One Saturday afternoon in the bedroom of the purpose-built international student apartment in Carlton, Melbourne that she shares with three Chinese classmates, 20-year old Ying, an Arts student from Hebei Province, connects via her laptop to a popular media download site based in China. While downloading several recent movies and TV series episodes (from China, Thailand and Hollywood), Ying opens up her QQ account and makes a video call to her parents back home. Speaking with her mother, she catches up on the latest news and gossip from her family and hometown. Ying then posts a comment on an ex-schoolmate’s status update on WeChat (the Chinese WhatsApp-style platform): ‘Nice pic! You and your BF are such a cute couple, haha. Miss you. Message me!’ She then scans a favourite gossip account to catch up on celebrity news from China. Once Ying’s downloads are complete, she spends the rest of the afternoon immersed in the latest episodes of the Chinese TV comedy series that screened back home the previous week.

Yaqi, a 20-year-old from Liaoning Province, sits by the window on a suburban train travelling from the leafy eastern suburb of Camberwell, where she lives in a homestay, to Melbourne’s Central Business District, where she studies actuarial studies. Yaqi is engrossed in the screen of her smartphone, where she scrolls through recent posts on her Weibo feed (the Chinese Twitter-like platform), catching up on the details of a recent political scandal involving a prominent member of the Chinese Communist Party. Interspersed with tweets on this story, Yaqi also reads local tips from the diasporic Chinese community in Melbourne, on where to get a discount lunch; which suburban hospital emergency department is under-resourced; and which supermarket has begun stocking specialty foods from China.

International tertiary students like Ying and Yaqi make up a considerable mobile population in the world today: in 2012, some 4.5 million studied outside their country of citizenship, with a majority travelling from Asian nations to wealthier western countries (OECD 2014, 342-345). Australian universities, facing a financial
squeeze due to a severe decline in government funding since the late 1980s, have enthusiastically welcomed International 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 (Australian Government 2014). Due to the boom in its economy following the market reforms initiated in the late 1970s, China has become the world’s largest student-sending nation, and is by far Australia’s largest source of International students (OECD 2014, 350; Australian Government 2015).

What, then, are the implications of these developments? On one hand, Australian governments and universities celebrate the economic success of the nation’s ‘education export’ strategy: education is routinely touted as Australia’s fourth largest export commodity—behind iron ore, coal and natural gas (Olsen 2014)—with the potentials for corruption inherent in such commercialization only very recently coming into the public spotlight (ICAC 2015; Bretag 2015). On the other hand, in relation to the wider social implications of education’s internationalisation, the intensifying inflow of international students—particularly in light of ubiquitous broadband connectivity and students’ ready access to ‘homeland’ media—has raised questions about both these students’ social experience in Australia, and the significance of their presence from the point of view of wider Australian civic life. In response to these issues, in this chapter I draw on research I am carrying out with a group of Chinese international students in Melbourne, in order to consider two central questions. Focusing on both the students’ media experience and their wider experience of social life in Melbourne—as well as the intersections of these two realms—I consider, first: how does these students’ everyday media use feed into their experiences of mobility, local belonging and home-making in Melbourne? Second: how do both these students’ media experiences and their broader social experiences in Melbourne impact on their negotiations with the concept of ‘China’ and Chinese identity? I note at the outset that because my project is still in its beginning stages, I am not yet in a position to provide definitive answers to these questions; rather, I discuss in a more speculative mode how the data I have gathered so far resonates with these issues. I raise these questions against the backdrop of certain trends in the current scholarship on migration, media, multicultural public spheres, and Chinese youth nationalism, which I summarise briefly below before analysing data from my study.
Shattered Public Spheres and Networked Nationalisms

Within the current scholarship, the intensifying mobilities of both people and media have raised anxieties about both the fragmentation of national public spheres (in western nations like Australia) and the rise of new popular nationalisms (among Chinese youth). On one hand, some scholars analysing temporary migration from the perspective of the western nations where migrants arrive to live, study, and work highlight problems connected with migrants’ civic engagement in their ‘host societies’. For example, in his essay, ‘Public sphere or public sphericules?’ Todd Gitlin nostalgically laments the “shattering” of the possibility of a unitary, Habermasian public sphere due to the spread of electronic networked media technologies, as well as the fragmentation of ‘the’ public into multiple publics as a result both of commercial market segmentation and of multiculturalism (Gitlin 1998, 168). Following these developments, Gitlin worries about the possibility that ‘the public sphere, in falling, has shattered into a scatter of globules, like mercury’ (Gitlin 1998, 173). In some more recent studies on the social effects of media use by first-generation and temporary migrants in western cities, we hear echoes of Gitlin’s anxiety about the fragmentation of the public into plural publics, and even into ‘virtual ghettos’ in which new social media connected to migrants’ countries of origin create ‘separate lives’, and hinder ‘integration’ and ‘assimilation’ into the host society, as Lee Komito and Jessica Bates argue in relation to Polish labour migrants in Dublin (Komito and Bates 2009). Broadly consonant points have been raised by Catherine Gomes in her study of media use by Asian international students in Australia, in which she found that these students, to their detriment, inhabited a ‘parallel society [...] disconnected from Australian society and culture’; a trend compounded by the non-consumption of Australian entertainment media by the students she studied (Gomes 2014, 519). From this perspective, intensifying temporary migration and media mobilities appear as a pressing issue for the host country: will its public sphere be shattered? Will the new arrivals, aided by their transnational media engagements, form ‘virtual ghettos’, impairing the national community’s social cohesion?

