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# Overthrowing the First Mountain: Chinese Student-Migrants and the Geography of Power

Anni KAJANUS

**Abstract:** This article uses Mahler and Pessar's (2001, 2006) model of "geography of power" to interrogate how the general dynamic of Chinese student migration generates a variety of experiences at the individual level. Each Chinese student-migrant embarks on their journey from a different position vis-à-vis the flows and interconnections of the international education market. Some of them set out to achieve concrete goals, while others are motivated by a more intangible mission to become cosmopolitan subjects. As they move around, their shifting position in the hierarchies of nationality, class, gender, and generation influences their decision-making and their experiences. These power systems function simultaneously on multiple geographical scales, exemplified by the contradictory ways gender operates in the family, education, work, and marriage. To further develop the connection this model makes between personal characteristics, cognitive processes, and various power systems, I draw attention to the politics of ordinary affects.

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**Keywords:** China, education, migration, gender

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## Introduction

Chairman Mao Zedong once stated that the three oppressive mountains the Chinese people must overthrow are imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism. In post-reform China, this popular saying has been rephrased to reflect the new difficulties people struggle with in the fields of education, housing, and healthcare. As education is a major route to economic betterment and job security, many people hope that conquering this mountain will help to overcome difficulties with the other two. Motivations for Chinese students to study overseas are embedded in the particular historical setting whereby the highly competitive and stratified education system in China gives them the incentive to go abroad, the internationalisation of education works as a pull factor, and the diverse network of brokers of the international education market facilitates and maintains the migration flow. Equally characteristic of the experiences of the current generation of Chinese student-migrants is the ongoing social and moral transformation, in which tension exists between the emphasis on personal success and self-fulfilment on the one hand, and the actual reliance on parental support in pursuing these goals on the other (see, for example, Kajanus 2015; Kleinman et al. 2011; Yan 2013).

This article<sup>1</sup> asks how the general dynamic of Chinese student migration generates a variety of experiences at the individual level. I use Sarah Mahler and Patricia Pessar's (2001, 2006) model of geography of power to examine the dynamics between various systems of power and individual mobility. People are situated differently vis-à-vis flows and influence over them. As they move, their positioning in the hierarchies of gender, nationality, generation, race, and so on, shifts. These systems of power operate simultaneously on multiple geographical scales (for example, individual, family, state), and a shift on one scale can influence the positioning of the migrant on another. Ultimately, the experience is influenced by personal characteristics and cognitive processes. In order to further develop the connection between this intimate dimension and the power systems that are central to Mahler and Pessar's model, I look at how the ordinary affects (Stewart 2007) that arise in the daily life of the migrant take a particu-

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lar political course. Let me start by briefly outlining the widely shared ideas about the goals and benefits of overseas study.

## The Benefits of Studying Abroad

The research on which this article is based involved 17 months of ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation and interviews) in Beijing. The group of key informants consisted of 21 aspiring and 13 returned student-migrants, along with their families. Data was collected during several fieldtrips to the home towns and villages of the student-migrants, from interviews in the United Kingdom, Holland, and Finland with 28 Chinese student-migrants, and from two surveys. All informant names in this article have been anonymised. The data consistently showed that the main motivations for overseas study are: to improve language skills, to get a better-quality education, to improve career prospects both in China and abroad, to achieve higher earnings in the future, to learn about other cultures, and to broaden one's horizons (开拓视野, *kaituo shiyè*). A survey among aspiring student-migrants from the Renmin University of China ( $n = 427$ ) and current Chinese student-migrants at the London School of Economics (LSE) ( $n = 203$ ) supported the ethnographic findings. Including respondents at different stages of migration in the survey revealed how views and attitudes change, or do not change, during the migration process. Out of 12 possible benefits listed in the survey that students either rated as "very important," "important," "not important," or "not important at all," or marked "there is no such benefit," the seven potential benefits listed in Table 1 were the most highly rated. There was no significant difference between female and male respondents or the current student-migrants and aspiring student-migrants, indicating that the way students viewed the benefits remained quite constant when their aspirations turned into experiences.

Table 1. The Rating of the Benefits of Overseas Study (in %)

	Important/ Very important	Not very important/Not important at all	There is no such benefit
Broadening horizons	95	1	1
Improvement of language skills	92	3	3
Education quality better abroad	90	4	4
Understanding foreign cultures and lifestyles	88	4	5
Higher income after graduation	70	12	15
Opportunity to work abroad after graduation	40	40	16
Better career prospects in China after return	40	37	19

Source: Author's surveys at the Renmin University and the LSE, excluding respondents with no plans to study abroad ( $n = 375$ ).

