaceutical Group Holding Co., China’s second largest pharmaceuticals company, was rocked by ten major scandals in the six years to 2012, including misleading advertising and the illegal addition of restricted drugs to its
health supplements (Time Weekly 2013). Combined with the commonness of counterfeit products, which inclines consumers to distrust locally purchased products stating to be manufactured overseas, all of this creates an unprecedented market for food and health products that sellers can guarantee have been purchased outside China.

~

Yueming’s story

When I first met 20 year-old Yueming, she was visiting Shanghai with her mother to accompany her father, gravely ill with advanced cancer, for his treatments at a city hospital. Yueming, a sociable young woman with a warm and easy manner, was born in a rural area of Zhejiang province and planned to travel to Melbourne to complete the final two years of her bachelors degree in Accounting as part of a joint program between her university in Shanghai and one in Melbourne’s northern suburbs. In our first interview late one summer afternoon, Yueming spoke at length and with quiet pride about her father’s life. He had been born into a smallholding farming (or ‘peasant’: nongmin) family, and made his first money selling cucumbers. However, quickly realizing this was a dead-end path, he followed a family connection to a nearby city where he began working as a builder’s labourer, and soon found himself managing small construction projects. Ultimately, he obtained a night school Certificate to practice engineering, and developed a professional career as a bridge engineer, raising himself and his family into the middle class. Yueming emphasized that her father prized his own ability, resulting from personal experience, to understand the whole job from the ground up. In light of her father’s illness, Yueming was very ambivalent about going to Australia. However, since he wholeheartedly encouraged her to make the move, she did so, and started her studies in Melbourne in July 2015.

Soon after her arrival, Yueming took up parallel trading, setting up a dedicated daigou account on WeChat on which she posted multiple ads almost every day. She was soon the most successful daigou in my participant group, due to the boundless energy she poured into the enterprise, her skill in copywriting, and her wide and diverse network of contacts. Participants from larger cities told me that they felt they would be unsuccessful at daigou since most of their contacts in China knew many other people studying abroad, thus saturating the market; whereas with Yueming’s family’s rural background, this is less the case for her. Unlike other participants, who see daigou as just an activity ‘on the side’ to make a little pocket money, Yueming approached it with entrepreneurial zeal. She picked up tips from her landlady (a young mother who did daigou virtually fulltime); traded with bulk-
buying agents in China in addition to individual customers; tried to ‘develop’ new Australian products she discovered that were as yet unknown to consumers in China; and took charge of every aspect of the business herself. Yueming’s average profit margin was around 30%. With a mix of astonishment and glee, she reported that she earned over RMB¥10,000 (more than AUD$2,200) in her first month of trading; nearly three times the amount she would have made working 20 hours a week in a Chinese restaurant job for the same period.

In September 2015 I visited Yueming at the suburban house where she was living with two classmates and the landlord’s family, to accompany her on a daigou trip. Yueming jokingly referred to her room as her ‘warehouse’, indicating the small mountain of flat-packed boxes, bubble-wrap, packing tape and health and food products neatly stacked along one wall (figures 1-2). Yueming explained that she chose to specialize in health products because of the excessive capital outlay for luxury branded products, and the hassles associated with trading infant formula. Orders for formula typically demand 20 or 30 tins at a time, which, given the limit on purchases per customer (four tins in supermarkets; one in pharmacies), necessitates visits to multiple stores. Milk powder in such quantities is also heavy to carry, and purchasing it in bulk subjects the buyer to disapproving glances from locals primed on media stories about the Chinese buying up ‘our’ milk. Health products are a comparatively easy-to-buy, portable, and almost equally profitable alternative.

Fig. 1-2. Caption: Daigou goods awaiting postage in Yueming’s bedroom. Photos by Yueming, used with permission.
Yueming proudly showed me her meticulously kept, handwritten accounts book, with page after page recording products ordered, quantities sold, purchase and sale prices, and postage details. She also kept an Excel master-spreadsheet listing some 235 products organized by brand, with columns specifying purchase price in Australian dollars, sale price in Chinese yuan, discount price for bulk-buying agents, bonus discount for bulk purchase, and weight per unit to calculate postage cost. Yueming’s iPhone contained a gallery of hundreds of photographs of her customers’ national identity cards, necessary when posting parcels to China. In one WeChat post, she uploaded a photograph of her neatly clipped stacks of orders and postage receipts, classified into categories with coloured tags, captioned: ‘Suddenly, I feel very professional!’ (Figure 3). As all of this demonstrates, Yueming revelled in the professionalism of her daigou activities. She told me she was motivated not only by the enjoyment she takes in the work, but, in light of her father’s illness, also by her hope to ease her family’s financial burden in funding her studies.

