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Author/s:
Martin, F

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Enterprising Self and Bohemian Nomad: Emerging Subjectivities in Chinese Education Mobilities

I was born in a small city, so I have had to advance by my own efforts. When I went abroad […] actually I climbed up two steps. Because in the generation that followed my parents' generation, most people went to Shanghai, whereas I went overseas. […] This means I've jumped up two levels, which is exhausting.

--Yining, 26, from a small city in Anhui, a year after graduating with an Australian master's degree

Before, I thought that by the age I am now, I'd surely have done something or other, but it seems I haven't. It's like, you're all grown up, shouldn't you have some achievements? But I haven't, I guess. The schedule I used to have for my own life […] seems not to be able to keep pace with the changes that happen.

--Niuniu, 26, from a small city in Henan, immediately after graduating with an Australian master's degree

These statements were made in response to interview questions about the two women's overseas study experiences and how these had related to their broader life plans. I have chosen these excerpts as epigraphs because their illustration of contrasting conceptions of the spatial and temporal significance of education mobility highlight some of this article's central preoccupations. Yining represents study abroad as part of an arduous upward climb in which advancement is closely tied with self-propelled spatial mobility. The move from her small hometown, through the cosmopolitan metropolis of Shanghai (where she obtained her bachelor degree), on to an overseas study destination is described as "jump[ing] up two levels," and Yining's exhaustion underlines the difficulty of this endeavour. In contrast, Niuniu represents her overseas study venture as precipitating a drift away from her expected life "schedule." She does not see studying overseas as self-advancement but—quite the contrary—feels the temporal re-organization it entails has led to her failure to achieve standard life milestones. Yet Niuniu's tone revealed that she was not anxious about this, but rather found the change in herself and her plans liberating and pleasurable.

Inspired these contrasting experiences of education mobility, this article addresses the question of mobility's subjective consequences. It explores how transnational education mobility enables young, middle-class Chinese women like Yining and Niuniu to negotiate

competing models of personhood, life structure, and life values, and to elaborate forms of subjectivity that respond to these in a range of different ways that are shaped by factors including gender, class, and personal history. Through case studies of these two women's narratives about how studying abroad changed them, the article intends to illustrate how transnational education mobility may entail plural and contradictory subjective outcomes vis-à-vis Chinese women students' (dis)identification with available models of personhood and life values.

Enterprising selfhood and bohemian nomadism in youth mobility studies

In a globalising era marked by intensified trans-border movements of all kinds, scholars recognise that more and more young people are practicing open-ended, transient, and multi-directional mobilities that differ markedly from earlier, more linear migration patterns (Sheller and Urry 2006; Robertson, Harris and Baldassar 2018; Martin, Erni and Yue 2019; Lan 2020; Robertson 2021; Choi 2021). This can be seen in part as a response to the normalisation of precarious work in flexible capitalism: as Aline Courtois observes, in the context of heightened instability and risk, there arises a sense that "in order to be successful, the individual needs to be constantly in motion, both figuratively and literally" (2020, 240). Courtois is specifically interested in the subjectifying effects of transnational education mobilities. She uses a Foucauldian governmentality lens to analyse how Irish students' experiences of study abroad foster the development of "hypermobile" subjectivities answering to neoliberal imperatives.[1] The hypermobile subject that Courtois sees as produced by outward education mobility desires a lifetime of professional mobility and is flexible, entrepreneurial, self-governing, "agile" and "voluntarily mobile geographically in response to the needs of global capitalism" (Courtois 2020, 238). Thus, when young people travel to amass qualifications, cultural capital, and "global experience," their mobility practices may contribute to the constitution of self-enterprising subjects and subjectivities (Waters 2008; Yoon 2014). And young adults socialized to envisage their future selves as individualized accumulations of human capital within a flexible, mobile workforce may become consumers of education conceptualized as a type of (trans)national export commodity.

However, research in migration studies and the sociology and geography of mobilities reveals that contemporary youth mobility practices also include less goal-directed forms, variously theorized as "nomadic," "lifestyle," and "bohemian" mobilities (Cwerner 2001; Cohen, Duncan and Thulemark 2015; Scott 2006). Such alternative mobilities run counter to

the entrepreneurial self-advancement imperative and may be seen as resistant to the demands that flexibilized capitalism places upon its subjects. Instead of being motivated by the drive to get ahead in career or financial terms, the new nomads are motivated by alternative goals like cultural enrichment, personal growth, the pursuit of pleasure, a relaxed lifestyle, and the collection of experiences and sensations. Rather than striving forward, they relish the experience of drifting through time and space (Cwerner 2001). Most extant studies of such alternative mobilities have focussed on economically "developed" western nations (e.g. D'Andrea 2006; O'Reilly and Benson 2009; Scott 2006).

