Author/s:
Zheng, H;Martin, F

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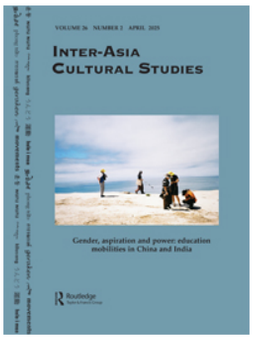

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ESSAY

Mobile genders: the trans* journeys of Chinese students in Australia

Hao ZHENG [a] and Fran MARTIN [b]

[a]Internet Studies, Curtin University, Perth, Australia; [b]School of Culture and Communication, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

Inspired by the stories of middle-class P. R. Chinese students and graduates in Australia who were assigned female at birth but whose geographic journeys entwined with their exploration of alternative forms of gendering, this article aims to advance understanding of how the power relations of global (post)coloniality shape diverse discourses and practices of transgender mobility in the context of international education today. Our research participants' narratives suggest that they understood movement from China to Australia as correlating with improved conditions for trans* becoming. Rather than naturalizing this understanding, however, we approach it as a problem to be solved. We do this by contextualizing framings of trans* existence in modern China as part of a wider set of global histories of (post)colonial power. Flowing from that history, we also consider China's specific social and medico-legal administration of gender transition today, which is widely understood to make trans* lives less livable there than they would be in Australia. These explorations reveal how disjunctures among medical, familial, media, state, and civil society constructions of gender non-conformity tend to channel middle-class trans* mobilities East-to-West and South-to-North. However, we show that the understanding of Australia as a welcoming destination for China's trans* educational migrants is challenged when they face obstacles to acceptance based on the intersection of their gendering with their racialized embodiment: another stubborn trace of sedimented (post)colonial histories.

KEYWORDS

Transgender; education mobilities; China; Australia; postcoloniality; race; intersectionality

Introduction

Inspired by the stories of middle-class P. R. Chinese students and graduates in Australia who were assigned female at birth (AFAB) but whose geographic journeys entwined with their explorations of alternative forms of gendering, this article aims to advance understanding of how the power relations of global (post)coloniality shape diverse discourses and practices of trans* mobility in the context of international education today. We use the term trans* to refer to diverse non-normative identifications in the gender domain (Halberstam 2017). By employing the open-ended trans* concept, we resist any assumption that our research participants' journeys are simple, one-way transitions into specific, pre-determined gender identities. Referencing the asterisk "wildcard" Boolean operator in internet search protocols, *trans** is intended to optimize inclusivity, indicating incompleteness and thinking-with our research participants on their gender journeys

CONTACT Hao Zheng hao.zheng.research@gmail.com

(Tompkins 2014).[1] Our use of the term also aims to challenge the neocolonial impulse associated with a universalizing understanding of *transgender*, in order to promote trans-*cultural* inclusivity (van Kessel, Minnaard, and Steinbock 2017).

In considering trans* educational mobilities between China and Australia, we take our cue from a growing scholarship on trans* mobilities that cautions against West-centric representations of migrations from Global South to North as narratives of gender liberation. Our research participants' stories, presented in the second part of the article, do suggest that they have understood and, to varying extents, experienced their moves from China to Australia as correlating with expanded possibility for trans* becoming. But rather than naturalizing their desire to remain in Australia after graduation, we approach that desire as a problem to be solved. In the first part of the article, we therefore begin by contextualizing dominant framings of trans* existence in modern China, including the construction of "the West" as the default location of sex-gender liberalism, as part of a wider set of global histories of (post)colonial power reaching back to the late nineteenth century. Our sketch of these historical contexts is intended to provide a "history of the present": to frame Chinese trans* students' and graduates' desires for westward migration as something that may often be taken for granted and yet hides within itself the embedded traces of historical power struggles (Foucault 1975; Garland 2022).

In particular, we propose that trans* students' and graduates' desires to migrate to Australia must be understood in relation to, first, the complex historical relationship between China and Australia in the context of global postcoloniality, which today sometimes (not invariably) positions the latter as an "advanced," democratic Western nation and an inherently desirable destination for progressive-minded middle-class migrants, sex-gender minorities in particular. Second, we consider China's current social and medico-legal regimes governing gender transition, which grow out of the same modern sex-gender histories previously discussed, and are widely understood to make trans* lives less livable there than they would be in a Western country like Australia. However, in the final section of the article, we show that the construction of Australia as a desirable destination for trans* members of China's education diaspora is interrupted and problematized when they face obstacles to acceptance based on the intersection of their gendering with their racialized embodiment: another stubborn trace of embedded (post)colonial histories.

Transgender: the neocolonial critique and beyond

A rich and expanding body of research examines the relationships between gender-variant identities and geo-cultural mobilities. A key focus of this work that is particularly important for us in this article is on how contemporary cultures of non-normative gender in the Global South are connected with power relations around race, class and global postcoloniality.

At the level of epistemology, scholars have observed that the ways in which anthropological, transgender studies and developmental discourses have universalized the category *transgender* across diverse non-Western contexts constitute a form of neo-colonialist epistemic violence. In a foundational article, David Valentine (2007) argues that in constituting itself as a field, transgender studies has risked obscuring the multiplicity and internal contradictions within the practices and identifications grouped together under the name of transgender, especially those found outside Euro-American contexts. The focus of Valentine's critique is the unreflective universalization of the modern Euro-American conceptual distinction between sexuality and gender; hence, between homosexual and transgender categories.[2] Focusing on media representations as an arena in which tensions around the Westernization of gender categories are played out, Thomas J. Billard and Sam Nesfield put forward a particularly blunt version of the transgender-concept-as-neocolonial-

violence critique, proposing that "as the forces of globalization transform the cultures […] of nations across the world, the great diversity of gender variance is increasingly homogenized, recast as 'transgender' identities" (2020, 66).

Another cluster of studies highlights the interconnected (post)colonial and class politics revealed in the common association of the English language and the idea of the West in general with sex-gender progressivism in Global South contexts. For example, in her study of working-class AMAB women at an NGO in Bangalore, Liz Mount (2020) noted the associations of Euro-American-style *trans* identity—as distinct from the Indian category *hijra*—with middle-class aspiration and post-colonial respectability, which she found mirrored iterations of respectable cis womanhood in India under British colonialism (see also Benedicto 2014; Hall 2009).[3] Conversely, yet illustrating related dynamics, Aren Aizura's (2018) work on MTF subjects from the Global North traveling to Thailand for sex-reassignment surgeries illustrates how this form of biomedical tourism both reflects and reinforces (post)colonial power relations, insofar as Global South labor supports the material and ideological (re)production of the ideal white, Western transwoman.