![Fig. 3. Caption: Yueming’s professional record keeping of daigou orders. Photo by Yueming, used with permission.](image)

Usually, Yueming did her daigou trips by tram, carefully mapping a route that took her past four or five pharmacies and can be completed within the 2 hours’ travel time covered by a standard ticket. The day I went along with her and her housemate Xiaoyin, I brought my car, which made transporting the purchases and packaging materials a lot easier: Yueming told me how exhausting it was to lug the heavy bags of goods via public transport and on foot. Yueming’s conversation as we roamed the aisles of various discount pharmacies we visited revealed that knew each shop intimately: the products it typically stocked, the
likelihood of their being in stock or sold out, its pricing, and the attitude and competency of the check-out staff.

Later, we visited two kuaidi shops selling boxes and tape, packing and postal services, and some of the more popular daigou goods sold at a small mark-up. These Chinese-run courier shops that have in recent years cropped up all over the CBD and suburbs, transforming Melbourne's urban geography, were as usual bustling with international students and other daigou-ers packaging up parcels (Figures 4-8). In one of the shops, Yueming and Xiaoyin met and chatted with three classmates from their university program. Our shopping completed, we drove back to their house, where I helped unpack the goods and boxes from the back of my car, and they distributed some purchases to classmates living next door for whom they’d bought a few items. Yueming told me that she did at least three of these trips every week.

Fig. 4-5. Caption: Kuaidi couriers in a northern suburban shopping strip. Photos by the author
Fig. 6. Caption: *Kuaidi* courier in a suburban shopping court, visited with Yueming and Xiaoyin. Photo by the author.

Fig. 7. Caption: *Daigou* products on sale at a CBD *kuaidi* courier. Photo by the author.

Fig. 8. Caption: Customers and a staff member pack up goods at a CBD *kuaidi* courier. Photo by the author.
Two days later, Yueming announced in a WeChat post that she was planning to reward all her hard daigou work with a spur-of-the-moment trip back to China for the university holidays. Her ticket cost ¥7,500: three-quarters of her first month’s profits. It turned out to be the last time Yueming would see her father, who passed away as a result of his cancer a few weeks after she returned to Melbourne.

~

For my purposes, four main points are worth making about what Yueming’s story can reveal about the daigou phenomenon. First, like waitressing work, daigou is feminized labour, but the ways in which it is feminized are distinctive. Whereas hospitality work centres feminine emotional labour manifested in live bodily and social performance, the digital commerce of daigou centres feminine gender capital operationalized through mediated social performance. Among the many female and male participants with whom I have discussed the daigou phenomenon over the past 18 months, in both Australia and China, daigou is universally understood as ‘women’s work’, and it is a generally recognized fact that far more female than male overseas students engage in it. Participants think that this is for a number of reasons. First, as noted above, the most popular products traded in daigou from Australia are infant milk formula, marketed to mothers of young children; and beauty products and health supplements, whose biggest market is women, and of which, as themselves young women, sellers are assumed to have personal, trustworthy knowledge. Second, participants told me that young women are suited to doing daigou because of their extensive and active social media networks, which they believed were more intense, more dense and more extensive than those of young men. This form of feminine social capital can readily be converted into a customer base for daigou products, as we see in Yueming’s networks into demographics where studying overseas is relatively uncommon. Third, participants recognized that much of the art of daigou is in the scripting and design of clever and arresting advertisements for the products, and tended to think that girls are more skilled than boys in that type of socio-representational work. Daigou-ers like Yueming write witty ad copy and skilfully exploit ‘life-cast’ images of themselves as attractive, ‘cool’ or relatable models for the products being sold. As Lin Zhang writes in her analysis of how young Chinese women fashion their gendered identities through luxury European fashion-and-accessories daigou:

Fashioning an ‘authentic’ self—that is successfully annexing individuals’ unique
personality and life experiences to commercial products through visual and discursive narratives—is paramount to attracting customers, enhancing ‘stickiness,’ and increasing profit margins. To excel amid fierce competition in a risky, mediated informal market, these women must be skilled at communicating their personal and affective appropriation and engagement with [...] brands. (Zhang 2015: 11)

Each of the above three capacities that participants understand as ‘feminine’ can be interpreted, in Huppatz’s terms, as forms of feminine capital: ‘the gender advantage that is derived from a disposition or skill set learned via socialization’ (2009: 50). In making this observation, though, it is important to bear in mind Huppatz’s reiteration of Skeggs’s de Certeauian observation that femininity:

- can be used socially in tactical rather than strategic ways. [...] Tactics constantly manipulate events to turn them into opportunities; tactical options have more to do with constraints than possibilities. They are determined by the absence of power just as strategy is organized by the postulation of power. Femininity brings with it little social, political and economic worth. It is not a strong asset to trade and capitalize upon. (Skeggs 1997: 10-11)

Thus, for Huppatz, feminine capital is inherently a ‘weak’ form of capital: ultimately, it ‘may only manipulate constraints rather than overturn power’ (Huppatz 2009: 59). This will be useful to bear in mind in our continuing analysis of daigou, below.