There is, however, a growing body of work that challenges the west-centrism of alternative mobilities research. Carolyn Areum Choi's research on transnational mobility among South Korean youth found that some non-elite young Koreans represented international travel as enabling the realization of authentic selfhood through the meaningful pursuit of experience and passions, thus "challeng[ing] the stratifying impacts of educational migration from the bottom-up, assertively creating lives that go against the grain" (Choi 2021, 57). This resonates with Shuling Huang's study of transnational mobility among Taiwanese young adults, who she found interpreted their travels as expressive of identities based on the valuation of individual freedom, non-conformism, independence, and cosmopolitanism (2021). These middle-class Taiwanese youth understood themselves as "mobile sel[ves] embod[ying] a soul in quest for individuality and subjectivity," transgressing the constraints of social convention at home (Huang 2021, 2). Comparably, Shanshan Lan's research on the "travel and study" (*youxue*) projects of Chinese students in Italy points to a "a shift from obtaining quality education to the accumulation of overseas experiences" and "the desire for self-transformation" in the framing of these ventures by education agents and the students themselves (2020, 167). Meanwhile, both Anders Sybrandt Hansen's research with short-term, elite Chinese exchange students in Denmark and Cora Lingling Xu's work with Chinese international full-degree students and graduates in the UK shows that study abroad, even when initially conceptualized as a means of furthering self-advancement, in practice entails experiences of "not-yet-purposeful time" that may foster alternative conceptualizations of self and life course: a "destructuring" of the "temporal mode of ceaseless striving" (Hansen 2015, 66, 53; Xu 2021, 19-22).

Helpfully schematizing some of the key issues emerging from this body of work, Shanthi Robertson observes that against the background of intensified economic precarity and increasingly deinstitutionalized life imaginaries, middle-class migrant youth from Asia

must negotiate two sets of tensions. These are, first, "tensions between normative and linear life scripts that still hold significant cultural weight in home families and communities and more individualized and flexibilized senses of the 'modern' biography," and second, tensions between "correlate[ing] transnational mobility with upward social mobility and […] correlate[ing] transnational mobility with alternative pathways" (2021: 72-73). Robertson's framework provides a useful resource for understanding the core contradictions that the young women whose stories are presented in this article negotiated through their study abroad projects vis-à-vis both life script (linear/ neotraditional vs. flexible/ post-traditional) and the meanings of transnational mobility (self-advancement vs. self-enrichment). In order to understand how these tensions played out for them, though, it is necessary first to consider the Chinese social contexts that conditioned their life outlooks before they travelled to Australia.

The striving individual and neotraditional femininity in post-socialist China

While enterprising selfhood as a function of transnational reconfigurations of capitalism is on the rise in many societies, its specific forms are particular to the situations where it manifests. In post-socialist China, despite conditions of governance and economy that differ significantly from the largely western contexts where the concept of neoliberal personhood was developed, multiple studies nevertheless point to the promotion of individualized, reflexive, enterprising personhood by the state, commercial culture, and emergent psych industries (Rofel 2007; Ong and Zhang 2008; Hoffman 2010; Yang 2014). In place of the old Maoist view of the individual as a screw in the machinery of revolution, the late reform era's ideal is what sociologist Yunxiang Yan calls the striving individual: "industrious, self-disciplined, calculating and pragmatic," "driven by the urge for success, […] striv[ing] by all possible means to make it out there" (Yan 2013, 282, 264-265). Uncoincidentally, the promotion of this ideal coincides with the state's withdrawal from welfare provision and decreasing regulation of labour markets, setting individuals adrift to navigate independently the opportunities and risks of the new market society (Ong and Zhang 2008; Ren 2013).

As education researcher Fengshu Liu shows, middle-class university students tend to identify strongly with the striving individual model, showing "a strong belief in self-efficacy, which is the main quality enjoined by the neoliberal norms of the autonomous, self-enterprising self" (2008: 200). Indeed, in line with the post-socialist championing of this

ideal, youth itself has become re-defined as most importantly a period of individual striving to obtain the academic qualifications and capacities for self-management that will secure one's economic future. Echoing the role of study abroad in crafting hypermobile, self-enterprising subjects that has also been observed in Europe (Courtois 2020), Hansen proposes that overseas education has become a standard part of the Chinese sequential script of youthful self-advancement: "one more step to the ideal sequence" from preschool through to obtaining attractive employment (2015, 57-58).

In recent years, however, critiques have emerged of this script of relentless self-advancement, emblematized in the so-called "Buddha-style youth" (*Foxi qingnian*) concept, and the more recent "lying flat" (*tang ping*) movement. Both address the burnout arising from the mainstream treadmill (or "involution": *neijuan*) by promoting the renunciation of ambition and the embrace of passivity and averageness, highlighting millenials' exhaustion with the endless demands placed on them in a social and economic context where self-advancement often seems a Sisyphean endeavour. These movements could be seen as China-specific analogues of a broader transnational youth backlash against the pressures of late-capitalist "grind culture" (Lee 2021). But they have been demonized as social pathology by both the parent generation and the Chinese state, which depict them as a form of nihilistic ennui harmful to social order, the national economy, and young people themselves (Bu, Meng and Zhang 2018).

Only-child daughters of middle-class families have concentrated parental resources available to them, and are encouraged almost as strongly as their male peers to acquire the independence, skills and credentials that will enable them to compete in the market economy (Fong 2002; Kajanus 2015). Many women in the current youth generations see individualized self-fashioning and attendant post-traditional forms of femininity as desirable and achievable, and these aspirations may underlie their desires to undertake overseas study (Martin 2017). Reflecting this, 60 percent of young people leaving China for education overseas in recent years have been women (Renmin Ribao 2016). However, in a context where the life course is less deinstitutionalized than it is in many western societies—especially for women—taking gender into account complicates the picture of post-socialist Chinese society's endorsement of self-entrepreneurial personhood. At the same time as they are encouraged to develop their potential as individualized, mobile human capital, contradictorily, young Chinese women are also the target of a strong neotraditionalist counter-discourse that constructs adult women as "naturally" marriage-and-family-oriented. This influential discourse, promulgated through

government campaigns and commercial media, insists that it is normal and beneficial for women to get married and have children "on schedule" before age 30, and devote their energies thenceforth to family care work rather than self-development (Andrade 2020, 10; Rofel 1999; Hong Fincher 2014; Xie 2021). This neotraditionalist line supports government pressure on women to return to the family in times of rising urban unemployment (Song 2011). After three decades during which the Maoist state line championed gender equality, the (re)naturalization of family-centric femininity suggests that gender relations have effectively become re-traditionalized in the post-socialist era (Wu 2009; Sun and Chen 2015).

