

The role of gender in the mobility and transnational study experiences of Chinese international students at UK universities.

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Abstract

This study explores how gender subjectivities change for Chinese international students in UK Universities, suggesting that gender subjectivities are not fixed but may be changed in transnational experiences. It aims to uncover the subtle transformations in students' perceptions of gender as they navigate different cultural environments.

This ongoing research uses a longitudinal approach, conducting three sets of semi-structured interviews at different stages: upon arrival, halfway through, and towards the end of their studies. This method allows an in-depth understanding of the students' evolving gender subjectivities over time.

Guided by three main questions, the study seeks to determine: 1. What are Chinese international students' gender subjectivities and habitus like before, during, and after their studies in the UK? 2. To what extent and how have their gender subjectivities and habitus changed, if any? 3. What role has the transnational experience played in changing gender subjectivities and habitus among Chinese international students?

Full paper

The landscape of international higher education is ever-evolving, characterized by unprecedented growth in student mobility. Predominantly at the forefront of this global movement are Chinese students, whose experiences in foreign lands are a subject of profound academic inquiry (Yang, 2018b). This study focuses on the role of gender in the mobility and transnational study experiences of Chinese international students at UK universities. It explores how these students' gender subjectivities and habitus evolve over time in response to their new academic and social environments.

Previous studies have highlighted the challenges and adaptations of Chinese international students in the UK, focusing on academic transitions and cultural adjustments (Li, 2015). However, the gendered experiences of these students remain less examined. Studies have shown that gender dynamics play a

crucial role in shaping these students' experiences, influencing their academic and social integration (Tian & Lu, 2018; Yang, 2018a).

Gender structures are embedded within habitus and fields. Traditional Chinese culture has long emphasized distinct roles and responsibilities for men and women, shaping a gendered habitus that influences social interactions and self-perceptions (Zhang, 2010). Habitus, according to Bourdieu (1977), encompasses the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their life experiences, which are heavily influenced by societal norms and expectations. Gendered habitus, therefore, refers to the internalized gender norms and roles that individuals carry with them, influencing how they perceive themselves and interact with others (McNay, 1999).

When Chinese international students move to the UK, they encounter different gender norms and expectations, which can lead to a re-evaluation and transformation of their gendered habitus (Wang, 2015; Liu, 2016). This process can be understood through the concept of gendered fields. Bourdieu's notion of fields refers to various social arenas where individuals compete for resources and status, each field having its own set of rules and norms (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Gendered fields specifically highlight how different environments, such as the academic and social settings of UK universities, impose new gender norms and expectations on individuals (Thornton, 2013).

As students navigate these gendered fields, they are often required to adapt their gender performances to align with the new cultural context. This adaptation process can involve a significant shift in their gendered habitus as they internalize new norms and practices. For instance, the relatively liberal and individualistic culture of the UK may challenge traditional Chinese gender norms, prompting both male and female students to reassess and potentially transform their perceptions of gender roles (Liu, 2016). This dynamic interaction between habitus and field underscores the fluid nature of gender subjectivity, suggesting that gender identities are continually constructed and reconstructed through social interactions and cultural exchanges.

Adopting a poststructuralist theoretical position towards gender, my research utilizes a qualitative methodology framed within interpretivism, as influenced by theorists such as O'Connor (2001) and O'Reilly (2012). This methodological approach is also chosen to accommodate the reflexivity required when exploring sensitive issues such as gender. It provides the flexibility to adapt to emerging insights and respects the participants' perspectives, ensuring that the research remains responsive and ethical. The qualitative method allows me to interpret data through a lens shaped by my background in gender studies, enhancing the study's depth by connecting theoretical insights with empirical findings (Mayan, 2016).

A longitudinal research design is chosen to trace the development of gender subjectivities over time. This approach allows for data collection at multiple intervals during the students' stay in the UK, providing a dynamic view of their evolving subjectivities. I will conduct three sets of semi-structured interviews with students at different stages: upon arrival, halfway through, and towards the end of their studies.

Semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 45 to 60 minutes, are selected as the primary data collection method due to their flexibility in exploring the nuanced and personal aspects of gender identity within shifting cultural contexts (Kvale, 2012). By collecting data before the students leave China, while they are actively studying in the UK, and after they complete their studies, I can follow the transformations in their gender perceptions and analyze the impacts of their transnational experiences (Adams, 2015).

This research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the gendered experiences of Chinese international students in the UK. By examining the interplay between habitus, fields, and gender performativity, it seeks to uncover how transnational mobility influences and transforms these students' gender subjectivities. The findings will offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and support services in creating more inclusive and supportive environments for international students.

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