On the other hand, some work in the field of China studies has approached the issue of Chinese students abroad from what amounts to a reverse perspective: that of students’ relation to the Chinese nation and nationalisms. Chinese students’
experience overseas has been framed in relation to the hallmark characteristics of the generations born in the 1980s and 1990s who make up the current wave of educational migrants (Nyíri, Zhang and Varrall 2010; Fong 2004; Chan 2005; Nyíri 2010). Scholars underline that as a consequence of the internationalisation of popular culture, increased wealth, and the relaxation of bureaucratic controls on travel, international travel is increasingly seen as an expected part of one’s life experience, and this generation is seen to be reconceptualising Chinese identity in relation to a cosmopolitan imaginary (Nyíri, Zhang and Varrall 2010; Rofel 2007). At the same time, however, loyalty to the Chinese nation is repeatedly emphasized in the secondary school ‘patriotic education’ curriculum that has been in place since 1991 (Wang 2008; Zhao 2005; Rosen 2009). A tension between transnational and national(ist) imaginaries is thus central to the public culture that shapes this generation’s identity. Equally significantly, the current generation of students are digital natives who have grown up with Internet use in education as well as the widespread use of Chinese-language computer- and phone-based social networking sites in everyday life (Wallis 2011; Zhang 2010), and their use of these Chinese platforms often continues when they travel overseas for study.

In light of this confluence of cosmopolitan outlook, networked sociality, and popular nationalism, China studies scholars have focused attention on the engagement of the current generation of Chinese students abroad in recent flare-ups of Chinese cyber-nationalism. (Gries et al 2011; Liu 2012; Nyíri, Zhang and Varrall 2010). From this perspective, recent waves of student migration appear primarily as an issue for the Chinese nation and state. The China studies scholars ask: why have Chinese youth studying overseas become proponents of ‘long-distance nationalism’ (Anderson 1992)? Will their patriotism from afar reach back to have effects on the politics of nationalism within China itself (Nyíri, Zhang and Varrall 2010)? Are the students effectively induced by the Chinese state to carry that state ‘within themselves’ (Nyíri, Zhang and Varrall 2010, 53)?

Both of the perspectives surveyed above raise pertinent points. However, it is my contention that neither of these approaches on its own is able to produce an adequately nuanced and holistic understanding of the unique new forms of sociality, subjectivity and identity being forged among the current generation of Chinese international students studying in western nations like Australia. On one hand, the ‘sphericules’ perspective is limited because, as Stuart Cunningham and others have
observed, with its principal focus on migrants as isolated, disconnected communities in the host nation, it sees only part of the picture (Cunningham 2001; Couldry and Dreher 2007). This perspective fails to grasp fully the fact that, while appearing to ‘fragment’ one (national) public sphere, these communities may be active participants in other, transnational public spheres. In the case of Chinese international students, these may include the kinds of ‘transnational Chinese cultural sphere’ theorised by Guobin Yang and others (Yang 2003; Ang 2001, 52-74), whose membership extends across geographically dispersed Sinophone communities worldwide, and whose opportunities for social interaction and civic engagement are not necessarily less than those afforded by a traditional, territorially-bounded national public sphere.

On the other hand, accounts that see recent waves of mainland Chinese migration as only part of a transnational network centred in and even directed by the PRC state are also unable to account persuasively for Chinese international student experience. My research with Chinese students in Melbourne shows that these students are not like the kinds of business migrant semi-elites discussed by Nyíri, who have extremely low levels of ‘knowledge of or interest toward the host society’, and for whom ‘the words “Japan” or “Hungary”’—or by extension, ‘Australia’—‘merely denote different Chinese economies and regimes of immigration’ (Nyíri 2010, 648-649). On the contrary, Chinese students coming to Australia usually have no direct ties to or contact with the Chinese government, and come full of hopes to learn about and participate in Australian society, with their everyday media and social practices contributing to ongoing place-making projects in the Australian cities where they live (Martin and Rizvi 2014).¹

In light of these complexities, in considering how these students’ both negotiate local belonging in Melbourne, and (re)negotiate their understandings of ‘China’ and ‘Chineseness’, I aim to keep in mind that students’ transnational media networks affect not only their relationship with the idea of ‘China’, but also their elaboration of a home-place in Melbourne; and their experiences in Melbourne affect not just their sense of local place, but also their unfolding negotiations of ‘Chineseness’.