Note: In 2009, 21,278 Chinese students were enrolled in Renmin University. I handed out 1,716 survey questionnaires and received 427 valid responses, which yields a response rate of 25 per cent. The campus had 48 dormitories for Chinese students, all single-sex, and mostly designated for either undergraduate or graduate students. I selected a number of dormitories for each of these categories (female undergraduates, female graduates, male undergraduates, male graduates) that roughly corresponded to their proportions in the student body as a whole.

For the survey among the Chinese students at the LSE, the Data Management Unit sent out an e-mail with a link to the online survey to all students from mainland China (excluding Taiwan, Macau, and Hong Kong). The total number of these students was 926, and 203 responded, yielding a response rate of 22 per cent.

Of the top-rated benefits, the improvement of language skills appears to be the most concrete and measurable benefit of studying abroad. The international education market revolves around the standardised tests (TOEFL and IELTS) that are required as a proof of language proficiency when applying to universities, and other tests that are required for employment (for example, TOEIC and Cambridge ESOL tests: CAE, BEC, BULAC). In reality, aspiring student-migrants usually concentrate their efforts on passing the standardised tests, rather than being able to communicate in social situations. Most students in this study took preparatory classes for these tests in private language schools. They separated this type of learning, its methods, and its

aims, from what they hoped to attain while studying abroad. The ultimate language goal of overseas study is the ability to use language in real-life interactions, but this is not connected to classroom learning.

The students surveyed defined a better-quality education to be a general Western emphasis on critical analysis and creative thinking, and they perceived that China lagged behind in access to cutting-edge theories and methods in fields such as design, media and broadcasting, social and political sciences, and business management. The knowledge and the ways of thinking that this kind of education provided were deemed necessary for anyone regardless of where they wanted to work in the future. To those who wished to work abroad, in multinational companies or in foreign companies in China, the value was obvious. But even those students whose career plans were clearly tied to Chinese companies and markets considered overseas study to be beneficial, as cosmopolitan skills learned and competencies gained would help them to adapt to the rapidly transforming work environment, or to become an active contributor towards China's development. Skills and qualities that at present can be acquired only through international education will in the near future become indispensable for those wishing to succeed in China.

They sometimes used the phrase "broadening of horizons" when talking about education quality, especially in terms of access to new ideas, theories, and methodologies. But more often they used it when referring to the abilities, experiences, and understanding that can be gained by living outside China, in a foreign society and culture, being exposed to foreign media, and interacting with people from different countries. Together with the benefit of understanding foreign cultures and lifestyles, this can be classed as a cosmopolitan orientation (Vertovec and Cohen 2002): a form of self-development and fulfilment that has value aside from its practical benefits.

Their views about more concrete benefits, such as higher incomes and better career opportunities, were more ambiguous. A higher proportion of students thought that overseas study would have no such benefits. Current student-migrants are aware of the devaluation of diplomas since the overseas study fever started in 2000 (Xiang and Shen 2009), realising that an overseas degree no longer guarantees a significant competitive advantage in the Chinese job market. The high cost of studying abroad further decreases the ad-

vantage it might bring in terms of higher earnings. Similarly, only 40 per cent of the respondents considered job opportunities abroad as an important benefit. This could reflect the economic trends at the time of the two surveys – the Renmin survey was conducted in early 2010 during the global economic crisis; the LSE survey took place in early 2012 during the euro crisis. The number of returning students has increased since the 2008 economic crisis (China National Bureau of Statistics 2013), and the widely held view is that China currently offers better job opportunities to overseas graduates than the destination countries do.

Benefits that were rated highly by approximately 90 per cent of students were the broadening of horizons, improvement of language skills, better quality of education, and understanding different cultures. This set of benefits is integral to the pursuit of “cosmopolitan competency and orientation” (Vertovec and Cohen 2002) that enables a cosmopolitan subject to move across socio-cultural fields with relative ease and confidence. The concrete benefits that will hopefully follow from such an orientation are rated slightly lower. These findings are in line with Vanessa Fong’s (2011) view of overseas study as a project to acquire “developed world citizenship,” including its legal aspects (the legal rights of residency, work, and citizenship), social aspects (a status that gives access to a certain level of services, prestige, and comfort), and cultural aspects (the sense of belonging and recognition). But this only sets the general picture. Some students have more freedom than others to follow their own motivations, and some are more successful than others in achieving their goals. Motivations and plans change during the process, and the imagined, actual, and remembered encounters (Svašek 2010) all become part of the migration experience. I will now use the building blocks of the geography of power model to examine the dynamics of the various facilitating, disciplining, and motivating elements that give shape to the journeys of individual student-migrants.