Second, whereas as I proposed above that restaurant work is dominated by local fixity, daigou is dominated by transnational mobility. The activity hinges centrally on access to technologies, services and networks including transnational social media, transnational electronic funds transfers, transnational courier services, and traders’ transnational social networks linking them back to China. Additionally, as with Zhenghui’s restaurant work, we see in Yueming’s story how undertaking daigou links in her mind with the cultivation of capacities that are central to her wider educational mobility project, especially self-professionalization and the cultivation of entrepreneurial skills. And yet—again echoing the complexity of the first example—Yueming’s story also shows how daigou work is emplaced as well as mobile. Her day-to-day labour of doing daigou involves specific places—bedrooms, tram stops, pavements, shopping courts—and a ‘tethered sociality’ peopled by disapproving locals, housemates, landladies, pharmacy checkout staff, classmates, and kuaidi.
business owners. Thus, although in the above ways this type of work may be said to be dominated by states of mobility, it is important to avoid reifying such work as completely mobile, with no aspects of geographic emplacement.

Third and relatedly, in harnessing capacities linked with their mobility, my participants’ daigou ventures draw on most of the constitutive elements of network capital (Urry 2007: 197-98). These include possession of the appropriate documentation to have enabled them to relocate to Melbourne for study; distal personal connections enabling them to develop a customer base; the physical capacity to travel in Melbourne to purchase and mail the products; social media apps and smartphones through which to advertise and manage orders; access to mail courier and transportation services in Melbourne; and the time and aptitude to coordinate the whole venture. Thus, the capacity to undertake daigou represents a confluence of these young women’s combined feminine capital and network capital: both sets of capacities are necessary to maximize the viability of their daigou ventures. This assemblage I call feminine network capital. However, in characterizing these students’ daigou activities in this way, I emphasise that the type of network capital the students are able to wield—mirroring their feminine gender capital—is a ‘weak’ and tactical form. Faced with effective exclusion from secure employment in Melbourne, the Chinese students leverage their relatively small reserves of network capital tactically, to negotiate the structural constraints that circumscribe their opportunities.

Fourth and perhaps most notably, however, Yueming’s narrative also highlights the role of unquantifiable affective dimensions to people’s experiences of mobility. Yueming’s story of coming to Australia to study and undertaking daigou is entangled with the parallel story of her father’s illness in multiple complex ways: the difficult decision of whether to stay in China to be with her father or come to Australia to carry out his wish; the potential to decrease the financial burden that her overseas education imposes on him as a motivation for undertaking daigou; and the fact that it is her daigou profits that ultimately permit her to go home and see him for the final time. Here, perhaps, is where we reach the limits of highly generalized theories in accounting for the embodied, subjective and affective singularity of people’s experience (Chakrabarty 1997: 43).

Conclusion: Imbricated and ambivalent (im)mobilities

In the foregoing analysis, I have framed the daigou phenomenon as an opportunistic exploitation of temporary gaps in the transnational supply chain. In closing, it is worth noting that these opportunities may prove to be temporary: over the past year, commercial and state
interests far larger and stronger than the students have begun stepping in to fill the gaps and reap benefit from the formalization of Australia-China retail trade. Between late 2015 and early 2016, both Chemist Warehouse and Woolworths supermarkets, two of Australia’s largest retailers of daigou products, began to market direct to Chinese consumers via stores on Alibaba’s TMall Global e-commerce website (Victorian Government 2015; Woolworths Limited 2016). In April 2016, China imposed tough new measures to extract import duties on daigou trade (Caixin Online 2016; Haigh 2016), and many speculate that Australia’s Free Trade Agreement with China, effective as of December 20 2015, will enable more and more companies to trade direct, cutting out the work of the daigou-ers (Battersby and Zhou 2015).

It is the nature of tactics to be opportunistic, small-scale, mobile and temporary (de Certeau 1984); daigou may prove to be no exception.