My analysis is based both on a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with fifteen tertiary students from China aged between 18 and 24 years, which I conducted in Melbourne during 2012, as a pilot study, and on my ongoing ethnographic research with a group of 50 Chinese students in Melbourne, commencing mid-2015.
Media, Mobility and Belonging

My research indicates that even before they left China, these students’ educational journeys to Australia were already highly mediated, often preceded by media-enabled ‘imaginative travel’ pre-departure (Urry 2007, 169-70). In addition to the common pre-departure activity of scouring forums on Chinese social media for first-hand accounts of life and study in Australia, several interviewees recalled longer histories of imaginative engagement with the idea of ‘the West’ through Euro-American entertainment media. Ying (20), for example, recalled in relation to the US telemovie trilogy Highschool Musical that ‘a big part of my inspiration to go overseas came from films and TV. Because the high school life they depict looks so perfect.’ Similarly, Wenyi (24) remembered listening to US band The Backstreet Boys during her school years; for her, ‘it was like a key that opened a door’ to western culture and, ultimately, the desire to study abroad. Such examples illustrate how popular entertainment media are ‘implicated in the imaginative pull towards mobility’ (Kim 2011, 64; see also Appadurai 1996, 35-36).

After their arrival in Australia, my respondents reported a wide range of everyday media engagements, dominated by networked digital media. Within this group of predominantly rather recent arrivals, regular consumption of Chinese-language media clearly outweighed their engagements with Australian media content (Table 1). Use of Chinese social media was the most significant aspect of their everyday media worlds, with platforms like WeChat, Weibo and QQ accessed both frequently—always daily and often many times a day—and sometimes for significant stretches of time. These media connect students into the local environment—specific groups for Chinese International students in Melbourne circulate daily information on food, housing, discounts, events, local news and so on (Martin and Rizvi 2014)—as well as into transnational networks. Wenyi observed:

[On Weibo], you don’t only follow your friends. You can also follow a lot of famous people; lots of them have Weibo accounts. There are accounts for celebrity gossip. But there are also social commentators, and writers, writing evaluations and critical commentaries on major news events in China. So I think that through Weibo I maintain a certain connection with China.\(^2\)
The ‘connection’ that Wenyi feels with China through Weibo is not just based on personal ties and entertainment; her engagements with critical social commentaries and public intellectuals indicates that this is a connection, precisely, into a form of transnational public sphere.

Unsurprisingly for this generation, newspapers were not among their favoured media, although many did report regularly dipping into the local free newspaper distributed on public transport in Melbourne, *mX*; one respondent mentioned reading other free newspapers delivered to residents by local councils; and a few had held electronic subscriptions to the Victorian tabloid *The Herald Sun*. Chinese-language community newspapers published in Australia were even less popular than these English-language papers. As Wenyi explained, although the older Chinese woman with whom she was boarding bought these papers, Wenyi herself found little to interest her there, since ‘you can see all that news on the web anyway,’ and moreover, the papers didn’t feel targeted to her: offputtingly, she found them filled with ads for ‘secondhand cars and fish-and-chip shops for sale’—clearly targeting an earlier, older, and less solidly middleclass wave of immigrants. Pal Nyíri (2010) shows that Chinese community newspapers in Europe draw much of their content from PRC-based news services, and are sometimes edited by people with direct CCP connections. He observes that these Chinese migrant media’s ‘narratives of belonging […]and] the standardisation of new migrant media contribute to the construction of a “global Chinese” identity with shared values, raising cultural Chineseness and transnational modernity in importance above the immediate environment the reader happens to be in’ (Nyíri 2010, 641). In light of that observation, it is perhaps significant that such media were largely ignored by my respondents in Australia. In this respect, they may be sidestepping at least some of the state’s efforts to connect migrants’ overseas ventures back into a China-centric model of citizenship and national-cultural identity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mainland Chinese media</th>
<th>Frequently engaged</th>
<th>Sometimes engaged</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TV costume dramas (EG Zhen Huan)</td>
<td>TV variety shows (EG KuaiLe Da Benying); CCTV edu-tainment shows (EG BaiJia Jiangtan); TV dating shows (EG Fei Cheng Wu Rao); Chinese web radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web and apps: Weibo, Wechat, QQ, Douban, Renren</td>
<td></td>
<td>Web and apps: Sina, Tengxun, PPTV, Kuaibo QiYi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other East</td>
<td>Korean TV dramas; Taiwanese</td>
<td>Taiwanese idol dramas; Taiwanese movies;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Asian media

variety shows (EG Kangxi Laile); Hong Kong movies

Thai horror movies

Australian media

mX free paper

Morning radio; ABC news online; The Herald Sun online; free local papers; Seven News; The Footy Show; TV drama Home and Away; reality-competition shows (EG: Master Chef, Australia’s Got Talent, The Biggest Loser, The Block); popular science show Catalyst