## Family Background and Power Geometry

The characteristics of the family play an important role in shaping the student migration project, constituting a part of the power geometry – the first element of the geography of power borrowed from Doreen Massey (1994) – that situates people differently in terms of access to



flows and interconnections, and influence over them. Factors that define the position of the student-migrant vis-à-vis the flows of the international education market include the income and education levels of the parents, their social status and connections, and whether they live in a rural or an urban area. This study roughly categorises urban families into three types according to differences in their motivations for overseas education, ways of organising it, and conflicts that arise in the process. The first category consists of elite families who mobilise various forms of capital to proactively engage with the flows. It includes the domestic politico-economic elite and the new cosmopolitan elite (for example, internationally connected professionals, academics, businesspeople, and diplomats). The cosmopolitan elite families are able to screen and choose a university for their child through connections or personal visits, arrange internships, make living arrangements, and mobilise various forms of support through friends and relatives already living in the chosen country. Their engagement in the international education market is more proactive compared with that of most families, who merely hope to find ways to benefit from the flows, not to actively shape them. To bring their children into the same cosmopolitan field of action as themselves, these parents often encourage their child to work or even to settle abroad permanently after graduation. The participation of elite families in the education market resembles Aihwa Ong's (1999, 2006) "flexible citizenship," which views the accumulation of passports, education, and residential rights in different countries as a neo-liberal strategy of the (Hong Kong) Chinese cosmopolitan elite in order to gain power and capital, while avoiding the constraints imposed by the regimes of different states.

The families of the domestic politico-economic elite also use social capital in the form of connections to various Chinese brokers of overseas education. Some of these families need to consider their public image in the process. The high cost of overseas study can raise questions about the source of the family's wealth, and may lead to accusations of corruption. The Chinese media have recently discussed at length the political elite's transnational strategies of amassing wealth and privileges abroad. The parents of one of my key informants, a police officer and a government official, kept their daughter's overseas study a secret even from close relatives and friends, telling them that she studied in Tianjin. Another student's parents, both

high-level cadres, did not keep their daughter's overseas study a secret, but made other arrangements to evade interest in their finances. The house they bought in the same year their daughter went to the United Kingdom to study was bought under a relative's name to avoid drawing attention to the fact that they had made two major investments in the same year.

Both types of elite family possess the social and cultural capital to provide their child with the best opportunities available, but their involvement is also a source of many student–parent conflicts. Since the parents are well informed and connected, they often wish to play a central role in the decision-making. For most student-migrants, going abroad is a way to gain more independence and freedom, and to pursue their own dreams and goals. Common points of conflict in the families in this study were: which subject to study, which country and university to choose, and whether to stay abroad or to return to China on completion of the course. Negotiations often extended over several years. The outcome was usually a compromise to some degree. One student wanted to study music and performance, while her father advised her to follow in his footsteps by studying business. Eventually both settled for media and broadcasting. Another student, the daughter of an army officer and a university lecturer, was not interested in going abroad at all, preferring to study in Shanghai with her boyfriend. Under pressure from her parents, who had initially hoped she would obtain a degree abroad, she agreed to apply for a six-month exchange programme in the United States. The parents of another student made plans for his graduate studies in Canada, where the family had a strong network of relatives and friends. Their son, however, had acquired a taste of freedom from familial control after moving to Shanghai for undergraduate study. He rented an apartment outside the campus, worked part-time to support himself, and most importantly, he lived openly as a homosexual, all of which he kept secret from his parents. He was unwilling to surrender this newly found independence, and was adamant that he did not wish to study anywhere where he had family. He made a case for graduate study in Hong Kong, emphasising the benefits of being close to mainland China and its Southern economic centres, and his parents finally agreed to support him.

The second and third categories of students, those coming from the low- and middle-income families, are the beneficiaries of the “one

child” policy. Their parents are able to support overseas education by focusing the limited family resources on the one child. Students from low-income families usually initiated the project of going abroad, and the parents at first often reacted either negatively or neutrally. The students were able to persuade their parents by presenting a convincing practical plan, by displaying enough motivation, or by mobilising the support of their teachers. Once they had secured their parents’ approval, most parents provided limited financial support, and the students found creative ways to cover the rest. They relied on scholarships, chose countries with low tuition fees, and worked part-time to support themselves. These families had no influence over the flows of the international education market, and tried to find ways to gain access to them. Importantly, it was the students who drove the parents towards participating in the flows. In contrast to students from elite families, they were more engaged with the flows through information distributed at schools, the experiences of friends and acquaintances, and through media images. Middle-income parents were more aware of the trend for overseas study, and considered it as an option for their own child. Many of them had harboured a long-term plan to send their child abroad to study, and over the years they had made conscious sacrifices in their living standards to save money for this purpose. In the social circles of both middle- and low-income families, having a child studying abroad was still a source of pride and prestige. The parents of students who had returned, or were visiting from abroad, were proudly presented at family gatherings where the parents distributed gifts to relatives and notable connections. With their experience and information about overseas study, the students had now themselves become a valuable connection to relatives and acquaintances, who consulted them on matters relating to the education of their own child.