Other studies have approached these processes from the perspective of the racialization, erasure, or immobilization of sex-gender minority migrants and people of color in the Global North as a result of intertwining regimes of normative trans citizenship, national(ist) whiteness, and border security (Mole 2018).[4] At a broad, structural level, C.Q. Quinan and Nina Bresser (2020) analyze how national border security regimes shape and restrict trans* people's capacities for transnational mobility. Aizura (2006) critically interrogates the alignment of Australian narratives of "proper" transmasculinity with a white dream of the nation through the valorization of practices such as sport and suburban weekend barbecues; while Jin Haritaworn (2012) highlights the Othering of the Muslim in "multicultural" Berlin as the supposed enemy of Berlin's inclusive sex-gender liberalism. Nael Bhanji (2012), meanwhile, critiques the metaphor of gender transition as "coming home" in some Euro-American trans theory, since it fails to account for racial and postcolonial power relations and leaves unconsidered the key question of who gets to feel "at home" in which places.

Yet, despite the crucial insights provided by the (anti-)neocolonial critique of transgender discourses, on its own, this critique may not be sufficient to comprehend the complexity of relations between gender-diverse practices and cultural and human mobilities today. This is because, first, as is also the case with sexualities (Martin et al. 2008), so too, in modern times, non-Western gender identities are always-already hybrid formations rather than autochthonous expressions of pure local cultures. We might recall, here, Peter A. Jackson's (2003) classic work on the *kathoey* sex-gender category in Thailand. Through historical research, Jackson demonstrates how *kathoey* emerged, paradoxically, as a result of the modern two-gender system's imposition by the Thai state, which was itself a response to European, American and Japanese imperialisms in Southeast Asia. This example illustrates both the constitutive hybridity of the *kathoey* identity, as a side-effect of the Thai state's response to the threat of foreign imperialisms; and the complexly generative rather than bluntly homogenizing effects of the globalization of modern Euro-American gender discourses. In centering the decisive role of the Thai state, Jackson's account underlines a point that Aniruddha Dutta, Adnan Hossain and Claire Pamment (2022) also highlight with regard to their research in South Asian contexts: that "national and regional hegemonies of class, caste and social morality […] are just as important in mediating the impact of categories like transgender" as negotiations with a putative "West" (Dutta, Hossain, and Pamment 2022, 99; see also Martin and Ho 2006).

Ethnographic studies of the hybrid life-worlds of gender-variant groups also tend to challenge a simplistic version of the neocolonial homogenization thesis. For example, resonating with Jackson's

discussion of *kathoey* histories discussed above (2003), Dutta, Hossain, and Pamment (2022, 86) observe that gender minority groups like South Asia's *hijras* are "an evolving group, interacting with and mediated by various global, transnational and transregional flows" (see also Scuzzarello and Statham 2022). Thus, as Susan Stryker (2012) argues with reference to China, while appropriations of transgender beyond Euro-American locations are undeniably conditioned by global (post)-colonial histories, nonetheless, they are indigenized in ways whose complexity exceeds the Manichean power schema of the cruder cultural imperialism models.

A second, even more important point that such models cannot account for is the practical utility of the transgender category for gender-diverse individuals and communities the world over.[5] As Benjamin Hegarty succinctly observes, based on his research in Indonesia, transfeminine "*waria* see the value of transgender in its ability to offer new, global claims for recognition" (2017, 91).[6] Such an adoption of cross-border tactics by minoritized sex-gender subjects in Global South settings brings to mind Vinay Gidwani and K. Sivaramakrishnan's definition of cosmopolitanism: "that art of being which is able to straddle a political world of difference and deploy the technologies of one to some advantage in the other" (2003, 345). It is precisely the cosmopolitan agency of subjects in the Global South in wielding the Euro-American concept of *transgender* that we risk missing if we assume in advance that the adoption of this term only ever has the effect of reinforcing neocolonial power relations.

This brief survey of a complex and evolving field inspires our framing of our case studies in this article. To avoid naturalizing a liberation narrative regarding the East-to-West, South-to-North trajectories of the subjects whose stories we tell (Camminga and Marnell 2022; Chossière 2022; Luibhéid 2005, 2008; Yuen 2021)—to view the directionality of these journeys as, instead, a problem to be solved—we will consider how such journeys may be seen as inflected by global histories of (post)colonial power, stretching back to the late nineteenth century, vis-à-vis the genealogy of the transgender concept itself as well as popular imaginaries of China, "the West," and the relations between them.

From postcolonial complex to sex-gender occidentalism

It was during the opening decades of the twentieth century that the European concept of transsexualism was first translated by China's intellectuals, providing a modern, scientific alternative to earlier, local forms of sex-gender taxonomy (Chiang 2018). The concept arrived as part of a vast body of European biomedical science and sexological categories that were translated into Chinese in this period, often via earlier Japanese translations, including also perversion, homosexuality, bisexuality, heterosexuality, and many others (Kang 2009; Martin 2010, 29–36; Sang 2003). During this intense trans-cultural exchange, peaking in the 1920s, the work of Chinese sexologists spearheaded the displacement of the local sex-gender taxonomies that had held sway in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary, intellectual and popular cultures (McMahon 1995). For example, Cuncun Wu and Mark Stevenson (2006) chart the demise of the *xianggong* category in early twentieth-century Beijing (boy actors who cross-dressed for female opera roles and were available as paid catamite escorts for male patrons); Wenqing Kang (2009) shows how the dynastic concept of *renyao* (literally "human freak": a pejorative term for those with ambiguously gendered bodies) was replaced by Western scientific sex-gender taxonomies; and Howard Chiang (2018) maps the processes through which the dynastic category of eunuchism was supplanted by the sexological concept of transsexuality during this same period. Although accounts that construct sex-gender modernization in China as a process of native "tolerance" for diversity being suppressed by the

ironclad categories of Western sexual science are too simplistic to be persuasive (e.g. Hinsch 1990 c.f. Bravmann 1997, 62–67; Martin 2003, 31–33; Martin 2010, 29–31), nonetheless, the transculturation of sexological thinking has left a highly impactful legacy in understandings of trans* identities in China today. It can be seen as the root *both* of pathologizing discourses that frame transsexuality as a form of mental disorder (see below), *and* of trans* as a sex-gender minority identity mobilized as a reverse discourse to seek recognition in its own name (Foucault 1978).

Chinese intellectuals' modernization of sex-gender discourses coincided with the nation's semicolonial period. Indeed, the fact that sexology was alluring to China's elite intellectuals by virtue of its associations with science, progress and the metropolitan West is underwritten by a cultural logic born of China's semicolonial situation.[7] In considering this background, it is important to keep in mind that China's experiences of colonialism differed significantly from those of countries, including India, that were subject to direct colonial control by a single European power.[8] By contrast, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries China was the target of eighteen imperial powers, including European ones as well as the United States and Japan. Yet the territories annexed were comparatively small and fragmented, and the foreign powers aimed not at wholesale cultural domination, but instead principally at resource extraction. Shu-mei Shih (2001) names this situation *semicolonialism*: a form of colonial power distinctive in that it was partial, multiple, informal and ambivalent.