Thus, as Kailing Xie (2021) illustrates, China's middle-class women in their twenties and thirties must negotiate a thorny contradiction. On one hand, they are "trained to live up to the neoliberal ideal: self-realisation, personal achievement, and competitiveness [and …] constantly seeking opportunities for self-development" (2021: 158). On the other hand, "the societal perception of personal success is deeply gendered [and …] for a woman, her success is judged predominantly through her married domestic life" (2021: 195). These twin pressures produce a gendered variant of the striving-individual ideal that emphasises having it all: becoming a "life winner" (*rensheng yingjia*) by attaining professional success *and* "the perfect family" (*meiman jiating*) (Xie 2021). As we will see below, young women's negotiation of the tensions produced by these contradictory pressures may become deeply entangled with their education mobility projects.

This article aims to make contributions to the scholarship surveyed above, intersecting mobility studies, youth studies, international education studies, gender studies, and studies of subject formation in flexible capitalism, by extending its investigations in four main ways. First, in a field that, despite recent advances, remains dominated by studies of western and otherwise privileged subjects, it directs attention to the alternative mobility experiences of non-metropolitan youth from China: a numerically large and globally significant group of mobile young people who, I show, may be experiencing transnational education mobility in unexpected ways. Second, this study places front and centre the differences that gender makes in Chinese women's negotiations of available identity models during their education mobility ventures. Gendered analysis of international student mobility has been neglected to date, and scholars are increasingly recognising the gap and calling for further research in this area (Moskal 2020; Raghuram and Sondhi 2021). Third, unlike other studies to date, the article considers the parallel but contradictory imperatives of enterprising

selfhood and bohemian nomadism side-by-side in a group of mobile youth who are interpellated, in different situations, by both or either, and it considers factors that may predispose them toward one or the other. Finally, by means of in-depth studies of individual women's self-narrated experiences, the article hopes to add a sometimes neglected human aspect to our understanding of mobile subject formation by foregrounding the subjective and affective dimensions of individual experience, which risk being obscured in more generalized quantitative or abstract theoretical discussions.

In order to explore the complex subjective consequences of education mobility vis-à-vis Chinese women students' (dis)identification with available models of gender and personhood, in what follows, I explore interactions among four complexly cross-linked models of personhood and gender that were referenced consistently in participants' narratives. This should not be taken to imply that these models exhaust the range of mobile Chinese women students' self-understandings: they obviously do not. Rather, I have isolated these models for heuristic purposes, to create a manageable schema to illuminate some interesting aspects of education mobility's subjective consequences (for more detailed discussion, see Martin 2022). First, the article considers how Chinese women's experiences of education mobility mediate their understandings two different models of personhood. The first of these is *enterprising selfhood*. In Peter Kelly's words, contemporary flexible capitalism insists on "the cultivation of the self as an ongoing, never-ending enterprise" which produces the subject as "entrepreneurial, active, autonomous, prudential, risk aware, choice making and responsible" (2013: 14). This is, as we have seen above, an influential model within China's contemporary post-socialist society as well as globally. Enterprising selfhood is the model of personhood referenced most prominently in Yining's statement in the epigraph, in which she frames her life goal as continuing self-advancement by means of a series of self-motivated "steps," of which studying abroad has been one. But Niuniu's contrasting narratives suggest that for young Chinese women, education mobility may not only support the development of enterprising selfhood, but may also make available critical alternatives to that ideal, including the second model of personhood I consider, which I term *bohemian nomadism*. To define this term, I draw on Saulo Cwerner's theorization of the "nomadic times" experienced by some migrants, when:

> there are alternative motivations that keep them "on the road," never really knowing when exactly is the time to return or to move on. They collect experiences and

> sensations, as well as postcards and letters. These nomadic times are the discontinuous and heterogeneous times of adventure, of uncertainty, of "having fun" (Cwerner 2001, 30).

The bohemian nomad concept I reference also draws on Sam Scott's (2006) typology of skilled migrants, in which "bohemian" mobility decisions are made based on lifestyle and anti-establishment values rather than career-path priorities (2006, 1120-1124). As we will see in the discussion below, Niuniu exemplifies this ideal in the non-directedness of her ongoing mobility aspirations and her reflexive distancing from the normative path of relentless self-advancement.

Throughout the analysis, I focus on gendered inflections of these mobile Chinese women students' evolving subjectivities, since for them, identification with either of the models of personhood described above is always complicated by the effects of their identity as young women. In the realm of gender, both of the personhood models just discussed support a gender model that I call *post-traditional femininity*. This is defined by women's ideological and structural individualization: their desires and quests for "a life of one's own" rather than a life focused on family care work (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Martin 2022). However, this ideal runs into strong resistance from a second, countervailing gender model: that of *neotraditional femininity*, which as we have seen, is prominent in post-socialist Chinese society. Neotraditional femininity is defined by adherence to a life script in which women's marriage and childbearing must occur before age thirty and an adult woman's identity should centre on her role as family caregiver. It should be clear from this discussion that these two sets of competing models of personhood and gender—enterprising selfhood vs. bohemian nomadism, and post-traditional vs. neotraditional femininities—are not separate but complexly entangled. This entanglement is reflected in the narratives presented below.