This section about the positioning of families vis-à-vis the flows of the international education market has touched upon the conflicts between student-migrants and their parents. The spatial mobility of student-migrants often shifts their position in the generational hierarchy, as they gain more autonomy with geographical and socio-cultural distance. However, generation is only one of the hierarchies that constitute social location, the second block of the geography of power model. Others include nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, and so on. As Abbas has noted, it would be a mistake to assume that the move-

ment of even the elite cosmopolitans is always voluntary and that their interaction with other cultures and societies is negotiated on equal and favourable terms (Abbas 2002: 210–211). I will now discuss the stories of two student-migrants, Chen and Jonatan, in order to analyse how a person's positioning within these hierarchies shifts with migration, and how these shifts shape the individual migrant's experience by setting affects that arise in the midst of ordinary experiences on a particular political course.

## Chen – The Trapped Cosmopolitan

Chen, a business student in London, found it particularly difficult to adapt to the unfamiliar teaching methods and the use of the English language. Failing several of his exams, he did not graduate from his course. While waiting to retake his exams the following year, Chen looked for work. With no diploma and limited knowledge of English, he failed to find work related to his field of study, and ended up doing temporary work for his Chinese friends. He lived a marginalised and modest life in the ethnic Chinese enclave in London. He felt that he had lost the social status he automatically commanded in China as a Chinese national, a university graduate, a man, and the only son of his parents. All he wanted was to return to China as soon as possible. However, Chen felt obligated towards his parents to succeed in his cosmopolitan pursuit. He said, “I can't go back, I haven't achieved anything! I have nothing to show, if I go back now my parents will lose face.” After retaking some of his courses, he eventually graduated two years later. This had added a considerable amount to his course fees, and Chen hoped to work to reimburse some of this money before returning to China. His plans were scuppered by new restrictions to the UK immigration policy introduced by the coalition government in 2011. These cut the time allowed to look for work after graduation from two years to just four months, and only those with a graduate-level job offer paying a minimum annual salary of GBP 20,000 could qualify for a work visa (Home Office, UK Border Agency n.d.). Since Chen could not find a graduate-level job, he had to return to China.

Mahler and Pessar draw attention to the influence of individual characteristics on the migration experience, including initiative and cognitive processes such as imagination and planning (2001: 447). To

say that a particular migrant is not adaptable due to her or his personal characteristics is not very interesting, so instead, I ask how the personal characteristics and cognitive processes are linked to the politics of social location. Looking at ordinary affects (Stewart 2007) that arise in the course of the daily life of the migrant can shed light on this. Ordinary affects are

the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergencies. (Stewart 2007: 2)

They can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock, as an empty pause of a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation. (Stewart 2007: 3)

They are more than the conscious level of experience or emotions, but experience and emotions are profoundly shaped when an individual is affected in random encounters and spaces they inhabit. Amanda Wise (2010) has drawn attention to the feeling of discomfort that emerges from affects in everyday interactions in multi-ethnic Sydney suburbs. People from different cultures “feel uncomfortable” with each other because of the improper affective responses in moments of greeting, eating, touching, and speaking in this shared space. Wise argues that this feeling of discomfort is the main source of tension between groups of immigrants, not racist ideology or prejudice. Rather than describing and analysing the affective moments, pleasures, and disorientations per se, I will focus on the point where they have already become part of an individual migrant’s experiences and emotions. They become feelings of connection and disconnection, they are shared and unshared impacts that I set in a wider political frame by arguing that the particular political course they take in a person’s experience can be followed through the complicated shifts and interconnections between the hierarchies that constitute her or his social location.

Chen had an engineering degree from a relatively prestigious Chinese university, and would have had a good chance of getting into a decent graduate programme in China. But at the time, he had been certain that overseas education would yield far superior career prospects, and in his words, “raise me to the high class of society.” This imaginary was so strong that, since Chen’s parents could not afford to pay university fees abroad, he went to the United Kingdom as a language student with the objective of working for ethnic Chinese

niche businesses to save money for a graduate degree. After two years of working, Chen was able to enrol in a master's degree programme. Now, the very things that had motivated him to study abroad, such as benefitting from different education methods, learning the English language, and interacting with people from different cultures, raised negative affects in him. He felt embarrassed when the lecturer asked him a question, and he was shy to contribute to classroom discussions. The jokes of his classmates did not make him laugh, and he did not find having drinks at the pub relaxing. The disorientation in the moment of a joke not understood, the relief of leaving the noisy pub, choosing a seat in a classroom, a rub of shoulders and an apology, a shared glance with a fellow Chinese student; all this affective texture developed into a migration experience characterised by feelings of alienation and loss. Central to its constitution was the distinction between imagined and actual emotional encounters that are crucial in forging the emotional side of migration (Svašek 2010). Student life in England was not what Chen had expected. He felt so uncomfortable in daily interactions that he confined himself to a small circle of Chinese students and labour migrants. As a result, he never became fluent in English, which further worked against him in the job market.