Shih proposes that this semicolonial situation produced in early twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals a uniquely complex relationship with the idea of the West, with the concept becoming split between the metropolitan West and the colonial West. The former became an object of intellectuals' emulation, which diminished their critique of the latter (Shih 2001, 36). Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (2004, 724) similarly argues that the absence of direct Western colonial administration supported a "colonization of […] consciousness" among elite intellectuals (see also Meinhof 2017). The "postcolonial complex" that consolidated during the late Qing dynasty and subsequent Republican era (1911–1949) persisted throughout the revolutionary years (1949–1979) and beyond to become "a key thread of continuity [linking] Republican to Maoist and post-Mao periods" (Yang 2004, 725; see also Duara 1991). Chinese intellectuals' eager adaptation of European sexological discourses since the early twentieth century can be seen, in part, as an expression of such a complex.

In the decades following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, however, the critique of the colonial West rose to prominence as government media pitted the new Chinese nation against the evils of Western imperialism, including in the realms of sexuality and gender. As Qingfei Zhang (2015) has shown, throughout the Maoist period and beyond, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) used the image of a corrupt, decadent West as a foil against which to construct socialist China in the image of sex-gender puritanism. While the sexological framing of sex-gender variance was retained, homosexuality and transgenderism were now represented as Western capitalist vices, in opposition to the state's promotion of "healthy" socialist images of cis-gendered, marital heterosexuality. When sex reassignment surgery became possible in China during the 1980s, it was officially represented as a Western invention not to be used in China except to correct physical defects; while "transgender, under the umbrella term *tongxinglian* (homosexual), was labeled as a social disease of the Western capitalist society" (Zhang 2015, 102).

Thus, a combination of early sexological modernization and cis-heteronormative state policing has ensured that no indigenous, publicly visible gender-variant community like those found in South and Southeast Asia has survived in China, and today's sex-gender minorities have comparatively few locally derived epistemological resources through which to understand their identities. Conversely, with the anti-imperialist line on sex and gender monopolized by the state, "liberal"

(*kaifang*) Western sex-gender values have become a powerful counter-discourse for gender-nonconforming subjects (Zhang 2017).

The context of global postcoloniality is also key to understanding the allure of countries like Australia as desirable destinations for both international students and gender-diverse migrants from China. This is because the historical experiences and aftermaths of high imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have fundamentally shaped the ways in which ordinary people in China today understand both "the West" and China's own place in the world (Ang and Martin 2024; Chen 1995). Australia, as a Commonwealth nation that grew out of a group of British colonies and occupies the stolen lands of Aboriginal peoples, is itself deeply imbricated with the same global (post)colonial history sketched above. Based on its British colonial history, in the minds of Chinese international students and their families today, Australia is presumed to be a "Western" (*xifang*) or "Euro-American" (*Ou-Mei*) country. It is popularly framed as a more laid-back, somewhat less sophisticated younger sibling of Western Europe, the United States, and the global Anglophone world, sharing the broad associations of those places with positive values, including modernity, liberalism, the rule of law and material wealth. Responses to Chinese students and migrants in Australia, too, are conditioned by these global (post)colonial histories. Despite high levels of multicultural diversity in Australia's large cities, anti-Chinese racism—a variant of racism against people of color in general—remains common, reflecting entrenched colonial-style white supremacy ideology as well as historically specific national fears about "Asian invasion" from the nation's North (Hage 2012; Yue et al. 2015).

In recent years, China's increasing power on the global stage, the growth of its capitalist economy, and the sophistication of its urban techno-capitalist modernity have precipitated forms of patriotic pride that, in the minds of middle-class young people, at times upend the old conceptual hierarchy of nations (Martin 2022, 233–236). However, when we focus specifically on the geographic imaginary of sex-gender minorities in China, Australian society, as part of the presumptively liberal "West," remains popularly understood as more "open" (*kaifang*), progressive, enlightened and tolerant than Chinese society in its attitude toward and treatment of LGBTQIA + individuals (mirroring the widespread association of "the West" with sex-gender progressivism also noted in other Global South contexts, discussed above). Following Xiaomei Chen (1995) and Qingfei Zhang (2017), we propose to understand this pervasive discourse as a form of *sex-gender occidentalism*: a positive construction of the Western Other that may, among other uses, be mobilized as a critique of the state's governance of sex-gender minorities within China. The fact that Australia is understood as a desirable destination for gender-nonconforming migrants is thus due, in part, to a postcolonial history that shapes how people in China commonly understand "Western" sex-gender liberalism. But at least as important as this imaginative dimension are material differences in contemporary legal, medical and social framings of gender diversity in China versus Australia—contexts to which we now turn.

Trans* lives in China and Australia today

Trans* people in China today face significant barriers to accessing medical services and support, including legal support and hormone therapy, even when they are of adult age (Zhu et al. 2019). Following the pathologizing logic of twentieth-century sexology, transsexualism is constructed as a mental disorder in the *Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders* (CCMD-3) (Wang et al. 2019), and is still categorized as "gender identity disorder" (*xingshenfen zhang'ai*) in the more recent *Standards for the Diagnosis and Treatment of Mental Disorders* (National Health

Commission of the People's Republic of China 2020). Although Chinese transgender people are permitted to change their names and gender markers on official identity documents, the completion of gender-reassignment surgeries is required as a precondition, and these are only available to unmarried individuals over 18 years of age with no criminal record (UNDP and China Women's University 2018; Wei 2022). While individuals identified as transsexual have been permitted to change their national identity cards since as early as the 1980s, legal recognition of transgender marriages was not established until the enactment of the new *Regulation on Marriage Registration* in 2003 (Zhang 2014).

Gender-reassignment health services in China today are above all family-centered. Reflecting this, a notary-verified consent letter from the patient's immediate family members, usually parents, is the ultimate precondition for transsexual medical treatments (Zhou 2024). Without the family's formal consent, doctors and psychiatrists are in most cases not permitted to prescribe medications or conduct surgeries. With the goal of striving toward a "normal life" for their patients, health professionals perpetuate a heteronormative, cisgender imaginary of trans* people, essentially adhering to the binary, sexological model of transsexualism. Patients and their families are obliged to prove that the assigned sex cannot align with their psychological gender, and there is no possibility to attain "normality" in their pre-transition bodies: they are compelled to verify that they have suffered tremendously, and their only solution is to undergo surgical treatment.

This familial model of transsexual medicine does not recognize trans* identity as a matter of individual autonomy and personal journey; rather, treatment is framed as a family decision (Zhou 2024). Given this, the family's intervention and opposition can easily derail trans* people's pursuit of treatment and cut off their community support. For example, in a recent news report, a young Chinese trans* person over 18 years of age ran away from home but was traced after her family reported her missing to the police. After she was found, the friend who helped her escape was arrested on charges of kidnapping (Lau 2024). This case again manifests how families hold power over trans* people's lives, and how authorities prioritize families' requests and place the rights of trans* individuals and their advocates under threat in a situation where there exist no specific social or legal protections for trans* people (UNDP and China Women's University 2018, 44).

As these medical and legal frameworks show, trans* desires are framed in China today principally as a problem to be corrected, whether through psychological or surgical interventions, based on a binary gender logic. Reflecting the ongoing pathologization of trans* identity, the extant research on the transgender population in China is dominated by psychological and medical studies, with an emphasis on transgender women and much less research on transgender men (Liao 2019). Relatedly, after examining the representation of transgender in the CCP mouthpiece *China Daily* since 1949, Qingfei Zhang (2014) found that representations of transgender individuals largely depicted them as exhibiting "sexual deviance" from an essentialist, biological construction of binary gender.