Other western/ Anglophone media

US TV dramas (EG: Friends, Big Bang Theory, Gossip Girl, Revenge); Hollywood movies

Web and apps: Google, Youtube

US reality / talk/ infotainment TV (EG Man Versus Wild, The Voice, The National Geographic channel, The Ellen Degeneres Show); CNN news; BBC TV dramas (EG Doctor Who); Chloe magazine

Web and apps: Facebook, WhatsApp

Table 1: Participants’ media engagements in Melbourne (2012 group)

Being in Two Places at Once

Some respondents’ media-use narratives underlined electronic media’s capacity to create a subjective sense of the proximity of China whilst in Australia—a sense of ‘being in two places at once’ (Scannell 1996, 91-92). For example, consider the following account:

When you’re interacting on the Internet, national borders don’t feel very obvious. Like, I’m here and they’re over there. You just … don’t notice that […] It’s like, a group of people floating in some different kind of space. […] I should read Australian newspapers, but I don’t, really. I used to read them, then I sort of forgot to keep doing it. […] I think I should read them, because I’m in Australia, so I should know what’s happening in the Australian news. But actually, it seems as if whenever something happens in China, then I know about it right away. Whereas if something happens in Australian society, I don’t know about it even though I’m staying here. […] My mother’s in China, but sometimes something happens there that even she hasn’t heard about, and I tell her about it, and she’s like – huh? I see it all via the Internet. (Song, 22)

Song’s metaphor for the feel of the Internet as ‘a group of people floating in some different kind of space,’ subjectively untethered from their immediate surrounds and imaginatively connected ‘back’ to China, appears to lend support to the idea that
transnational media connectivity enables these students effectively to disconnect from their geographic location in Melbourne, drifting entirely free of local context. However, this is far from the whole story.

Negotiating (Dis)connection, Ambivalent Belonging, and Syncretic Home-Making

In other narratives, we see students’ media use negotiating various levels of connection and disconnection with local social contexts and articulating a complex sense of what I term *ambivalent belonging*. At one end of the spectrum, some interviewees discussed how their engagements with local media in Australia drew attention to their ‘outsider’ status. For example, Song had often watched Australian TV news and reality shows when living in a former share house with other Chinese international students. But rather than feeling incorporated into an Australian national audience, she felt like ‘an outsider watching: let’s see what’s on TV over here. That kind of feeling. […] An outsider finds the content extra-interesting; like “Ahh, so *that’s* how it is” – that kind of feeling.’ This reflexive awareness of ‘outsider’ status was echoed in remarks made by Shufen (18):

> No, I don’t [feel like a part of Australian society when I read free newspapers]. Because to be honest, I tend to read mainly articles about International students. If they’re not about International students, I tend not to be that interested in the things in the papers. So when I read them, I am reading with the identity of an international student (*liuxuesheng*).

Shufen’s response illustrates the development of an ‘international student’ identity as a sort of third option that is distinct from both identification either as ‘Chinese citizen’ and ‘part of Australian society’.

At the other end of the spectrum, other respondents told of quite different experiences with Australian media, including accounts in which engagement with it enabled them to elaborate a certain sense of belonging and at-homeness in Melbourne. Yaqi (20), enrolled in a prep program toward a degree in Actuarial Studies, provides an interesting example here, and one that is worth considering as a more detailed case study. In developing this analysis, I draw inspiration from the work of David Morley, Shaun Moores and others in materialist media studies, who argue for the need to richly contextualize media use as among a range of everyday practices that produce
place—including the place of ‘home’—as a practical and emotional accomplishment (Morley 2009; Moores 2012; Georgiou 2011; Metykova 2010; Hepp 2009; Couldry and McCarthy 2004).

At the time of our interview, Yaqi had been living for 18 months in a homestay in a leafy eastern suburb of Melbourne, sharing a heritage-style brick house with her Australian ‘homestay mother’ and a female Taiwanese university student. I interviewed Yaqi in what had once been the house’s living room but was currently serving as a makeshift combined kitchen / living room while the main kitchen was being renovated. Yaqi told me that she felt extremely comfortable in her homestay: she got along well with both her housemate and her landlady, and by choice spent a lot of her time in the communal living room / kitchen chatting with them. As with many of my interviewees, Yaqi’s media practices comprise a complex mix of transnational connections to both ‘homeland’ and other overseas media as well as connections with Australian media, and they are worth recounting in detail in order to illustrate this syncretic character.