Chen's migration experience was characterised by his shifting position in various power hierarchies. His nationality and student-migrant status put him at a disadvantageous position in the United Kingdom. Because of the negative affective texture of his interactions with the host society, Chen did not acquire the cosmopolitan competency that would have helped him to succeed in his studies, or to integrate into the job market. He lost the privilege and power he had drawn from the hierarchies of gender and kinship in China. At the same time, it was his positioning in these Chinese hierarchies that motivated him to stay in England, despite his marginalised position there. Apart from Chen's sense of filial obligation towards his parents, his anxiety to succeed also had something to do with him approaching the age of marriage. Because of the strong ideal of a woman's hypergamy, a man's value in the Chinese marriage market is to a large extent determined by his ability to succeed financially. In the end, the UK government's policies, which aim to engage in the international education market only in terms that serve national interests, forced Chen to return to China.

The complexity of how the geography of power shapes the migration experience is illustrated by comparing Chen's story with the experience of another student-migrant, Jonatan. Their migrations involve similar shifts in the hierarchies of generation, gender, and nationality, as their mobility is influenced by filial obligations, marriage concerns, and destination-country policies. But because of the different personal characteristics of Chen and Jonatan (and their parents), and the different ways the power systems intersect with their experiences, two rather different migration experiences emerge.

## Jonatan – The Reluctant Returnee

Jonatan is a returnee who studied in Austria. As Jonatan was not a particularly good student in school, his grades gained him access only to a vocational high school. His ambitious father, himself a businessman, was determined for Jonatan to study business at university, so he decided to send his son abroad. Jonatan's main interests were music and languages, but his father wanted him to follow in his footsteps. He decided to send Jonatan to Austria, where the family had previous connections. Jonatan was ready to enrol in a BBA course for the autumn term of 2003, but because of the outbreak of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), he was not granted a visa until January 2004. This hitch in the plan offered him a short window to pursue his own interests, and for the spring term of 2004 he enrolled in a German language course at a college in Vienna, where he also studied music and performance. After the spring term, he followed his father's wish and transferred to a business school. A year into his degree, Jonatan was forced to return to China when his residence permit was not renewed. According to Jonatan's account, this was due to the malpractice of the agency that had handled the paperwork for his school applications, transfer, visa, and residence permit. In 2005, the agency was exposed as having forged documents for students' applications. This led to a careful review of all the renewal applications of students who had used this agency's services. In Jonatan's opinion, his transfer from a German language programme to a BBA degree that was taught in English raised further suspicion, and his renewal application was denied. To the disappointment of Jonatan's father, after 18 months abroad, he returned to China without a degree.

Jonatan had enjoyed his time abroad immensely. Gifted in languages, he had become fluent in English and German. He had embraced the new socio-cultural environment, making friends with people of different nationalities, dating a local girl, and adapting local habits of eating, dressing, and socialising. Having grown up under the strong influence of his parents, Jonatan felt that living abroad had given him the chance to be independent and free. This shows that the positioning of an individual in the geography of power depends not only on extrapersonal characteristics such as gender and nationality, but also on the personal characteristics of the migrant and those who have influence over her or him – in this case, Jonatan’s father. Jonatan quickly acquired a high degree of cosmopolitan competency – that is, language skills and cultural knowledge that allowed him to move across socio-cultural fields relatively freely. Because of this, and the strong patriarchal authority exercised by his father, Jonatan felt that leaving China had increased his power. After his return to China, therefore, Jonatan wanted to go abroad again, perhaps to study in the United States. His father, however, decided that Jonatan’s best option would be to focus on gaining work experience before later studying for a diploma through adult education.

In the following years, Jonatan and his father constantly negotiated the limits of his autonomy. The father drew his authority from the patrilineal and patriarchal models that regulate not only intergenerational, but also heterosexual relationships. A connection to the former is obvious, since it would have been unfilial for Jonatan to openly oppose his father. As for the latter, the father held significant power over Jonatan’s status in the marriage market, which partly depended on his ability to provide a house and a car, the main tokens of bridewealth in urban China. This rendered Jonatan financially dependent on his parents, giving his father further leverage in the negotiations over his autonomy. Jonatan’s father said that Jonatan was free to do whatever he liked, but his financial support was subject to following his advice. Unwilling to risk his ability to marry in the near future, Jonatan gave up his plan of quick remigration, and focused on gaining some autonomy over his career development.