How people's experiences of geographic mobility shape their subjectivities is a question of central interest for mobilities studies (e.g. Elliott and Urry 2010). However, by its nature the formation of subjectivities—a process that unfolds unpredictably and unconsciously over years and may not be readily articulated by people in its midst—is challenging to research. The analyses below benefit from being able to draw on a relatively holistic, multi-dimensional picture of research participants' experiences afforded by a five-year longitudinal ethnographic study. This study developed a transdisciplinary exploration of

Chinese young women's experiences of education mobility through ethnographic research, aligned with the humanities orientation of cultural studies (the author's home discipline). It was conducted between 2015 and 2020, when I worked fulltime following a group of 56 female tertiary students from pre-departure from China through several years of study at various Australian universities, and on to their post-graduation destinations across China, Australia and the world. Participants were part of the large population of middle-class youth who left China to study in destinations including Australia, the United States and Europe every year pre-COVID (over 700,000 in 2019: Ministry of Education PRC 2020). Australia has been recognized as having "the most organized and aggressive [international] recruitment and marketing strategy" for its universities in the world (Brooks and Waters 2011, 117) and during the years of this study, was the world's third-largest destination country for international students after the USA and the UK (OECD 2017, 287).

In this article, I draw on the narratives of just two participants, Yining and Niuniu,[2] focusing on how their mobility experiences shaped their emergent understandings of biographical time, life values, and gendered subjectivity. I have selected these two participants because their narratives illustrate so sharply and clearly the contours of, and tensions between, the two influential models of enterprising selfhood and bohemian nomadism, as well as the tense relation that both of these bear to neotraditional femininity. Because exploring the development of subjectivities necessitates considering research subjects' evolving senses of selfhood and life values over time and in contextual depth, their stories are presented in detail. The narratives draw on my understanding of participants' experiences of their education mobility ventures as these unfolded over the five years of the study and as they were revealed to me not just in the recorded interviews that are directly quoted but also in many hours of unstructured hanging out together.

Yining's story: Aspiring to enterprising selfhood

Yining was twenty-one when I first interviewed her at a suburban mall in Shanghai six months before her departure for Melbourne. Her family was from Greenlake, a small city in Anhui province, where her parents—both university graduates—worked as civil servants. Yining had moved to Shanghai for her bachelor's degree, then won a Chinese government scholarship to study toward a master's media degree in Melbourne. When I first met her, she spoke with a slightly naïve directness, and sometimes expressed strong self-confidence about her abilities. But as I got to know her better over the years that followed as she moved

between Greenlake, Shanghai, Melbourne, and Auckland, she also voiced persistent anxieties about her life plans and ambitions.

For Yining, education mobility was fundamentally about self-improvement experienced as an upward climb, as we see in her statement in this article's epigraph. During her years abroad, though, Yining embarked on not only a quest to consolidate and advance her career chances, but also a psychologized project of improving her character. I noticed during our regular hangout sessions and her conversations with friends that she was developing an increasingly reflexive habit of mind and a growing investment in cultivating her self as a conscious project. She was deeply introspective, often assessing her interactions with others, reporting on her friends' and parents' judgments of her temperament, asking my opinion about it, and considering what she ought to do to make improvements. She constantly looked back and evaluated her progress and the maturation of her attitudes, behaviours, understandings and values over time. She described her unfolding transnational journey as facilitating a maturation process in which she transformed from naïve to worldly; from low to higher emotional intelligence; from introverted and quiet, to social and networking, to valuing authentic over instrumental relationships; from narrow to wide horizons; and from a conventional outlook to greater tolerance of alternative viewpoints and lifestyles. Yining once described herself as exhausted by her character trait of pushing herself to excel (*yaoqiang*),[3] and often reached out to me to seek my advice on figuring out her future direction. "I feel that life is very hard right now," she said during the semester before her graduation. "But it's also a good thing, right? Because through hardship, you grow (*ziji chengzhang*)." Thus, Yining managed to convert even stressful and confusing experiences into fodder for her core project of personal growth. All of this reflects an inward turn toward self-care, self-regulation and self-realization that, as Jie Yang (2014) shows, underlies influential pop-psychological discourses which, in China as in the west, promote individualized solutions to the structural contradictions of neoliberalizing societies (see also Lewis, Martin and Sun 2016).[4]

Yining's reflexive project of individualized self-development was also linked closely with the more concrete endeavour of developing her professional career. After graduation, she told me that the most important thing she had gained from her overseas studies was that she had "come into contact with different cultures, different people, so your field of vision gets broadened a lot, it really is *broaden[ing] the horizon*."[5] In the next breath, Yining linked this with marketable skills:

> I've broadened my own way of thinking, so maybe in future if I run into a problem, I may be better able to understand and accept things, and more able to … actually there's also a definite increase in *soft skills*, including *communication skills*, and the ability to get along, also the capacity for understanding, they've definitely all become stronger.

When Yining spoke of running into a problem in the future, the implication was that this would be a work-related problem, which her new soft skills, developed through cross-cultural experience, would help her to tackle more effectively. Perhaps echoing a similar emphasis in the Australian curriculum she had studied, Yining thus translated her personal maturation through transnational mobility into marketable professional capacities. Self-development became self-entrepreneurship in an almost literal way (Hoffman 2010; Ong 2008; Yoon 2014).