Like many of my 2012 interviewees, Yaqi made daily use of Chinese social networking sites including Renren (similar to Facebook) and, especially, Weibo (similar to Twitter); she accessed Weibo mainly on the train between her homestay and the urban campus where she was studying. Although she had signed up to Facebook, she did not feel comfortable enough with this platform to use it regularly; however, since moving to Australia she did tend to use Google rather than the Chinese search engine Baidu. Despite her lecturers’ recommendations that students try to read the Finance section of Australian newspapers, Yaqi had never actually read an Australian paper. She also stated: ‘I don’t read Chinese newspapers very much because, sometimes I feel—the things they write aren’t too meaningful. The point is, right from the start they say how great the country [China] is, and on and on – it’s all so meaningless (wuliao)!’ (On this point, see further discussion in the next section). Yaqi’s fandom of US sitcoms had begun in her home city of Shenyang, when she had forced herself to watch them in order to improve her listening comprehension for the IELTS exam. She then began to enjoy the shows and continued to watch them in Melbourne, both via free-to-air broadcast on the living room / kitchen TV set and via Internet download on her laptop in her bedroom. She had also recently downloaded and watched the 2012 Korean drama series Rooftop Prince (Oktaabang Wangseja)
and the 2011 Chinese costume drama *The Legend of Zhen Huan (Hou Gong: Zhen Huan Zhuan)*.

Yaqi also enjoyed watching the Australian soap opera *Home and Away* nightly on free-to-air TV with her landlady. She spoke animatedly about getting caught up in the plot: she was shocked and ‘heartbroken’ when a beautiful policewoman character died, and the show’s relatively non-moralistic treatment of another character’s divorce and re-partnering led her to a thoughtful, reflexive consideration of the seemingly distinct value systems of Australian versus Chinese TV dramas:

*Home and Away* I’ve watched, because my landlady watches it every day, so I get to see it. [...] I watched it a lot. [...] I can still remember which girl got together with which boy and everything that happened [laughs]. [...] I was aware of a bit of cultural difference, though. Truly, truly. Because some of their understanding of certain concepts is quite different from ours. [...] For example, that boy in it called Romeo. He broke up with his girlfriend, right? Those two had got married, right? Right after that I went back to China. Then after I got back, they broke up. He got together with Ruby. And I thought: once they were married, how could he do that kind of thing? But later, I thought more about it, and realized: OK, since you don’t like that girl, you should tell her clearly, and say: I like somebody else. But in China, that’s not the way of thinking. [...] If something like this were shown on TV in China, it would tend to be criticised. Whereas here, there was no criticism implied.

We see in Yaqi’s reflexive engagement with the implications of the drama’s representations of social norms something far more complex than straightforward disengagement from ‘Australian society’ or an inhabitation of some completely separate social world. Instead, her engagements with the perceived ‘Australianness’ of *Home and Away* enable a reflexive re-seeing, and partial denaturalisation, of Chinese social and representational norms.

Her watching of the show—especially the ritual of nightly viewing in her homestay living room—also begins to articulate a syncretic sense of ‘at-homeness’ for Yaqi. When I asked whether watching Chinese dramas like *Zhen Huan* on her laptop gave her any sense of returning ‘back home’, Yaqi was keen to make clear that
unlike others, she did not consume such media with the aim of imaginatively returning home:

No, I watch them purely to de-stress. […] Because I feel my life here is very good. Not like other people, who feel exhausted, or desperate to go back home. Because I feel that if you have everything set up properly, then anywhere can be your home.

Here, Yaqi articulates a feeling of at-homeness that arises from having her immediate surrounds and routines ‘set up properly’, enabling a strong sense of attachment to develop with the mediatised place of her homestay. Significantly, this place attachment was highlighted again in the picture Yaqi painted of her hoped-for future, which as the quote below illustrates, was directly inspired by her enjoyment of the specific physical place of her homestay’s living / eating / TV area:

I hope that I’ll be able to find a [husband] I like. And … to return home from work, make and eat dinner, then watch TV and go to bed and that’s it—I really do hope for that kind of life. Sometimes when I’m sitting here eating, I look at the sofa there and imagine myself cuddling a cat or a dog, and chatting. […] I just want a stable life. I don’t ask too much.

The sense of at-homeness that Yaqi articulates in these two excerpts arises from a combination of affective relationships with her immediate physical environment in her Camberwell homestay, and ‘place choreographies’: complex, routinised behaviours that link the subject to the living environment (Seamon 1979, 41; Moores 2012, 53-54). As Moores underlines, habitual media interactions constitute one element within the individual’s elaboration of at-homeness in place. Yaqi’s at-homeness in Melbourne is a product of her occupation of the spaces of her homestay house (especially the living room / kitchen), plus the affective relations she had developed with the people, objects and media she encounters in the household (her landlady, her housemate, the sofa, the kitchen table, the TV set, her laptop). Her place choreographies include the habitual movements of coming home and occupying the communal space each evening to chat, eat dinner and watch TV with her landlady, then retreating later to the private space of her bedroom for study, media use via
laptop, and sleep. The TV set and the laptop constitute two important nodes in the mediatised place choreography that shapes Yaqi’s daily domestic routines; her smartphone is another that, as we have seen, extends her place choreography out beyond the domestic and into wider (sub)urban space. Through all of this, we see how Yaqi uses both media and non-media elements to produce her home-place. Affective relations, place choreographies and local and transnational media connections combine to produce Yaqi’s sense of at-homeness in the syncretic cultural, geographic and media landscapes of her everyday lifeworld in Melbourne.