Jonatan’s father used his connections to arrange an administrative job for Jonatan at a language school, but Jonatan wanted to find work by his own means, and persuaded his father to allow this. He found a job at the ticket sales office of Air China. “That’s when I



really found myself. At Air China I discovered my skills and realised I had power,” Jonatan said. His exceptional skills in languages, and his ability to serve foreign customers, made an impression on the office manager, who commended Jonatan to his superior at the head office. Jonatan was awarded a sales commission, a performance-based incentive rarely given by a state-owned company. But even with the bonus, the monthly wage came to just CNY 1,300. His father thought this was too little, and suggested that Jonatan come to work for his pawn business. Facing the risk of his father withdrawing his support, Jonatan reluctantly left Air China. His father had him trained in various aspects of the pawn business, such as evaluating jewellery, but Jonatan’s eye was constantly on the job market. As he repeatedly told me, he wanted to find his own path to success, to discover his abilities, and to be more independent of his father. But, without a degree, and not wishing to accept the help of his father’s connections, it was not easy for Jonatan to find a job his father would approve of. Despite short periods of employment in advertising and accounting, Jonatan always returned to his father’s company.

Jonatan’s mobility, like Chen’s, was profoundly shaped by the geography of power, specifically by his positioning in the hierarchies of gender, generation, and nationality in different locations. His migration was initiated by the patriarchal authority of his father. The plan was interrupted when, as a Chinese national, Jonatan was caught up in the political muddle that followed the SARS outbreak. The contingencies resulting from one hierarchy disrupted the dynamics of another, as the initial refusal of his visa gave Jonatan a chance to pursue his own interests for the spring term in Austria. Unlike Chen, who lacked cosmopolitan competence and felt that he lost status and power through migration, Jonatan quickly developed new skills, and experienced his time abroad in very positive terms. But, despite this difference in the affective responses of these two young men in their new living environments, the shifts in social location shaped the political courses of these affects for both of them. In Chen’s case, his disadvantaged position as a student-migrant in the United Kingdom with no degree and limited language skills meant that his feelings of alienation and discomfort led to an economically and socially marginalised position. Even though he eventually reached a partial resolution by gaining his degree, the policy change forced him to return to China without valuable work experience and savings, which meant a

loss of face to both himself and his parents. Jonatan's cosmopolitan pursuit was initially more successful, but it was cut short because of the conflict between its brokers – that is, the overseas study agency and the Austrian immigration authorities. Upon his return to China, he regained the privileged position of a citizen with the rights to reside, work, and study, but lost the relative autonomy he had gained through geographical distance from his father. In this shifted social location, Jonatan's quest for independence became a struggle that continually raised negative affects.

The migration experiences of Jonatan and Chen also show that filial obligation can motivate students to stay abroad as much as they can motivate them to return to China. Even though many student-migrants feel under pressure to return to China to be close to their parents, in Chen's case this filial obligation was superseded by his filial obligation to succeed in London. The student-migrants often told me that their parents wanted nothing from them but to see them live happy, secure, and successful lives, and this was backed up by their parents. This may illustrate the emphasis on individual desire among contemporary urban youth (Rofel 2007), but it is also a form of filial obligation. Urban parents do not need much from their only child. They devote a great deal of energy and resources, often at the expense of their own comfort, to support their child. The child's success is a privilege, but also represents a duty to pay back the parental support. Both daughters and sons have this sense of duty, but as the gender model articulates men's success more in terms of personal achievement than women's, it is not surprising that male student-migrants express this anxiety more often.

## Gendered Geographical Scales

Gender also plays a role in shaping the student migration experience. Firstly, I should note that, in line with the findings of previous research (Fong 2004; Tsui and Rich 2002; Zheng 2000), I have found that the educational achievements of the daughters and sons of urban, single-child Chinese families are equally supported by their parents. This marks a clear change from the previous focus on investing in the future of sons, who would then bear the main responsibility of caring for the parents in old age. On the scale of family, gender does not influence the ability of women, as daughters, to pursue overseas

study. Pessar and Mahler point out, however, that “gender operates simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales (e.g., the body, the family, the state) across transnational terrains” (Pessar and Mahler 2003: 815). For the Chinese student-migrants, the operation of gender in the three interconnected scales where most of their interests and concerns are located – education, marriage, and jobs – creates contradictions.

