

News from Australia and the Pacific

For *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research interests and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. We focus on current, recent or upcoming projects, books, articles, conferences and teaching, while identifying related interests and activities of fellow academics in the field. Our contributions aim to give a broad overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia in the region. Our preferred style is subjective and conversational. Rather than offering fully-fledged research reports, our contributions give insight into the motivations behind and directions of various types of conversations between Asia and the region.

News from Australia and the Pacific is edited by Ana Dragojlovic (ana.dragojlovic@unimelb.edu.au) and Edwin Jurriëns (edwin.jurriëns@unimelb.edu.au), with assistance from Andy Fuller (fuller.a@unimelb.edu.au), from the Asia Institute in Melbourne (arts.unimelb.edu.au/asiainstitute). In the current issue, we highlight the topic of *Gender and Mobility Regimes in Asia and its Diaspora*.



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The Asia Institute is The University of Melbourne's key centre for studies in Asian languages, cultures and societies. Asia Institute academic staff have an array of research interests and specialisations, and strive to provide leadership in the study of the intellectual, legal, politico-economic, cultural and religious traditions and transformations of Asia and the Islamic world. The Institute is committed to community engagement and offers a dynamic program of academic and community-focused events and cultural exchanges that aim to promote dialogue and debate.

The gendered mobilities of Chinese educational transmigrants

Fran Martin



IN MOST OF THE DEVELOPED western countries that are popular destinations for international students, including the USA, the UK, and Australia, students from the People's Republic of China have for several years been the biggest group, by a wide margin.¹ Partly as a result of the one child policy in force when the current generation was born, meaning that relatively few daughters had brothers to compete with for parental resources, young women make up around sixty percent of Chinese students abroad.² In the case of Australian higher education, female Chinese students account for around 54%,³ despite the sex-ratio skewing of China's youth population toward males.⁴ This apparent feminization of Chinese educational migration to Australia raises some interesting questions, which I am currently investigating as part of a five-year ethnographic study funded by the Australian Research Council. First, why does study abroad seem like a *particularly* attractive option for young women? Second, what impacts will several years spent living away from China have on the way these young women understand their gendered identity and life course?

My interviews with 30 future students and their families, conducted in several eastern Chinese cities in mid-2015, reveal some interesting answers. On one hand, both future students, and (especially) some of their mothers, focussed on gendered risks in China's urban professional job markets that they hoped would be mitigated by increasing female graduates' competitiveness with an international university qualification.⁵ Social scientists have demonstrated that in many respects, gender relations have effectively become re-traditionalized with the end of high socialism in China (after 1979), and gendered inequalities in urban labour markets have significantly increased.⁶ Students' mothers verified this with personal stories: job ads stating directly that preference would be given to male applicants; a female job applicant with an outstanding GPA who lost out on a job to a male ex-classmate with a lower GPA; pregnant white-collar workers either being fired or finding

themselves unable to advance professionally after returning from maternity leave, and so on. Commencing students and their parents hoped that an overseas degree could provide the extra CV embellishment needed to make a female job applicant competitive against less qualified male applicants.

The impact of studying abroad on these young women's understanding of themselves and their gendered life course is still being researched, but data gathered thus far provides some clues. On one hand, even before leaving China, some of my research participants were already highly critical of the currently standard middle-class female life course in China. This was caricatured by many as a strictly sequenced pathway through higher education, finding a boyfriend, working professionally for a few years, marrying and bearing child(ren) between ages 24 and 30, and thenceforth redirecting one's main energies toward the family. Some of the young women I interviewed hoped that time away from China would help them elaborate alternative life pathways, for example through later marriage, non-marriage, a heightened focus on career, or extended periods of overseas travel and work forestalling the standard feminine 'settling down'.

During the two years I have followed my 50 core participants to date, some changes in how they understand themselves in gendered terms are indeed becoming apparent. For some participants, time abroad seems to create a 'zone of suspension' in the sense that the full force of Chinese sex-gender norms *vis-à-vis* both life course and relationships becomes somewhat suspended as a result of geographic distance.⁷ For example, in terms of intimate relationships, many participants have remarked on the commonness of boyfriends and girlfriends living together in Australia; a situation that remains relatively uncommon, and morally 'dangerous', for young women in many areas of China. Living abroad and far from the prying eyes of gossiping neighbours back home, some young women feel freer to explore *de facto* relationships, cohabitation with boyfriends they don't intend to marry, and same-sex attraction.

Interestingly, however, this doesn't remove fears about reputation at home; often, such explorations of alternative forms of intimacy are kept secret from friends and extended family in China. Given the ubiquity of transnational social media connections that allow daily conversations with people back home, this means that these young women are effectively negotiating, day to day, a liminal space in between two contrasting regimes of sex-gender norms. Meanwhile, with regard to students' developing understandings of gendered life course, our conversations to date reveal that for some, an alternative ideal life script seems to be emerging that is characterised not only by the increasing de-linking of sexuality from marriage but also by relative flexibility in the timing of life transitions, self-development rather than family-focus as a core value, and a greater diversity of life pathways for adult women.

The really interesting question, though, is how such transformations in these young women's gendered self-understandings as a result of their educational mobility will play out over years to come, especially for those who ultimately return to China to live.

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Above:
Two of Martin's study participants photograph The University of Melbourne, soon after their arrival in Australia. Photo by C. Zheng.