Reflexivity and Chinese National Identity in Melbourne

The discussion above addressed the question of how everyday media use mediates Chinese students’ experiences of mobility, location and belonging in Melbourne. In this section, I consider my second question: how do my interviewees’ everyday media use and social experience in Melbourne impact on their negotiation of their own relation with ‘China’ and ‘Chineseness’?

Due partly to the context of the interviews—relatively relaxed discussions of everyday experience—the loyalty to China that my respondents expressed on occasion was of a much ‘cooler’ kind than the ‘hot’ nationalism that young Chinese netizens have sometimes expressed in response to various international conflicts involving China (Gries et al 2011,2). Although they often felt a patriotic duty to protect China’s reputation from criticisms of the CCP regime made by people they met in Australia, my interviewees’ patriotism—such as it was—was not a straightforward identification with either the CCP or the Chinese state. Yaqi’s comment below is typical:

To speak frankly, sometimes the Chinese government does do some things that are not too good—sometimes. But it will always be our government. It will always be the government of the Chinese people. People within our own family can [criticise] it; and if you phrase it positively, then you can do so as well. But don’t resort to slander. When [foreigners] resort to slander, I feel: it’s not your place [ni meiyou zige] to say that.

Other frequently repeated characterisations of students’ feeling for China as a nation include a similar analogy comparing China to one’s alma mater (‘The nation [China]
is like the school you graduated from. It’s like, I can criticise it a hundred times, a thousand times, but I won’t let others criticise it’: Liangya, 24, Hunan. Such an orientation toward the Chinese nation—loyal in the same way one is loyal to one’s family or school, yet not precluding criticism of the government and the Party—has much in common with both ‘liberal nationalism’ as discussed by Suisheng Zhao (Zhao 2005, 137), and ‘filial nationalism’ as analyzed by Vanessa Fong (Fong 2004).

Following their arrival in Australia, my respondents’ subjective and emotional relationships with the idea of the Chinese nation appear to date to have been affected by three main processes: a growing awareness of the partiality of Chinese state media; racialisation in Melbourne’s non-Chinese-dominant society and a perceived burden of ethnic representation; and the realisation of the internal multiplicity of Chinese identity. In this section, I consider each of these processes in turn.

The Limits of Chinese State Media

Reflecting, at times, a nascent awareness of the limits of Chinese state discourse, several of my respondents articulated a developing recognition of the partiality of Chinese state media. Fong observes that despite the current middleclass young generation’s shared sense of filial nationalism, their cosmopolitan worldview means that they also tend to have a highly reflexive orientation toward the idea of ‘China’, and a certain tendency to distance themselves from it emotionally, even before they travel abroad for study (Fong 2004, 635). This was certainly reflected in some of the pre-departure interviews I conducted with students in China in 2015, in which some future students readily voiced criticisms of elements of state policy and practice (especially around environmental and social equity issues, and the bias of state media). Post-arrival interviews suggest that the experience of living away from China may augment such an awareness. For example, Shuling (19) vividly describes the impact of reading anti-CCP publications by the Falun Gong organisation (outlawed in China), to which she of course had not had access before leaving China:

I read [Australian-produced Chinese newspapers] once. But I don’t dare to read them twice! [laughs] They say the [Chinese Communist] Party is not good. I was shocked! And they said Falun Gong is really good! I daren’t see it twice. And they have evidence to say the Party is not good. I am shocked! I don’t want to know this because I love my country.
Shuling’s narrative captures the internal conflict of a moment when former certainties begin to crumble. Although she states that she has since deliberately avoided Falun Gong publications due to the disorienting challenge they pose to her love for China, she is very self-aware about the kind of doublethink she is engaging in. Although she states that ‘I don’t want to know this’, of course, she does know it now. While at the time of our interview, Shuling remained (albeit ambivalently) defensive of the Party and the state, it is certainly possible that this direct experience of their limits—exposure to ‘evidence’ of the Party’s possible wrongdoings—might open up a critical distance for her.