Researchers have pointed to the occupational gender segregation and the increased discrimination against women in the reform-era job market (Broaded and Liu 1996; Jacka 1990; Li and Zhang 2010; Wang and Cai 2008; Xiang and Shen 2009; Zheng 2000). The gender models that associate aggression and strength with men, and passivity, weakness, and altruism with women (Evans 1995) influence the perception of suitable jobs for men and women along gendered lines. This model extends to gender relations through a belief that the education, income, and status of a man should be higher than those of a woman. As wives and mothers, women are expected to carry the main burden of performing familial care in practice, and should thus be able to devote more of their time and energy to this task than men do. Parents often emphasise the importance of stability and security when advising their daughters about education and career choices. Even though none of the parents of female students in this study wished their daughters to become financially dependent on her husband, many tried to direct them towards subjects of study and jobs that were considered relatively stable and undemanding (for example, teaching, government official jobs, accounting, or administration). Such careers were considered as supportive of “women’s needs” as well as the appropriate enactment of the gender roles befitting wives and mothers.

In the early 1990s, Broaded and Liu (1996) regarded the acquisition of overseas credentials as a strategy used by women to tackle the increased discrimination they faced in the Chinese job market. In this study, I found no evidence of female student-migrants viewing their overseas pursuits in terms of a conscious strategy against gender discrimination. This is not to say that informants were not aware of the discrimination. Some tried to use their gendered assets, youth and beauty, to their advantage in order to build connections in the male-dominated business fields. One recent graduate, working in the mineral export industry, was the only woman employee in her office, and

often the only woman participant in conferences and networking events. “Men control business, and they care about beauty,” she claimed,

and I think, now that I’m still single and beautiful, men want to make friends with me! But after 30 or something, nobody will care. So it’s good to make these friends now. (Anonymous 1 2008)

She had several male friends who were her senior in their field of business, and able to provide useful advice, connections, and resources. She chatted with them online, sometimes sending pictures of herself or meeting them for dinner, but she firmly rejected any dating and marriage proposals. She viewed their possible romantic or sexual interest in very pragmatic terms, as a way to motivate initial contact and a willingness to help, but then she tried to build a relationship based on common interests and shared business ventures.

Other female returnees were also aware of the gendered assets they had in the job market, but to those who were not as skilful or willing to use the assets to their own advantage, they became more of a burden. Female informants at the early stages of their careers were obliged to accompany senior men of the company to dinners and karaoke nights with business associates in order to make the atmosphere “more lively.” I accompanied informants to some of these meetings where very little business was discussed, and men challenged young women to drinking games and entered into light-hearted banter. Young women accepted this as part of their job, but considered it burdensome and of little benefit to themselves. As one 26-year-old informant said,

Sometimes it’s fun to know people in high positions, to make myself more sophisticated, but I think there’s just too much drinking. And most of these guys are very nice and kind, but some like to make dirty jokes and all that. But for a secretary, or if you work in sales or in marketing, it’s very important that you can drink! (Anonymous 2 2009)

The practice of cultivating business relationships in these types of settings can be a burden to young working women, but recruiting women to provide entertainment or services has other implications. Shen Hsiu-Hua (2005) calls this “the masculinisation of business,” which leads to the idea that only men have the potential for full career development, as only they are able to take part in these relation-

building events. The justification given for this is that their freedom to do so is not as restricted by familial obligations as is that of women (Shen 2005: 421).

The gendered assets women have in the job market do not help them to attain high positions of power. Zheng Wang (2000) has written about the “rice bowl of youth” – jobs at the bottom end of the urban job market (for example, promoters and assistants). Women, often migrant workers, with few skills and educational credentials can use these jobs as access points towards landing higher paying clerical and managerial jobs (Zheng 2000: 73). The situation is different at the top end of the job market where the student-migrants aim. There are certain fields (such as hospitality) that almost exclusively hire women whose youth and beauty embody ideals of modernity, but these kinds of jobs have very limited prospects for upward mobility. Most highly educated women find that their gender gives them few advantages in the job market.

Even though the female student-migrants in this study did not consciously view overseas study as a strategy to tackle discrimination, many returnees felt that the experience had developed their *duli nengli* (独立能力, “independence ability”), their social skills, and their self-confidence in ways that made them more aggressive and confident in the Chinese job market and, importantly, in negotiations with their parents. One 24-year-old returnee explained to me,

So, sometimes I question if it was the right choice to go overseas to study. But I think it was, because it opened my mind, I changed a lot. I went to many places, got to know the people and the habits, made lots of friends. It changed my personality. I used to be very quiet and always listened to what my parents said. Now I’m very outgoing and open-minded, and I like to do marketing. Before, I could have never imagined doing marketing. I was very quiet. But now I love it. My mother says I’ve changed a lot. When I came back, I moved in with them. The first three or four months we just argued all the time. For example, when I was looking for a job, my mother said that I should find something in administration. She thinks this kind of job is very stable, and suitable for a girl. But I didn’t want to, I wanted to do marketing. (Anonymous 3 2009)

She was one of the many students who had initially followed their parents’ advice when choosing a subject to study, but during their time abroad had developed an interest in another field that they

would have initially considered too demanding. Upon graduation, this young woman had gained enough confidence to pursue the new career path despite facing some parental opposition.