Yet despite the central government's "prevent and correct" policy on gender nonconformity (Zhang 2014, 191) and the impossibility of public activist mobilization for sex-gender minority rights, public acceptance of sex-gender diversity has not been completely suppressed. The burgeoning media representation of gender-nonconforming identities since the early twenty-first century has given young people, including participants in our studies, exposure to a wider and more nuanced set of images. This is illustrated by the popularity of transgender celebrity Jin Xing (Zhou 2023), the phenomenal trend of cross-dressing performances and tomboy personas on reality TV since 2005 (Zhao 2018), and ever-evolving trans* representations in independent Chinese

cinema (Bao 2022). Moreover, despite the topic's low visibility and marginalization in the mainstream public sphere, the internet provides a mediated space to debate trans* issues (Liu 2022). It also facilitates individuals' explorations of trans* identity in a culturally hybrid manner by drawing on overseas media and cultural texts across geographic borders (Zhao 2017). A notable disjuncture thus emerges between medico-legal versus popular media framings of trans* identity.

In Australia, meanwhile, thanks in part to trans* advocacy and activism, the past decade has witnessed a (still far from complete) shift from a psychiatric model of care to a model of gender-affirming care based on informed consent, and enhanced legal protections for trans* people (AusPATH 2022). The informed consent model prioritizes the experiences, knowledge and needs of trans* people themselves, to avoid unnecessary risks and protect patients from potential harm (TransHub n.d.). In the case of trans* people under age 18, after the victory of the *Re Kevin* Case in 2017, parents and healthcare professionals are able to authorize adolescents to seek gender-affirming hormone therapy, which no longer requires legal approval by the Family Court.[9]

Trans* people in Australia are legally protected against discrimination, harassment, and violence at both state and federal levels (Attorney-General's Department n.d.). These protections extend to an individual's gender-related identity, appearance, mannerisms, and other characteristics across settings including the workplace, accommodation and public spaces. They also safeguard an individual's privacy when interacting with organizations or government departments (Anti-Discrimination New South Wales 2024; Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission n.d.). Governments in many states allow people to update gender markers on legal identity documents, such as passports, Medicare cards and citizenship certificates without the requirement for surgical treatments (The Gender Centre n.d.).[10]

However, for trans* people in both countries, mental health and well-being remains a pressing issue. Due to widespread discrimination in employment and difficulty in accessing reliable and safe healthcare, trans* adults in China and Australia have reported high rates of depression and anxiety (Bretherton et al. 2021; Lin et al. 2021), as well as other conditions such as body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Barnhart et al. 2023). The mental hardship associated with trans* identity thus continues to negatively impact trans* people's well-being in both countries.

Despite this, overall, Australia's informed consent model of medical care, legal protections against discrimination, relative openness to public trans* advocacy and activism, and more lenient regulations on changing names and gender records contrast markedly with China's pathologizing, family-centered and de-politicized system of transsexual regulation. This allows Chinese trans* migrants in Australia to navigate their self-gendering with greater autonomy than they would have in China (Lam et al. 2022). Although the medical, legal and mental healthcare systems supporting the care and well-being of trans* people in Australia are far from perfect, remaining uneven across states and patchy in implementation, nevertheless the clear material differences in these support systems when compared with the situation in China tend to support the common understanding of Australia as associated with sex-gender liberalism and hence a desirable migration destination for trans* people.

Moving abroad as normative middle-class aspiration

A third context that frames our consideration of gender-diverse student and graduate flows from China to Australia concerns class demographics. The massive growth of the educational mobility vector linking these nations over the past two decades has been fueled by the growth of China's urban middle classes in tandem with the commercialization of higher education in Australia

(Martin 2022). The Chinese international university students who have studied in Australia since the turn of the millennium have overwhelmingly been children of the urban middle classes that emerged in the wake of China's post-socialist market reforms since the late 1970s. So-called "study abroad fever" (*liuxue re*) is driven in significant part by the middle classes' anxieties about the reproduction of their social status in the context of the ever more competitive, marketized and inequitable secondary education system at home (Fong 2011; Kajanus 2015, 46–72; Nyíri 2011, 37; Waters 2008). Thus, studying abroad in countries like Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA has by now become a standard part of the middle-class life course (Goodman 2014; Hansen 2015).

Lucetta Kam's (2020) study of Chinese queer women's migration to Australia illustrates that *chuguo* (moving abroad to a Western country) has become a normative cosmopolitan aspiration among middle-class and elite *lala* (lesbians) and trans* folks in particular (see also Wei 2020). And for those women and sex-gender minorities who undertake such journeys, study abroad may be experienced as a "zone of suspension" where the normative sex-gender rules are partially, temporarily lifted; and/ or as a time and space of queer possibility (Kajanus 2015, 114–119; Martin 2022, 161–189). Reflecting the contexts sketched above, the stories below illustrate that the perceived sex-gender progressivism of Western societies may also provide a primary *motivation* for study abroad in the case of middle-class sex-gender minorities, for whom pressures from family members, state institutions, and Chinese society generally that push them toward cisgender embodiment and heterosexual marriage are most sharply at odds with their own self-understandings (Engebretsen 2014; Kam 2012).

Methods

In this article, we examine international students' and graduates' trans* mobilities by drawing from studies by Hao Zheng (2024) on Chinese queer female students' queer and adult identity-making, and by Fran Martin (2022) on young Chinese middle-class women's educational mobility, both conducted largely in Melbourne, Australia. Zheng's study employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews complemented by second-stage social media scroll-back interviews (Robards and Lincoln 2020). The participants were 20 queer AFAB international students from China, ranging in age from 20 to 34. The cohort included both full-time students and recent graduates from Australian universities, as of 2021.

Martin's study is a transnational, multi-sited longitudinal ethnography that commenced with an interviews-based pilot study in 2012 (Phase 1) and continued through an intensive research period between 2015 and 2020 (Phase 2), in which a group of 56 young women and AFAB people from China were "followed" through the course of their education journeys in Australia. Data was collected through repeated audio-recorded interviews, unstructured hanging out, digital ethnography, and a range of related methods. The third phase of the study, underway at the time of writing, involves two further rounds of semi-structured recorded interviews with 34 of the Phase 2 participants, to map their experiences after graduation, in Australia, China and other destinations worldwide.