During her time in Melbourne, however, Yining also struggled with a persistent problem: pressure to adhere to the neotraditional feminine ideal in the form of her mother's relentless nagging about the looming marriage deadline. Her self-entrepreneurial project, then, was always entangled with her negotiation of this omnipresent gendered pressure. Yining, too, wanted to find a partner, just as much as she wanted a successful career. She told me at our first meeting that she had never had a boyfriend, which she connected with her rather sheltered upbringing. It made her somewhat unusual in her age-group, she explained, and caused her parents to worry since it left her only a few years to find the right man before the mandated marriage age. But she resisted her mother's old-style approach to courtship based on matching social rank (*men dang hu dui*), and instead harboured a more romantic vision, hoping to meet and fall in love with the right person spontaneously. Yet despite objecting to her mother's approach, in our first interview Yining nevertheless presented her single status as "a major problem," saying that if she were still single when she was twenty-five she would agree to parental matchmaking.

But over the years that followed, Yining, like many other participants, observed her attitudes transforming. This was connected with observation of alternative scripts in the lives of women in Australia, while geographic distance from the elders created psychological distance from home-country gender norms (Martin 2018). Such changes also reflected participants' absorption, in Melbourne, into a critical community of other Chinese women of

broadly similar age and background, which developed a collective critique of gendered social pressures back home. Yining reflected along these lines shortly after graduation:

> I simply can't say that, for example, I'm going to get married and have a child when I'm twenty-five. That's impossible to control. […] Of course, my Mum always says, "Give me a time: when will you find a boyfriend? Give me a time: when will you get married?" […] I've discussed this with friends and found that everyone has this same problem. I mean those who are *single* like me, their parents will push them to find a boyfriend or girlfriend. Those in a *relationship*, their parents will push them to marry. […] Over ninety percent of my classmates have all struck this problem, […] basically all girls do. Boys, not so much.

As well as illustrating the workings of what me might call a gendered counterpublic in China's educational diaspora (Warner 2002), this quote also reveals the development of Yining's thinking on these issues during her years abroad. At twenty-four, she had abandoned all thought of trying to meet the mid-twenties marriage deadline and felt increasingly distanced from the neotraditionalist gender ideal.

A year later, I re-interviewed Yining when she made a whirlwind trip back to Melbourne from Shanghai, where she was by then working. She reflected on how her two and a half years in Melbourne had impacted on her gendered life outlook:

> When I *catch up* with girls who haven't studied abroad, everyone will *gossip*, like how many apartments does this boy's family own, and where. But as for me, maybe because of having studied abroad, […] I have more of my own ideas […]. I want to live out my own self (*huo chu wo ziji*). […] And […]—to speak directly—I think my demands are higher now. If I hadn't gone abroad, I might just meet someone halfway decent and quickly get married. […But now] I can't really accept a girl being a *housewife*. I demand more.

Yining revealed, here, a reflexive awareness that mobility had fundamentally transformed her outlook on herself and her life path, making her less conventional and more independent in her thinking, and more demanding of a prospective partner. Above all, Yining was conscious of her reorientation toward a more self-focused outlook.

Nevertheless, Yining also felt a renewed urgency to achieve the goal of marriage. Interestingly, however, the way she spoke about romantic relationships folded back into her overarching goal of self-development. Discussing her recent breakup with her first boyfriend, who was older than her and had treated her badly, she made the best of things by framing it as a learning opportunity:

> I'm in the midst of learning. […] There's a saying: once you've played with the master, you'll also make a lot of progress yourself. So I guess I've […] also progressed a lot, because if I found someone at the *same level* as myself, I wouldn't have learned as much. […] My biggest fault is my *bad temper*, so I'm working on that. […E]ver since the break-up, I'm reading a lot of books like the ones by *Dale Carnegie*. […] If you can implement the things they say, then you can really improve your *emotional intelligence* and many other aspects […like] inter-personal relations, plus I focus a lot on *self-improvement*. Because only if you improve yourself will you meet better people. In this way of thinking, your partner is a reflection of yourself.

At twenty-five, Yining explained that the task of finding an appropriate partner had now gained foremost importance for her, since "career-wise I'm probably sitting in the top fortieth or fiftieth percentile—at least, I'm not dragging my feet":

> So probably what I need to focus on now is the personal side. And my personal life can also improve my emotional intelligence, and emotional intelligence in that quarter will help me in my work. […] I've done the *EQ* test, and apparently I come out in the middle. […] I want to continue to develop to be better still. If I want my career and my [future] family both to be better, then I've definitely got to improve.

Yining felt that improving herself through conscious effort—consulting American corporate self-help literature, increasing emotional intelligence, etc—would allow her to meet a higher-level partner, and this would improve her further which in turn would support her professional self-advancement. The relentless circularity of this reasoning crystallizes the punishing logic of the enterprising self ideal, marked by radical reflexivity, individualization, and market rationality—but with a notably gendered inflection, in Yining's apparent re-absorption into neotraditional Chinese norms around women's hypergamy and "timely"

marriage. In fact—despite the seeming contradiction between the two projects—her reflections suggest that she had to some extent subsumed the fiancé search into her overarching project of self-advancement, illustrating once again the mutual entanglement of her self-entrepreneurial project and her gendered situation. Yining's palpable exhaustion while juggling these multiple imperatives viscerally illustrates the painful torsions involved for young women who identify with the mythical "life-winner" ideal, striving to embody *simultaneously* the neoliberal figure of the relentlessly upward-striving individual *and*, contradictorily, the neotraditional figure of the marriage-and-family oriented adult woman (Xie 2021).