While ambitious female students face gendered obstacles on the mountain of education, the cultural model of gender can also allow women more freedom than men to choose their route. Although much emphasis is put on educational success in securing a prosperous and happy future, members of both sexes consider a good marriage to also be fundamental. For men, securing a good marriage match relies largely on being financially well off, on their entrepreneurial spirit, and on potential, often referred to as *nengli* (“ability”). These qualities are also seen as assets for women, but because of the ideal and common practice of women’s hypergamy, their success in the marriage market is not linked to their educational and career achievements to the same degree as it is for men. The stress of finding a good job after graduation was felt particularly strongly by the male graduates in this study, both returnees and those who remained abroad. The female graduates who struggled to find suitable employment anguished about their financial situation, about visa issues, and whether they would be able to find a job that would bring personal satisfaction. These concerns were shared by male graduates facing a similar situation, but unlike the women, they often stressed the feelings of losing face and disappointing their parents if they failed to succeed. Women may feel less pressure to achieve and to succeed than men, but the other side of the coin is that women who want to succeed in a career must take into account the disadvantage this may bring them in the marriage market. Apart from the ideal of hypergamy, for many young educated men, a woman’s high level of education can be an indication of qualities such as ambition, career orientation, critical thinking, and independence – qualities that, in excess, may not be desirable in a wife.

After finishing their education abroad, students enter the gendered marriage and job markets. As education greatly influences their future positioning in these markets, the gendered constraints, opportunities, and expectations inevitably influence the decisions they make regarding education. In their cosmopolitan field of action, however, student-migrants can draw from diverse symbolic resources, such as a variety of cultural models for gender, love, and marriage. Some of them also have the choice of entering the job and marriage markets in

their destination countries. Even when the students return to China, they can make use of cosmopolitan competencies acquired to tackle some of the barriers of the gendered job market.

## Conclusion

Chinese student migration flow, which is shaped by various push and pull factors that result from the Chinese education system and globally changing job markets (Kajanus 2015), is driven by the international education market. Combined with the socio-cultural transformation that has seen the rise of the desiring and enterprising individual (Kajanus 2015; Kleinman et al. 2011; Rofel 2007; Yan 2009, 2011, 2013), these structural factors form the basis for the motivations that lead students to embark on such a journey. One of the underlying tensions in this dynamic is between the idealisation of individual success and self-development on the one hand, and the actual reliance on parental support in pursuit of these goals on the other. The migration journeys of all student-migrants in this study were influenced by familial constraints. The students from elite backgrounds had a wealth of resources to facilitate their migration, but their experiences and decisions were strongly shaped by parental involvement. The students from low-income families were more independent in setting goals and making plans, but their range of choices was limited by the lack of both financial support and connections to migration brokers in China and abroad. Whatever the process of making decisions and practical arrangements was, one thing was common to all participants: with their spatial mobility, the positioning in various hierarchies shifted, resulting in a variety of contingencies.

Through the stories of Chen and Jonatan, I have argued that, in order to understand an individual migrant's experience, the analysis must include the ordinary affects that arise in an individual's experience but happen in the context of the geography of power. Both Chen and Jonatan to a certain extent failed in their pursuit to acquire "developed world citizenship" (Fong 2011). While Jonatan improved his language skills and became competent in moving across different socio-cultural fields, he returned to China without an overseas diploma. Chen, though, eventually received his degree, but his experience abroad did not convert into an ability to act and interact at "the high level of global society."

The conflicts that emerge between the rapidly changing family system and the cultural traditions of gender, filial piety, and patrilineage are central to the student migration experience. On some geographical scales (for example, parent–child ties in the family) gender has little influence on the educational aspirations and achievements of sons and daughters. But on other scales – namely, the job market and marriage – gender matters. Women student-migrants in particular must negotiate the contradictions of the different scales in their personal experience. The equal focus of urban sons and urban daughters on the importance of education is not matched by equal opportunities in the job market. What is more, gender operates in contradictory ways even within the same scale. “Family” does not describe a fixed set of relationships, but a person’s positioning and role in its hierarchies shifts as life progresses. As daughters, women are encouraged to pursue self-development and success as much as sons, but their anticipated role as wives and mothers in child-centred families shapes the way their success is defined.

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