In this article, we focus on just two participants, one from each project. While this is obviously not a representative sample, we nevertheless believe that these two individuals' stories reflect a critical yet under-examined aspect of educational mobility. Focusing on such a limited number of case studies detracts from the generalizability of our findings, but the level of detail we can attend to through this micro-focused approach affords us a uniquely in- depth, nuanced view of participants' experiences, especially the subjective dimensions of their gendered mobilities (Noble and Tabar

2017). By exploring the accounts of 20-year-old non-binary Li, and trans* Harry, who was aged between 18 and 28 during the period of study to date (pseudonyms are used to ensure the de-identification of participants),[11] we attend to questions of trans* identity and mobility in the context of international education. At the time of writing, Harry uses he/him pronouns, though when Martin first met him nine years ago, this was not yet the case. Harry's story, as related below, is based on her three recorded interviews and 19 additional informal meetings with him between 2015 and 2024. Li identified as genderqueer during the course of two in-depth interviews in 2021. In 2024, they shared with Zheng that they now identify as non-binary and use they/ she/ he pronouns. All quoted interviews were conducted in Mandarin and translated by the authors. By considering Li's and Harry's evolving gender narratives while on the move between China and Australia, we aim to show how their education-related mobilities intertwined with their trans* becoming in ways that reflect the broad historical contexts sketched above, reveal Harry's and Li's cosmopolitan agency, and challenge any assumption that such South-North migrations could be seen simply as journeys toward trans* liberation.

Harry's trans exile: "there's no way I can go back"

Martin first met Harry, a high-achieving AFAB student in a STEM discipline, when he was just seventeen, before he left China for his Australian studies. They met in Harry's home city, together with both of his parents, and it seemed from the conversation that evening that his tomboyish style and unwillingness to find a boyfriend were already a source of tension between parents and child. As Martin got to know Harry better over the years that followed, it became clear that educational mobility meant time away from parental surveillance where he could more readily explore and develop his gender-variant subjectivity.

Today, some nine years after that first meeting, Harry has obtained Permanent Residency in Australia as a skilled migrant and remains in Melbourne studying toward a doctoral degree while working part-time. A year ago, he revealed to Martin that he had begun gender affirming therapy with a psychiatrist: a well-known expert in the field whom he much admired:

> I think [seeing the psychiatrist] is helpful, and I don't think it's a stigma. […] My GP [i.e. doctor] recommended [the psychiatrist] to me. Of course, I also Googled their profile. […] It's Dr [XXX], at [XXX] Clinic. […] [Their work is] pretty much in line with [the gender] topic, that is, they are a consultant in Psychiatry, and their specialization is related to gender. […] They also [display] that rainbow [flag] and so on. […] Dr. XXX is helping me do this thing called *gender affirmation*.[12] […] They are one of the few psychiatrists qualified to do it. I think you could count them on the fingers of one hand—there are fewer than five of them.

For Harry, the path toward trans* identification had been long and winding, and involved exploration of various different sex-gender possibilities, including lesbian identification (prompting Martin to suggest some queer resources to him, referenced below). Several years earlier, when Harry had revealed his sexual preference for women to his parents, after lengthy arguments, his father had suggested that if he was certain about this orientation, then it would be best if he remained in Australia after graduation, as his life as a sexual minority subject would be easier there.

M: […] A few years ago, do you remember […] you described the painful process of discussing all this with your parents? But at that time, the focus was on so-called "homosexuality" (*tongxinglian*) rather than "transgender" (*kuaxingbie*).

H: Yes, yes.

M: But now it has shifted to …
H: Yes, it's … different. I don't remember when it was, but you introduced me to an [Asian] *les*[bian] group, and I went to participate in their activities, and I started to feel like I don't belong in this group either. […] I did go along, I went along to participate in person. It was only because I went that the story continued.
M: And the [Taiwanese queer] books that I lent you don't really deal with transgender issues very much.
H: No, so when I read them, I felt like that's NOT. ME. […] I was exploring at the time, as I felt that I understood too little. It's not that I suddenly felt that I'm this or I'm that. I had to participate many times [in various LGBTQIA+ activities], and get to know more about them––and then, yes: then I knew.

A year after that interview, Harry had concluded his gender affirming psychiatric therapy and was in the process of social transition. With pride and excitement, he showed Martin the new "Mr" title on his bank and identity cards, along with a button stating his preferred pronouns, "He/ Him," which he wore at work. He related the story of correcting his gender records at the bank, where he quoted the bank's own guidelines to the branch staff, who knew less than he did about the process:

> That day was –– pretty awkward! But […] I knew: today I need to do this, and whatever you need, I've brought it all with me. I've changed it [gender]! […] I had to show it to them. I said: "I found this [regulation] in the [XXX] Bank regulations. This is from your *homepage*." […] It really was a hassle. […] I mean, I'm already at that stage where I could do it […]. Because *I don't care*. However you talk about me, however you look at me—I don't care. That's why I could do it.

Harry's firm resolve to record his correct gender in the face of the bank staff's ignorance and the awkwardness involved in such a public interaction testifies to the confidence he now feels not just in his gender identity, but also in asserting the rights it entitles him to within Australian institutional and legal frameworks.

The potential to explore alternate sex-gender identity categories––and especially to realize his trans* identity––was clearly linked, for Harry, with his move to Australia. During the same interview in which he related the bank story, Harry also offered a comparative reflection on the situation of trans* people in China:

> I think [things for trans* folks] are actually pretty good in Australia. […] At least, they're already *a big step ahead* [of China]. So there's no way I can go back. Everybody knows there's no way I can go back. […] Of course, there are some [trans*] activities back [in China] now. […] But they're not public, they're all underground. Though their lives are better than they were before. […] It's a bit more difficult, because in China, if you want to change your [national] ID card, you can only do that if you've had surgery. And that's very unreasonable. Because not everybody can have surgery like teacher Jin Xing did [a transgender celebrity].

Harry repeated the phrase "there's no way I can go back [to China]" (*wo shi bu keneng huiguo le*) multiple times in Martin's two most recent interviews with him. Used at moments when the conversation touched most directly on Harry's unfolding experience of gender transition, the repeated statement seemed to mark a fundamental perceived link between his consolidating transmasculine identity and his move to Australia, with its wider range of institutional and social supports for trans* lives.

Indeed, in the most recent interview, Harry re-told the story of his multi-stage quest for Australian Permanent Residency (PR) as all based on his emergent trans* identity and the knowledge that it was not viable for him to return to China. This odyssey had involved a switch in majors to train in

a profession included on the Australian government's Strategic Skills List to facilitate Harry's transition to a skilled migrant visa, followed by two years working in a profession in which he originally had little interest:

> Because I've known for a long time that society would be this way [ie: regarding his gender identity], I said, I definitely have to get [PR]. No matter what I did, this was the goal. That's why I switched [majors] back then. I could put up with dirty [work] [in a previous job] because I knew what I wanted [ie: to get PR]. […] I couldn't go back.

While Harry's commitment to remaining in Australia post-study is clearly connected with his experiences of stronger medico-legal infrastructures supporting trans* existence there compared to China (the availability of non-pathologizing psychiatric care; the at-least relative ease of altering pronouns on official documents, et cetera), another motivation to remain outside China is connected with the painful complexities of family relationships. Harry revealed his parents' refusal to acknowledge (far less accept) his trans* identity, saying they had initially supported his wish to consult the psychiatrist "because they assumed he would tell me I was being silly." When Harry told his parents he had tested positive in the psychiatric test for gender dysphoria:

> They had no reaction, they pretend not to know. […] So let them pretend not to know […]. I know I'm right, so I don't care. […] I'm pretty conflicted. […] When you ask for help from your parents, you want them to *support* you. But to not only not get *support* but also be criticized––that's exhausting. That's why I've begun sharing less with them. Because it's already quite hard for me to maintain my emotional stability, it takes a lot of effort. And I don't want to have to make extra efforts [in communicating with them]. Because you know that nothing good will come of it, anyway.