But notwithstanding her renewed focus on finding a fiancé in Shanghai, within a year, Yining—still unmarried—had moved again: this time, to Auckland to pursue a PhD. While she still hoped to meet Mr Right, for the moment, it seemed that her desire for self-development through ongoing mobility had won out over neotraditionalist gendered pressures.

Niuniu's story: Becoming nomad

When I first met her at the apartment she was sharing with other Chinese students in Melbourne's CBD, Niuniu was twenty-three and had recently arrived to study toward a master's degree in accounting. Her family was from a town near Saddleback Gorge, a small city in China's central Henan province, and her father and mother, educated to technical college and high school levels respectively, both worked in a local bank branch. Niuniu had already travelled widely within China for her education. After completing kindergarten and primary school at a boarding school near her hometown, she went to the provincial capital of Zhengzhou for middle school, then to the northern megacity of Tianjin for high school, and finally to Chengdu in the southwest for her bachelor degree, during which she also completed a short exchange program in the United States. Niuniu had one older brother, who was married with two children, but like Yining when I first met her, Niuniu herself was single and had never had a boyfriend. From our first interview, she struck me as a quietly reflective, slightly unconventional thinker and something of a free spirit. She observed the world from an independent perspective and drew her own conclusions.

Unlike Yining, who returned to China at regular intervals during her Australian studies, Niuniu went back just once in three years, and became embedded in Melbourne life in ways that she felt profoundly transformed her life goals and values. To a far greater degree

than Yining, Niuniu became able to distance herself from pressures to adhere to a normative life script defined by professional advancement and "timely" marriage, and began instead to imagine an alternative future for herself. About eighteen months after coming to Australia, she mused: "I think it's OK to have an ordinary life […]. Not everyone has what it takes to be outstanding [*youxiu*]. […] Me, I'm happy just to be an ordinary person." She contrasted this view with her mindset when she had first arrived, when she was much more stressed by internalized pressures to excel academically and professionally.

At the time of that conversation, Niuniu had recently moved into a share-house with a group of young people from many different countries, most of whom were undertaking hybrid mobility projects like studying and working and working-holidaymaking. Niuniu told me that one housemate, from Brazil, had worked for several years in a low-skilled café job before returning to university study as a mature-age student. She pointed out that such a plan would simply not work in China: everyone—especially one's parents—would find it unacceptable, not to mention that Chinese universities did not accept mature-age students. Niuniu contrasted her housemate's trajectory with that of her brother, which she described as typical in China: get a "respectable" job and stick with it, no matter how unhappy you may be, rather than risk getting off-track. Niuniu thought that such rigid norms would be a drawback of returning to China post-graduation, although at that stage she still planned to do so, tending to see China as the geographic centre of her life plans.

But by the time Niuniu graduated six months later, her subjective, biographical and geographic reorientation had deepened and her plans changed. Addressing one of the annual group meetings I organized for project participants, she summarized the self-transformations she had observed during her time in Melbourne:

> During these past two years, I've felt extremely happy, […] though it's not because I've gained anything, since my marks have been pretty ordinary, just barely passing [*laughs*]. […] And I haven't found a boyfriend [*all laugh*]. […] But I've met a lot of really good people, and I've learned a lot. Studying overseas, […] in terms of mentality, I've truly become more open; the growth in my mentality has been far, far greater than my academic growth […]. I feel that nothing back home is more repressive than others making judgments on you, having expectations of you, imposing certain requirements on you. […This makes me] feel, ahh, exhausted inside. I feel I haven't met their expectations, I feel very disappointed within myself. But over here, as time

> has passed, I have gradually become able to accept my own imperfections, my insufficient excellence [*youxiu*], […] and I've slowly started to accept that I can't possibly become someone like [business magnate] Jack Ma, that I can't attain that kind of life pinnacle. Over here, […] the world holds all kinds of possibilities: every person has many, many choices within this society, and you can gradually find a way of life that makes you comfortable. This is what I've felt most strongly over here: that I've slowly become able to understand what it is that I want—I don't mean to the extent of having an ideal, I just mean that I've discovered some passion (*reqing*) for certain things. I've graduated just recently, and my plan right now is first to learn to swim [*all laugh*], […] and […] I bought a ukulele online, so maybe I'll learn to play the ukulele. […] I want to do some things that may not be proper in my parents' eyes, but that make me happy. […] If instead of feeling you have to get a certain exam score or whatever, you do things that make you happy, then you'll feel that life really does have meaning.

Niuniu's narrative represents the growth in her mentality (*xintai chengzhang*) as a shift from one set of values, which she associates with back home (*guonei*), to a new value set which she links with life "over here" (*zhebian*). The pressure and exhaustion of conforming to the academic and professional self-advancement script have been exchanged for happiness (*kaixin*) and a comfortable life; instead of striving for excellence, she accepts imperfection; she rejects convention and the "proper" (*zhengshi*) way of doing things in favour of openness, multiplied choices, and the discovery of meaning; plural possibilities have taken the place of a rigid track; and endless exams and academic credentialism have been replaced by swimming lessons and a ukulele. In sum, Niuniu frames her education mobility as distancing her from the normative Chinese middle-class life course with academic and professional self-advancement at its centre. Later in the same speech, Niuniu noted: "Truly, if you hang out with Chinese friends, you'll feel greater pressure. Because they often bring up issues connected with parents. Right now, I just don't want to think about my parents." For Niuniu, as for Yining, both the generation gap and the capacity to elaborate new meanings and practices of youth, values and life course were amplified by the distancing afforded by educational mobility. But in Niuniu's case, this was even more sharply felt as a result of her transcultural friendships.