Another interesting example is found in the experiences of Shun (22), a young woman originally from a rural area in Liaoning Province who had lived in Australia for four and a half years at the time of our initial interview, was in the final year of her BA, and had ambitions to undertake a graduate Law degree. Majoring in Politics, Shun had a special interest in current affairs. Like Yaqi, quoted above, she was impatient with the official spin in Chinese news media: ‘To tell the truth, I don’t really believe the Chinese news media, I’d rather believe Weibo.’ Shun related how she regularly watched BBC News and read the New York Times, with a special focus on the Asia-Pacific region and China, and compared news reports on particular issues from various sources; for example, Chinese media versus the BBC. In part through these critical media engagements and in part through her recent studies on Chinese politics, Shun was developing a complexly ambivalent orientation toward the idea of ‘China’. She explained:

The course I’m taking is fairly sensitive—Politics. So sometimes in class, I get so angry! In my view, I think we need to see the good things about China, so that we can feel proud. So I feel the need to defend China. But sometimes, the questions I’m asked—I get so embarrassed, because … I really don’t know how to explain certain things. I’m not willing to say that China’s—that is, I admit that we do have a few, you know, whatever—but unconsciously, I’m unwilling to admit, I don’t wish to admit that—. So sometimes, I’m asked questions that [I can’t answer]. This gives me an incentive to try to reach a deeper understanding of China. To think deeper about those particular questions. Some people don’t understand, they say: you’re studying overseas, why would you choose to study
Chinese politics? But actually if you studied Chinese politics in China, there’d be certain things you wouldn’t have access to. […] After studying [Chinese politics] here, I’ve found it’s extremely worthwhile. […] It’s had a huge impact on the development of my thinking. I see things from a different perspective now.

This excerpt illustrates Shun’s ongoing, deeply felt ambivalence about the re-orientation of her relationship with ‘China’ that is occurring as a result of her time in Melbourne. When describing her anger at classmates’ criticisms of the Chinese state, she is torn between admitting—both to her classmates and to herself—that ‘we do have a few [problems]’, and the forceful ethical imperative she feels to ‘defend China’—which persists to the extent that Shun cannot even utter in our conversation anything negative about China, but repeatedly tails off before actually voicing a criticism. Three years later, in a 2016 follow-up interview after Shun’s graduation from her graduate Law degree, Shun stated directly that while her intense sense of loyalty to the people and the culture of China remained unchanged, she now separated this clearly from the Chinese state and government, toward which she tended to feel more ambivalent. We glimpse here an ongoing process through which, via her experiences in Australia, Shun reflexively reconfigures her own subjective relationship with the idea of ‘China’.

Racialisation and the Burden of Representation

Like Shun, many respondents observed that the experience of living in Melbourne had made them newly conscious of their own status as ‘Chinese people’. Several interviewees noted a certain ‘burden of representation’ that arose from that heightened awareness. Fangfang (22) made a typical statement:

I began to feel that I’m not a person, but a Chinese person. […] Sometimes, as a Chinese person, you feel very internally conflicted, for example when you hear people saying bad things about Chinese people. It’s a big headache. Then you start thinking: OK, how can I do good things to make others [think better of us]? Because what I represent is not just myself as one person. […] Here, if you do something bad, people will say: look, you Chinese people are—you know, whatever. So you start to take special care.
For 18 year-old Shufen, meanwhile, the new self-awareness of her Chinese identity equated to a process of racialisation that was linked with her awareness of anti-Chinese racism in Australia:

Walking on the street you notice there are heaps of people with, you know, high-bridged noses and so on, it’s like—aha! This is different from China. […] You suddenly feel: Oh! I am a Chinese person. But sometimes, I wonder whether being a Chinese person here will bring some problems. […] I wonder whether, if I wasn’t a Chinese person, certain things might be different for me. […] I remember once I was getting on a bus with my friend. Her English is really not that good. The driver asked, what kind of ticket do you want. Monthly, or what. My friend didn’t understand. […] So she asked again, and the driver spoke very fast. Again she didn’t understand. And the driver [rolls eyes and clicks tongue, imitating the driver] looked completely fed up. I think perhaps if she had not been Chinese, the driver might not have got so fed up with her.

For Shufen, her sense of ‘otherness’ as a racially marked ‘Chinese person’ actively hindered her ability to feel ‘integrated’ (rongru) into a society of whose racism her experiences had made her painfully aware. Here, while ‘Chineseness’ is still experienced reflexively, nationality and ethnicity become not so much a burden of representation, as a liability and a risk (Martin and Rizvi 2014; Kim 2011).

Fragmenting Chineseness

Finally, respondents’ media engagements and social experience while living in Melbourne also drew attention, for many, to the internal multiplicity and heterogeneity of the very category of ‘Chineseness’ itself; especially through contact with classmates from the ‘other’ sites claimed (and variously contested) as Chinese territories: Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. At the time when I conducted my interviews (and as is still the case), tensions were running high between Hong Kong residents—many of whom are passionately attached to a specific and distinct formation of Hong Kong cultural and political identity—and the Beijing administration (and the Beijing-friendly Hong Kong SAR administration), which sees
Hong Kong, post-1997, as part of China. These tensions were very evident in my interviewees’ narratives. For example, Yaqi voiced an more impassioned patriotic view of the politics of the situation:

The one thing I do object to is when the teacher asks where someone’s from, and they say: I’m from Hong Kong. I mean, isn’t Hong Kong a part of China? They say: I’m from Hong Kong. This just makes me feel—why? You’ve very clearly admitted that you are part of the Chinese territory, so you have a duty to admit that you are a Chinese person. You say you are a Hong Konger, thinking that others will inwardly acknowledge that [identity], but saying it in that way actually sounds very ugly (bu haoting).