Given this impasse with his parents and the arguments that invariably ensued when they spent extended time together, Harry chose to reduce his communications with them. He looked forward to the day when he would obtain full-time employment and with it, the financial independence that would decrease his parents' moral justification to influence his decision-making. This distancing––emotional and geographic––also worked from his parents' point of view: "[My parents] think that at this stage, just as long as I don't go back there [home], everything is fine. Because [that way], I needn't reveal [my gender identity] to my relatives and [their] friends."

Harry's discussion of his experiences on visits back to his hometown also reveals a cluster of ongoing tensions around heteronormative marriage practices. This focused not so much on the issue of Harry's own hypothetical future marriage––a topic he had become adept in shutting down whenever his parents raised it, ever since his teenage years––but rather, negotiations within Harry's family around the compulsory performance of heterosexuality and cis-normativity at the weddings of family friends. He related:

> Maybe because [my parents] quite often attend other people's weddings, they request of me: "just bring back someone of the opposite sex and show him off one time [at a friend's wedding]: that's all we ask." […] Of course, this wouldn't be particularly difficult for me because I do have *gay* friends, so it would be pretty convenient. But I think, why should I do this for the sake of showing others? Even though I have the option, I don't want to do it. […] I think [my Chinese gay friends in Australia] have the same idea. They are also striving to get *PR* in order to stay here. Two of my *gay* friends have already got it, so they don't have to go back and face this [marriage pressure]. [… My gay] friend got [PR] earlier than me, and he told me: if you can't get it, I can help you. […] Because he knows that I can't go back.

Harry's discussion highlights the multiple ways in which family pressures underwrite his decision to remain in Australia. These include his parents' preference for him to remain away from home to avoid the public shame of his gender-nonconformity being revealed to extended family and friends;

the emotional burden of frequent conflicts with his parents and Harry's desire to establish independence from them as an adult and a transman, aided by geographic distance; and the routine humiliations of cis-heteronormative pressures connected with events like weddings back home. For Harry, permanent resident status in Australia and, ultimately, economic independence from his parents emerge as the two key preconditions for the trans* life he hopes to realize. The final quote suggests Harry's membership in a wider diasporic LGBTQIA+ community, which includes gay male Chinese friends who share his understanding of the complex ways in which sexual and gendered tensions within families relate to geographies and mobilities, resulting in a shared consciousness of the impossibility of return. Harry's often-repeated sense of this impossibility—conditioned by stronger medico-legal supports in Australia on the one hand, and unbearable family pressures in China on the other—makes it tempting to frame Harry's situation as one of *trans* exile* (see also Quah 2024).

Li's spiritual homelessness: "I'm too short and skinny as an Asian man"

Li reached out to Hao Zheng on a Chinese lesbian dating app after seeing her advertisement recruiting "Chinese queer females." After expressing their interest in participating, Li asked whether they met the screening requirements, as they were exploring self-gendering at that time and did not identify as a woman. Zheng clarified that "queer females" was intended as an umbrella term and assured Li that gender fluidity would be fully acknowledged in the research. Drawing on this opening conversation, she got to know how Li explored self-gendering as a 20-year-old undergraduate student who had been living in Melbourne for over two years. In general, like Harry, Li was pleased with their new life in Australia, with more freedom from family and easier access to resources to explore and embrace their sex-gender diversity. Nevertheless, to a seemingly greater extent than Harry, they encountered anxiety and uncertainty when contemplating alternative forms of gendering within their intersectional identity.

From a very young age, Li had always resonated with male roles. They played with boys in primary school and never joined a girls' friendship group until prepuberty, when the difference between boys and girls became emphasized among peers. After coming to Australia, Li tried to "fit in." They joined girls' social groups and made an effort to use makeup and dress up. But awkward feelings overwhelmed Li with confusion, as they explained:

> I don't know my problem, I don't know if I chose to be like that, or if it was because of my homosexuality, as I like girls, and only men can like girls, so I must identify myself with the role of men. I don't know the reason.

In tandem with Li's confusion in self-gendering, they also described a profound desire to explore "a liberal and open world" in Western countries. Prior to coming to Australia, they had actively engaged with global queer media on platforms both within and outside the Chinese digital sphere (i.e. BiliBili and YouTube), which enabled them to explore Western non-heteronormative representations. Furthermore, Li was keen to break free from their parents' strict governance, particularly their mother's desire to control and oversee their life. For these reasons, going abroad and leaving the family had been a primary aspiration for Li when they were a teenager, to allow them to explore their sexuality and achieve autonomy. But Li's family insisted that Li should finish their Bachelor's degree in China and go abroad later, for a Master's degree. Unexpectedly, in high school, Li's depression caused serious issues in their academic performance, and they ended up giving up the all-important college entrance exam (*gaokao*). The mental health issue

became an incentive for Li's parents to allow their study abroad ahead of the original plan. At the age of 17, Li came out to their parents as homosexual (*tongxinglian*) and left home to study in Australia.

Despite the tense relationship between Li and their parents, their sexual identity did not lead to family disputes at that time, as the family sought to avoid major conflicts in order to support Li's mental health. But years later, Li's father reacted negatively when Li mentioned their confusion in self-gendering: he immediately became furious and expressed his opposition, saying that he would disown Li if they became a transgender man. Li's parents blamed Li's Australian friends, as most of them were queer and trans*, for having a bad influence on their child and turning Li transgender. Recalling their father's negative reaction, Li speculated:

> My father did not have issues with me being a homosexual, but once I mentioned that I might be transgender, he was mad. Maybe the reason behind this [is that] in China, your body is given by your parents: if you don't like your body, you are disrespecting your parents––that's also why they forbid children to get tattooed.

According to Li, the authority entitled to parents gives them a sense of ownership to control children's corporeal practices. Following mainstream Chinese understandings, Li's father perceived his child's trans* identity as essentially transexual and entailing a surgical outcome (i.e. making changes to one's body without parents' approval). This reaction again demonstrates how familism and patriarchal structures may impose grave pressure on trans* young people despite their living overseas. The blaming of Li's Australian friends also reflects how Chinese parents––to some extent following state rhetoric––may paint transgender as a neocolonial gender ideology from the West (Evang 2022; Zhang 2017) which makes a negative impact on their children, who are "led astray" (*xuehuaile*).

The stressful relationship with their parents had driven Li to leave home, and now their arguments on trans* identity further intensified their conflicts. As a non-binary trans* person, Li was worried about the intervention of their parents and the lack of legal protections for trans* people in China. Having expressed their disappointment with the familial medical transsexual model in China, they declared their refusal to return: "This is your body. Your parents cannot feel your feelings. I cannot accept allowing my parents to decide my life!"

Although Li had spent only a short time in Australia compared to Harry, they already expressed a strong commitment to staying on after graduation. Echoing Harry's narrative, Li firmly stated:

> [I want to get PR] because I want to stay here. As a gender/sexual minority, I would get better protections here compared to China. I can also get married here … After same-sex marriage was legalized in Australia, I felt I must stay abroad.