By presenting international student parallel traders as operationalizing a tactical form of feminine network capital, I have tried in this article to productively complicate the network capital concept as developed by Urry. The daigou example shows that this form of capital can take ‘weak’ as well as ‘strong’ forms, and be wielded tactically from positions of disadvantage as well as strategically to consolidate advantage. Moreover, as I have shown, Chinese students turn to daigou in the first place at least partly as a result of experiencing exclusion from secure employment in local businesses in Melbourne, which in turn is due partly to the social capital deficit that they experience as a result of their move away from their home cities in China. Contra Urry’s framing of network capital, we thus see how social capital in the Bourdieusian sense remains at least partially tethered to place. Examples like these force us to recognize that for most people, social structure—hence social capital—remains somewhat attached to localized personal and family histories and specific geographies. Geographic and social mooring in place can generate benefit for individuals and groups, and being extracted from one location and relocated in another entails losses that cannot be fully compensated by the placeless machinations of network capital.

The situation of these students also demonstrates both opportunities and risks associated with the geo-mobile and the geo-fixed states that intertwine in their experience. For example, although I have not had the scope to expand on this point here, the transnational educational journeys of many of the young women in my study were in the first place motivated by their families’ sense of the specific risks women face in a gender-discriminatory employment market in China: enhancing female job applicants’ CVs with overseas education is hoped to offset their gender disadvantage (Martin in press 2017). Thus, people become mobile as a response to a risk attaching to staying put. Analogously, in the
examples considered above, finding themselves ‘stuck’ in the relatively fixed ‘zone of exception’ of Chinese restaurant work, students tactically ‘turn to the transnational’ in undertaking parallel trading. Here again, forms of mobility are taken up to mitigate the risks of fixity. But in other cases, geographic tethering represents opportunity; as in the case of localized social capital to which students have access in their communities of long-term residence in China but tend to lack, to their detriment, when arriving in Melbourne. Mobility, too, brings risks as well as opportunities. While study abroad was often framed as a response to the risks of getting ‘stuck’ in a disadvantaged position in China, conversely, some graduate students and education industry workers with whom I have spoken observe that graduates from overseas universities returning to seek work in China may actually face increased disadvantage as a result of ‘guanxi deficit’: the social connections on which people must often rely to secure jobs wither during their years away, making them uncompetitive against domestic graduates (Hao and Welch 2012).

In these examples of ‘middling’ forms of transnationalism, mobilities are wielded tactically against the risks of ‘stuckness’ in place; yet these mobilities themselves entail new risks, because they negate the opportunities as well as the dangers attaching to geo-fixity. Such examples should caution us against any simple equation of mobility with capital understood as an abstract, general and placeless form of value. Specific forms of mobility entail specific forms of benefit as well as danger, all of them imbricated with both the materialities of particular places and the singularities of mobile subjects’ embodied experience.

References


Caixin Online. 2016. ‘China to place new taxes on foreign goods bought via e-commerce.’


Franquesa, Jaume. 2011. “‘We’ve Lost Our Bearings’: Place, Tourism, and the Limits of the ‘Mobility Turn’.” Antipode 43(4): 1012-1033.


Haigh, Adam. 2016. ‘Blackmores CEO Downplays China E-Commerce Tax as Shares Sink.’


Irvine, Jessica. 2015. ‘Why baby formula is the new iron ore.’ The Age November 12.


Notes

1 Urry neglects to consider the alternative accounts of social capital from Pierre Bourdieu and other scholars. I treat network capital as a variety of, rather than a replacement for, social capital.

2 All participant names are pseudonyms. All quotes are translated from the original Chinese by the author, unless stated otherwise.

3 Booth, Leigh and Varganova (2012: 558) showed that a person with a Chinese name would need to submit 68% more applications than someone with an Anglo name in order to get the same number of responses, making Chinese applicants the most discriminated against of all ethnic groups studied.

4 In mid-2016 two prominent Chinese restaurant chains began paying $18 per hour, rumour has it this was in response to being reported for underpay.

5 In fact, the students’ incomes almost certainly fall below Australia’s tax-free threshold.

6 My discussion is based on email and telephone conversations with representatives of both Fair Work Australia (the governmental regulatory body) and the JobWatch legal advice centre, in October-November 2015. Fair Work concentrates on developing a handful of high-profile prosecutions each year to act as a deterrent to the industries in question.
Author/s:
Martin, F

Title:
Rethinking network capital: hospitality work and parallel trading among Chinese students in Melbourne

Date:
2017-01-01

Citation:

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/214412

File Description:
Accepted version