As was the case for Yining, for Niuniu, too, her evolving understanding of the type of person she could be and wanted to be was thoroughly entangled with gendered

considerations. Although in the semi-public speech quoted above, Niuniu implied that her lack of a boyfriend was regrettable, in our one-on-one interview a few days later, she was more critical of the normative Chinese gendered life course. Her new identification with a bohemian-nomadic sensibility entailed a thorough embrace of post-traditional gender ideal. Now twenty-six, Niuniu told me forcefully: "I haven't even thought about [marriage]! I haven't even had a boyfriend. I say to people: don't you think the fact that I've got to this age without having a boyfriend might tell you something about me? Some people are suited to marriage; maybe some people aren't." Her enjoyment of single life strengthened over the following year. In our final recorded interview, a year after the one quoted above, Niuniu told me: "My current thinking is that I probably won't get married. […] If you're on your own, and you decide what you're going to do tomorrow, then you can definitely do it. […] If I suddenly had to do things for someone else's sake, I'd feel like argh, it's too tiring." Her parents still wanted her to marry, but she hoped, as time passed, that they might be satisfied with the grandchildren her brother had provided, and accept her own new, more individualized life plan. Niuniu attributed the reorientation of her gendered life plans directly to her experiences abroad. She followed up her statement in this article's second epigraph with the reflection that: "If I hadn't studied abroad, I'd probably be working now, and I'd probably have a boyfriend. […] I guess I'd soon be getting married, by this age."

The role of her multi-national share house and transcultural friendships, in particular, seemed to Niuniu to be key to the transformations she observed in her own understandings of life course and goals. She observed with fascination the alternative pathways her housemates created through life, and being part of this houseful of peripatetic young people also inspired in Niuniu a desire to continue her own international travels. She spoke wistfully about her housemates' transnational trajectories, which traced open-ended routes between Spain, Dubai, Mexico, China, Canada, and beyond, and hoped to emulate their mobile lifestyles. The difficulty, however, was in finding work or study opportunities overseas to convince her parents of the legitimacy of her plans, and she had called on her housemates to help her find opportunities abroad while she continued working as a sandwich hand in Melbourne in an attempt to fund her hoped-for ongoing travels. In multiple ways, then, experiences of and desires for mobility were at the heart of Niuniu's reconceptualization of her life course, goals and values during her time in Melbourne.

Rethinking mobile subject formation in late capitalism

Robertson's (2021) framework, introduced above, is helpful in summarizing key transformations in the ways Yining and Niuniu conceptualized gendered life script, mobility, and life values during their time in Australia. While both women thought overseas study had led to personal growth, they framed this in very different ways. On one hand, Yining identified increasingly with enterprising selfhood while shifting between outright criticism of and partial identification with the neotraditional feminine life script. In Robertson's terms, she experienced her education mobility as part of a broader project of upward social mobility while negotiating tensions between normative versus flexibilized gendered biography. Niuniu, on the other hand, came to reject *both* the enterprising self model *and* neotraditional femininity. She saw her transnational travels as a means to forge a less conventional, lateral pathway based on alternative values—those of bohemian nomadism—which also entailed her increasing identification with a strongly individualized, flexibilized, post-traditional gendered biography. These narratives thus illustrate the intricate entanglements of subjectivity, gender, mobility, biography, and life values entailed for young Chinese women navigating life on the move in a late capitalist world.

Yining's and Niuniu's narratives also underline four further important points that this study contributes to current scholarship on youth mobilities. First, in line with the research discussed in the first part of this article, their experiences point toward ongoing mobility as a somewhat open-ended youth project. Both had already experienced education mobility within China, and, particularly in Yining's case, remained physically and imaginatively mobile between China and Australia while living in Melbourne. I have also included in the ambit of these women's mobility stories their post-graduation journeys, when they continued to travel—or, in Niuniu's case, desired to travel—to other places for work, further study, and pleasure. Through all of this, their mobility emerges as an ongoing, multi-legged series of moves whose final destination remains uncertain, and their time at university appears not simply as time "in Australia," but also a time in-between, and part of, ongoing movements (Gu 2015, 64; Kajanus 2015, 125). It is this open-ended series of mobilities, I argue, that significantly *makes* the experience and meanings of youth, for these subjects, and makes them *as* subjects, in the process.