Throughout Li's conversations with Zheng, they constantly expressed enthusiasm and excitement to be exposed to the resources to (re)build their identity in Australia. After arriving in Australia, Li had been active in local queer scenes and engaged extensively with Australian partners and students. Through attending student-led queer activities and the family events of their white Australian girlfriend, Li finally found opportunities to express their queer identity with pride and joy. Moreover, they developed interests in politics and started participating in gender-related celebrations and human rights movements such as the Midsumma Pride March and SlutWalk.[13] Li also enrolled in Gender Studies subjects at their university, outside of their Psychology major, and received, in their own words, "so much useful information" that positively affected their identity exploration. Having experienced many eye-opening events and accessed valuable resources via

education, activism and social interactions in Melbourne, Li became familiar with the vocabulary and ideologies of local queer and trans* discourse. These prompted Li to explore their gender beyond binary frameworks. But while acknowledging that the experience of educational mobility was fruitful and exciting, Li confessed that there still remained many "I don't knows" in terms of their self-gendering: "I am so confused. Am I trans, or gender fluid, or non-binary, or maybe I am just a little girl? I don't really know."

Interestingly, it appears that multiple layers of issues in relation to racialized phenotypical attributes intersected with Li's self-gendering:

> I started to listen to my internal voice recently, as I was not quite aware of this before, nor had I considered what I wanted. It's quite funny: I thought I was too short to get T-shots [testosterone injections]. Speaking of my [physical] attributes, I might have more advantages as a woman than a man. Moreover, over here, if you're an Asian man and also short and skinny, you might face more discrimination.

During the process of exploring alternative forms of self-gendering while studying in Australia, Li experienced constant anxiety about navigating life as a Chinese trans* person in a Western country, reflecting wider fears of racialization and racism on the part of trans* migrants who are people of color (Castro et al. 2022). Trans* Chinese international students face "double marginalization" due to both their Chinese and trans* identity (Chiang et al. 2018). As previous research has shown, transphobia within Chinese families and society is further complicated by discrimination and exclusion against Chinese/Asian identities in predominantly white societies, including within LGBTQIA+ groups (Hu and Flynn 2024). For example, in Szu-Ying Chiang and colleagues' studies on the mental health of migrant Chinese sexual and gender minority youth in New Zealand, racism emerged as one of the major challenges for these double-marginalized young people. Continuous racial objectification and sexual stereotyping, combined with internalized racism, intensify their feelings of disconnection from cultural roots and objection from the destination country (Chiang et al. 2018, 2019).

Reflecting these wider transnational patterns, the sense of shame for "not being enough," often rooted in experiences of (internalized) racism, contributed to Li's anxiety about their racialized body image and affected how they approached their gender-affirming journey: "I will go to the gym and build up my muscles [if starting T-shots]! [Because] I'm so petite and so I must become strong." Asked why they felt so anxious about their trans* appearance, Li responded:

> Generally speaking, Asian men are indeed not as popular in Western [dating] markets. When I met my partner's family, each one was around 1.9 meters tall, and I barely reached their hips. This would certainly make me feel somewhat inferior as a man.

To address this anxiety about being inadequate as a Chinese man, Li used digital techniques to explore their trans* identity. They told Hao Zheng that, when they discovered an AI gender-swap photo filter, they used this application to find out what they would look like as a man. Li was satisfied with the result and decided to share the picture on social media: "I just wanted to implicitly express that I could be so good-looking if I became a man." The intention behind this, Li explained, was to satisfy their curiosity and reassure themself in the face of their uncertainty about becoming trans* as a Chinese person in Australia.

Framed as a form of appearance anxiety, Li's perception of trans* Asian men's disadvantage reflects how sex-gender minorities of color are racialized and thus further marginalized in Western societies (Caluya 2008; Wang and Gorman-Murray 2023). Their unease demonstrates how "the logic of difference" shapes the experience of queer and trans* exiles, leading to exclusion, inequality,

and even discrimination (Cantú 2009, 39–40). In Li's case, on top of their trans* identity, race became a severe concern as their racialized physiology intersected with and might further solidify their sex-gender minoritization and displacement in the West. Although trans* people can benefit from more inclusive resources in Australia than in China, Li's discussion illustrates that they may face greater barriers to being accepted in Australia as people of color.

Li's narrative thus challenges the framing of "migration-as-liberation" in some queer and trans* migration studies (Chossière 2022). Their hesitation about becoming an Asian trans* man demonstrates how minority race and minority gender create forms of culturally and geographically specific intersectionality. Bin Wang and Andrew Gorman-Murray (2023) have highlighted the experiences of "spiritual homelessness" caused by such intersectionality. They describe this as "the lack of connections to a community or place free from identity struggles with underlying power structures, where [minoritized subjects'] multiple identities are mutually embraced" (2023, 121). Li's predicament exemplifies such an experience.

In sum, Li's aspirations toward migration after their overseas studies in Australia first of all demonstrate the productive potentials of trans* educational mobility. During this process, Li's participation in local LGBTQIA+ scenes and networks supported their deepening exploration of self-gendering by providing resources to enrich their gender imagination. Nevertheless, Li, like Harry, encountered long-distance pressures from their family, who continued to impose the stigma of transsexualism from afar. Li also reflected on the negative effects of trans* intersectionality, anticipating further marginalization as a minority in both gender and race living in Western society. Li's story thus illustrates the multiple and complexly disjunctive subjective effects of trans* education migration. Even though it provided Li with certain resources and spaces to explore trans* identity affirmation beyond the pathological and familial models, the previously appealing "liberal and open" Western world also imposed new pressures and doubts about acceptance.

Conclusion: cosmopolitan agency amid the disjunctures of education mobility

The first part of this article sketched the broad historical contexts that gave rise to four discourses within China that, we have argued, frame trans* existence today and propel the westward aspirations and mobilities of middle-class trans* students and graduates like Harry and Li. These discourses are disjunctive in their framing of trans* existence: sometimes confluent and sometimes contradictory. First, we considered a *medico-psychiatric* discourse that pathologizes transsexualism as a mental illness. This discourse was derived from the transculturation of European sexology into China in the semicolonial early twentieth century and remains dominant in the ideological framing and medical treatment of gender-nonconforming individuals in China today. Second, we noted the emergence of a *nationalist/ anti-imperialist* discourse, promoted by the socialist state after 1949, that represented homosexuality and transgenderism as social pathologies produced by the capitalist West. Third, we observed a pervasive *familialist* discourse in the administration of medical care for gender-variant people in China today, especially in the organization of consent. This familism has its roots in traditional culture, and has been (re)appropriated by the socialist and post-socialist state as part of a more general sex-gender conservatism that has often been promoted as the Chinese socialist antidote to Western decadence. This type of familism is deeply embedded in trans* people's everyday experiences of family relations. Fourth, we noted a *sex-gender minority identity* discourse, which is popularly associated with the idea of "the liberal West" through sex-gender occidentalism. This discourse initially emerged as a reverse discourse from the first wave of European sexology, gained force with the rise of liberationist movements in Western Europe and the

Anglosphere in the late twentieth century, and since the 1990s has flowed across China's borders as part and parcel of cultural globalization, including via popular media (Bao 2018; Kam 2012; Kong 2023; Zhang 2017). It is appropriated by LGBTQIA+ individuals and groups in China through tactics of cosmopolitan agency, in explicit or implicit resistance to state framings of sex and gender.