Although the potent social and political tensions between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese students are not likely to be easily resolved, speculatively, direct personal experience of the Hong Kong students’ contestation of China’s right to ‘claim’ them may potentially contribute to the mainland students’ appreciation of the internal complexities and contradictions of Chinese identit(ies)—complexities that these respondents certainly found more salient in Melbourne than they had in China.

At the time of my interviews, the ‘Taiwan issue’ was not nearly so potent a source of tension as the Hong Kong question. Several respondents stated that they were happy to go along with Taiwanese classmates’ claiming of a distinct Taiwanese identity, as they recognised, pragmatically, that for all intents and purposes Taiwan was a separate society, and that the decades-long standoff between Beijing and Taipei could not be easily resolved. Shujuan (20) recounted how these complex politics of Chinese identit(ies) could emerge through everyday media use:

We have an app, an app from China—PPS—and it divides [media downloads] up according to different regions. One of them is called ‘Taiwan, China.’ When my Taiwanese friend saw that, it created a kind of political awkwardness: she went blank and just stopped talking.

Observing her friend’s mortification at the app’s classification of Taiwan as a region of China, Shujuan herself becomes reflexively conscious of the contested character of a territorial-political claim that, within China, would far more easily pass unnoticed.
In a particularly thoughtful reflection, Qi (18) sums up how her social experience in Melbourne has complicated and even fragmented her former sense of ‘China’ as a unitary entity:

In China you think: China is China. But here, we find we need to divide it into China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau: four places. Some of my mainland Chinese classmates wonder why it gets divided this way, and get angry about it. But I can accept dividing it this way. The issue is, I have met some Hong Kong classmates who, when discussing the mainland, seem not to like it. They think the mainland has put a lot of pressure on Hong Kong and that’s what’s forced them to come overseas. So debates arise. But you can’t say what’s right and what’s wrong, since you’re not in their position, and you don’t understand what it’s like for them. When you’re in China, your field of vision lets you see the issue a certain way, but you get a more complete picture of things, from other people’s point of view, from overseas.

Even more than the examples discussed earlier in this section, Qi’s observations highlight the potential for students’ experiences in Melbourne to nurture a critical reflexivity in their relationship with the concept of ‘China’. Far from simply acting as impervious emissaries of official nationalism or far-flung human extensions of the Chinese state, such a response suggests that these students’ experiences of mobility, media, and everyday social life in Melbourne have the potential to significantly complicate their former understandings of Chinese national identity.

Conclusion

I set out in this chapter to juggle a multiple focus in which local and transnational contexts are mutually constitutive and consistently intermeshed. We have seen how my respondents’ culturally syncretic media practices allow them to work on local-level place-making in Melbourne in the rich context of a range of other material everyday practices. Conversely, we have considered how these students’ embodied media and social experiences in Melbourne enable them to reflexively (re)negotiate their understandings of ‘China’ and ‘Chineseness’. Combining an appreciation of overseas Chinese student communities as nodes in transnational networks with close attention to the material practices of these mobile subjects at the
local level in Melbourne, the approach I have taken here draws inspiration from what has been called the ‘translocal turn’ in studies of media, mobility, and place (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013; Conradson and McKay 2007). This approach supports the insight from current cultural geography that local, material ‘place’ (for example, the Melbourne suburb of Hawthorn) and global, abstract ‘space’ (for example, cyberspace) are neither ontologically pre-given nor fundamentally opposed, but instead are both produced—and continuously shaped and re-shaped—though practices within networks (Amin 2002). Thus, writes Ash Amin, ‘we might begin to think of places in nonterritorial terms, as nodes in relational settings’ (Amin 2002, 391; see also Massey 2007). The ‘Melbourne’ that is both inhabited and produced by Chinese international students can be seen, I propose, as just such a node, existing in relation to both transnational and local-level networks and practices. Complex though it is to keep all of these multiple intermeshing dimensions in mind simultaneously, it is necessary to do so in order to avoid reducing such international student communities to fragmentary sphericules, on the one hand, or cyphers of long-distance nationalism, on the other.
Works Cited


Gomes, Catherine. 2014. ‘Negotiating everyday life in Australia: Unpacking the parallel society inhabited by Asian international students through their social networks and entertainment media use.’ *Journal of Youth Studies* 18.4: 515-536.


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**Notes**

1 Martin and Rizvi (2014) show how for the current generation of Chinese and Indian international students in Melbourne, it is not the case that the availability of homeland media simply ‘takes them out of’ their immediate geographic locality, but rather that students’ experiences of both the local place of Melbourne and the imagined or remembered ‘homeland’ become fundamentally reconfigured by the persistent media links between them.

2 This interview was conducted in Mandarin, with italic terms spoken in English; the same typographic convention is used throughout.