Second, like discourses recently observed among Korean and Taiwanese young adults (Choi 2021; Huang 2021), Niuniu's narrative provides a new illustration of the diffusion of alternative mobility projects beyond the western subjects who have been the primary focus of many analyses of such trends to date. The "bohemian" desires that Niuniu describes—open-

ended travel for self-enrichment, low-status work, extended singlehood, and dedication to personal passions unconnected with professional advancement—may be fairly normalized for young people in western contexts, and to some extent also in wealthier post-industrial East Asian societies like Taiwan and Korea. But for a young woman from a small town and modest background in China, re-orienting one's life trajectory toward the fulfilment of such unconventional desires is a more radical move. That such a shift in orientation may be facilitated by educational mobility is supported by the resonance between Niuniu's story and the findings of both Hansen and Xu that study abroad may foster alternative conceptualizations of life course (Hansen 2015, 66, 53; Xu 2021). For Niuniu, as for Hansen's more elite Chinese student informants, "the central message […] was existential. The good life could not be singularly oriented towards future goals. It was rather one in which you were present in the present, responsive to the situations you found yourself in and the people you found yourself with" (70). In Cwerner's terms, Niuniu shifted from a temporal mode of striving to inhabiting "nomadic time": "problematis[ing] dominant temporal conditions and devis[ing] new forms of thinking and using time" that involved "displacing the dominant sequential nature of careers and life paths." (2001, 29). While resonant in some respects with the "Buddha-style youth" and "lying flat" trends in China, Niuniu's rejection of self-advancement ideals was differentiated by the constitutive link between her altered life values and her mobility experiences and aspirations. Niuniu was exhilarated by cutting herself loose from the standardized life script, and aspired—if and when economic, bureaucratic and familial constraints permitted—toward a form of bohemian mobility that she imagined would enable access to life's deeper meanings and pleasures. Despite her relatively modest resources, Niuniu thus demonstrated a belief shared with more privileged lifestyle migrants "that spatial mobility in itself enables […] self-realization" (O'Reilly and Benson 2009, 5).

Third, the sharp contrast I have traced between the two women's subjective experiences of their own education mobilities raise the question of what led to this difference. Consideration of the two women's differing backgrounds and mobility experiences suggests some factors that may have enabled Niuniu to embrace bohemian nomadism and post-traditional femininity, while Yining remained attached to enterprising selfhood and was more ambivalent about the post-traditional gender model. The fact that Niuniu had an elder brother with a conventional career and a family took some of the pressure off her in both of these regards and perhaps made it easier for her than it was for Yining, an only child, to imagine

alternatives. Yining's family background—judged by her parents' education levels, employment, and government affiliations—was also somewhat more privileged than Niuniu's, and her mother placed far greater pressure on her daughter to "succeed" in the conventional ways (marriage and work) than did Niuniu's. Indeed, while Yining often complained about her mother's constant intrusions into her life, Niuniu expressed gratitude to her parents for both giving her opportunities and trusting her with independent decision-making. Individual temperamental differences between the two women surely also play a role: Yining pushed herself very hard, having strongly internalized a normative understanding of the "successful" person and life, whereas Niuniu was more laid-back and tended from the outset to question conventional wisdom on a range of issues. As we have seen, the two women's experiences of education mobility were also distinct. Before coming to Australia, Niuniu had already experienced many years studying far from home, whereas Yining had lived for longer with her family in her hometown, which may perhaps have fostered a less independent outlook. And whereas Niuniu became deeply connected with local social life in Melbourne and absorbed new ideas from her multinational housemates, Yining returned often to China and remained more intensely connected with home-country values, partly due to her mother's constant communications. These factors may partly explain the different routes to self-transformation that the two women followed through their study abroad experiences.

Finally, however, beyond illustrating macro-scale trends in youth mobility cultures, what I hope stand out even more sharply from Yining's and Niuniu's narratives are the micro-level affective aspects of their experiences (Gu 2015). Yining repeatedly expressed her anguish at ongoing conflicts with her mother as a result of their divergent understandings of gendered life scripts, and the mental exhaustion entailed in mediating contradictions between neoliberal and neotraditional imperatives while striving to embody the "life winner" ideal on the move. Niuniu, meanwhile, characterized her overseas experience as suffused with happiness resulting from personal growth. The two women's different temperaments, backgrounds and experiences produced different responses to mobility, but common to both was the emotional intensity of these years and the deep impact they observed they had on their in-process subjectivities. My aim in foregrounding Yining's and Niuniu's individual subjective and affective experiences has been to honour what Avery Gordon (2008, 4, 24) has called research subjects' "right to complex personhood," and to explore the actually "diffused and delicate effects" of systems that some theoretical accounts of transnational processes

have tended to present in rather general and abstract terms (Bude and Dürschmidt 2010). In these ways, I hope that this article helps to add human depth to our conceptualization of processes of mobile subject formation in global late capitalism (Courtois 2020). Whether experienced as one more upward step in the relentless quest of a striving individual, or a happy detour that re-routes one's life trajectory into less-trodden pathways, transnational education mobility reveals itself through these women's stories as a powerful force in the (re)making of youth subjectivities in our times.

Notes

[1] Other research in the sociology of education illustrates how enterprising or "agile" selfhood and other forms of "neoliberal" subjectivity are fostered through elite secondary schooling (e.g. O'Flynn and Petersen 2007) and higher education policy (e.g. Gillies 2011).

[2] Participants are referred to with pseudonyms. Small hometowns are given pseudonyms to minimise the risk of identification.

[3] This term implies a desire to self-strengthen, external-oriented self-comparison with others, inward-focussed uncompromising drivenness and perfectionism, and a type of self-pride that spurns help from others.

[4] Given the deep consonances between then, I see the global *enterprising self* model and the Chinese *striving individual* model as functionally equivalent in this case. For discussion of the conceptual distinction between the two based on the impossibility of political engagement and the absence of classic liberalism in China, see Yan (2013).

[5] Terms in italics in participant quotes were spoken in English; roman text quotes have been translated by the author from the original Mandarin.

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