Our discussion of our research participants' stories has illustrated how today, the disjunctures between the medico-psychiatric, familialist, and nationalist discourses on the one hand, and the sex-gender minority identity discourse on the other, channel flows of middle-class trans* exile from China to countries understood to be part of the liberal West, including Australia. The movement of international students and graduates like Harry and Li enables them to tactically distance themselves from the pressures created by the pathologizing, nationalist and familialist discourses and access support from institutions and practices built on the global (not exclusively "Western") spread of the fourth discourse: in their stories, they thereby enter a world of rainbow flags, gender affirming care, Asian diasporic and Australian LGBTQIA+ social groups, Taiwanese queer literature, feminist and gender theory, he/ him buttons, and gender-corrected identity documents. We have argued that Harry's and Li's use of education-related mobility to leverage the minority identity discourse in Australia as a tactical tool against the disabling effects of the dominant discourses on transsexuality in China can be seen as a form of cosmopolitan agency.

Yet these mobile students' and graduates' lives in Australia are also characterized by negative experiences of racial(ist) marginalization that are conditioned by the same (post)colonial histories which also enable their positive experiences of inclusion as sex-gender minority subjects. Although the informed consent model in Australia provides enhanced resources and affirmation for trans* exiles in self-gendering, which offers promising prospects for their autonomy and inclusion, persistent racial(ist) structures inherited from colonial histories continue to immobilize people of color, and may hinder these trans* migrants from gaining a sense of confidence and competence in their own intersectional identities. From a broader point of view, the exploration of Harry's and Li's narratives in this article highlights unique insights into international student's gender mobility, opening up new avenues for understanding mobile young people's journeys of self-exploration in transnational and transcultural settings. Although the case studies focus on individual experiences, our discussion underscores the role of race/racism in the context of trans* educational mobilities. Future research could further investigate the implications of gendered mobilities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of trans* identities in motion, helping to address the limited visibility of trans* exiles in academic and public discourses due to the culturally and geopolitically specific forms of intersectionality they embody.

Notes

1. Trans* thus includes "not only identities such as transgender, transsexual, trans man, and trans woman that are prefixed by trans- but also identities such as genderqueer, neutrios, intersex, agender, two-spirit, cross-dresser, and genderfluid" (Tompkins 2014, 27); to this list we would add Chinese terms including *kuaxingbie* (transgender/ transsexual), T (lesbian tomboy, broadly similar to *butch*), ENBY (a shortened form of non-binary, *feieryuanxingbiezhe*) and others.
2. For related discussions, see also Jackson 1996; Lugones 2007; Dutta and Roy 2014; Chiang 2020, 19–63; Dutta, Hossain, and Pamment 2022, 96–99; Evang 2022.
3. In the domain of sexuality studies, see also research on the rejection of the lower-class, rural-migrant local *money boy* identity by middle-class urban gay men in China (Rofel 2010; Kong 2012).
4. This resonates with work on homonationalism and homotransnationalism, which has tended to focus more on the domain of sexualities (Puar 2007; Bacchetta and Haritaworn 2016).

5. This is acknowledged in many of the accounts surveyed above: Stryker 2012; Dutta and Roy 2014; Billard and Nesfield 2020; Dutta, Hossain, and Pamment 2022.
6. Such discussions resonate with earlier work in transnational sexuality scholarship, when a certain obsession about whether LGB globalization in Asia represented a homogenizing or a diversifying trend gave way to the realization that, for the individuals and communities concerned, this academic question paled in significance beside the more pressing issue of which aspects of Euro-American LGB cultures could be retrofitted as tools to advance local-level struggles (Chu 2004; Martin 2011).
7. Relatedly but from another angle, Kang notes that the pre-modern idea that "*renyao* was a bad omen for a dynasty's decline […] resonated within the context of Western imperialist encroachment. […] Public anxiety over the national crisis caused by colonial powers was displaced onto men who engaged in sex with other men" (Kang 2009, 38–39). This nationalist abjection of male effeminacy prefigures the state's othering of transgenderism and homosexuality during the high socialist years (see below).
8. The historical literature review in the next two paragraphs is partly adapted from a longer discussion originally published in Ang and Martin 2024.
9. It was further clarified in the *Re Imogen* 2020 judgement that individuals under 18 can begin treatment provided that there is no disagreement from parents or those holding parental responsibility (Moussa 2021).
10. At the time of writing, New South Wales and Western Australia are the two states where surgery is necessary prior to changing gender on birth certificates.
11. Harry has been referred to with a different pseudonym in Fran Martin's previous publications; the change to an English masculine name reflects a similar change in the participant's actual preferred name since the beginning of Martin's study.
12. Italicized terms were spoken in English.
13. The Midsumma Pride March has been a signature event celebrating Melbourne's LGBTQIA+ community since 1996. SlutWalk is an international movement calling for an end to victim-blaming and shaming of sexual assault survivors.

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Special terms

xianggong	相公	lala	拉拉
renyao	人妖	tongxinglian	同性恋
kaifang	开放	kuaxingbie	跨性别
xifang	西方	wo shi bu keneng huiguo le	我是不可能回国了
Ou-Mei	欧美	gaokao	高考
xingshenfen zhang'ai	性身份障碍	xuehuaile	学坏了
liuxue re	留学热	feieryuanxingbiezhe	非二元性别者
chuguo	出国		

Notes on contributors

Hao Zheng is a Chinese queer female researcher based in Australia. She is a current research fellow at the Influencer Ethnography Research Lab (IERLab) at Curtin University and a recent PhD graduate from Deakin University. Hao's research interests are in the areas of gender and sexuality, transnational mobility, and digital cultures. Her doctoral research, completed in 2024, explored Chinese queer female students' transitions in Australia, analyzing how they craft their queer and adult identities in a transnational context. Her work has also been published in the *Journal of Homosexuality* and the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Fran Martin's research focusses on Asia-related cultural studies and sexuality and gender studies in the context of globalization. In 2021, she completed a major ethnographic research project funded as a Future Fellowship by the Australian Research Council, exploring the subjective experiences of young women from China studying in Australia. Its findings were published in *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West* (Duke U.P., 2022). Fran's prior research addresses television, film, literature, and other forms of cultural production across Taiwan, the mainland People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, and the worldwide Chinese diaspora. Her earlier monographs include: Telemodernities: Television and Transforming Selfhood in Asia (with T. Lewis and W. Sun, Duke U.P., 2016); *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese Cultures and the Female Homoerotic Imaginary* (Duke U.P., 2010); and *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture* (Hong Kong U.P., 2003).

ORCID

Hao Zheng http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3370-7665
Fran Martin http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1265-9577

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