

Intersecting inequalities in young Chinese women's transnational education mobility: Class, race, gender and age

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Abstract

This paper draws from a 5-year longitudinal ethnographic study of a core group of 50 young women who travelled from China to Australia to undertake tertiary education. It explores how the intersecting axes of class, race, gender and age shaped their experiences of education mobility before, during and after study, and the ways in which the power relations associated with these aspects of social identity shifted and transformed along with the women's geographic mobility. With a focus on research participants' experiences of employment seeking in both Australia and China, the paper draws on extensive recorded interviews and ethnographic observation to explore how participants' education journeys were motivated by their aspirations to alleviate gender disadvantage while consolidating middle-class status, but in practice, students faced downward social mobility in Australia as a result of racialization, while graduates had to contend with ongoing gender and age discrimination in Chinese job markets.

Full paper

This paper draws from a 5-year longitudinal ethnographic study of a core group of 50 young women who travelled from China to Australia to undertake tertiary education (Martin 2022). It explores how the intersecting axes of class, race, gender and age shaped their experiences of education mobility before, during and after study.

In spite of the sex-ratio skewing of the youth population in China toward males, some 60 percent of those who leave China for study are women (Renmin Ribao 2016). This means that Chinese women are about 30 percent more likely to study abroad than Chinese men. Why should this be? Drawing on my initial interviews with study participants and their family members, either before participants left China or soon after their arrival in Australia, one answer is that for female students and their mothers, transnational study ventures are a pragmatic response to gender bias in China's professional labor market. In this context, it is hoped that international educational qualifications will enhance female job seekers' competitiveness (Martin 2017).

Studying overseas is also intended to consolidate students' middle-class position by giving them an edge in professional employment markets, and the Australian post-study visa system supports this by offering graduates the chance to obtain degree-related experience in an international setting. In pre-departure interviews with study participants in China, most spoke of their plans to find work in "local" (implying non-Chinese-run) businesses in Melbourne in the area of their major. However, after arriving in Australia, they generally found that the types of professional work experience they had hoped for were out of their reach. Anti-Chinese racism in Australian employment markets has been corroborated by statistical studies (Booth, Leigh, and Varganova 2012). Thus, although some participants initially saw the lack of *guanxi* relations in Australia as ethically desirable, in practice a lack of local social capital, combined with racism, frustrated their hopes to benefit from the supposedly free and fair Australian job market.

Many students were therefore forced to settle for casual unskilled work in the Chinese diasporic economy, where opportunities were facilitated by shared ethnic background and networks. Student workers thus experience contradictory class mobility. While overseas study was intended to help them maintain or improve their (middle-)class status in China, in Australia they became "downwardly global" when corralled into precarious work at the bottom end of the labor market (Parreñas 2001, 150-96; H. Lewis et al. 2015; Amrute 2016; Ameeriar 2017).

Graduates' experiences seeking professional employment in

Australia were also often negative. Many employers simply refused to accept job applicants—or even interns—on temporary graduate or bridging visas (Robertson 2013, 95). Participants in the accounting and finance fields regularly reported that employers, including some of the Big Four international accounting firms and the four major Australian banks, specified Permanent Residency or citizenship as a condition of application. Graduates thus faced disadvantage in Australian job markets based on visa status and arguably, more covertly, on race and nationality.

For those graduates who returned to China, the job hunt was more strongly shaped by gendered pressures and restrictions. Returning with Australian master's degrees in hand, many found that employers' gender bias still obstructed their path and was sometimes even exacerbated after overseas study because the graduates were now several years older, and employers assumed they would soon marry and have children, thus legally requiring paid maternity leave. Graduate returnees faced a toxic combination of gender and age bias that affects unmarried or married but childless female applicants in their late twenties and over. Thus, while overseas study may have been originally intended to counter gender bias in the Chinese job market, such bias was paradoxically exacerbated for many graduate returnees given the years needed to earn the extra qualification.

In these ways, intersecting axes of class, race, gender and age shaped Chinese students' and graduates' experiences of education mobility at every stage of their journeys. The move from China to Australia was motivated by gendered and classed anxieties, but in practice precipitated new forms of disadvantage and downward mobility linked with racialization and visa status. The return to China, meanwhile, saw disadvantage based on employers' gender and age biases come to the fore. Overall, then, these young women's experiences of education mobility are thoroughly entangled with complex intersectional power relations, which tend to shift and transform, rather than become resolved, with education mobility and graduate return.

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