

## Book Review

# Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West

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In *Dreams of Flight*, Fran Martin investigates the 'deep entanglement of gender with educational mobility' (p. 5) in the lives of transnational Chinese millennials (i.e., born in or near the 1990s). She sensitively explores how Chinese women students abroad negotiate conflicting demands of neoliberal individualism and neotraditional femininity (indicating the resurgence of retrograde gender norms), and illuminates how they forge translocal belonging amid their spatial and social exclusion. This extensively researched ethnography draws upon multisite fieldwork Martin conducted between 2015-2020 with a cohort of 50 Chinese women students (pre-undergraduate, undergraduate, and graduate) at Australian universities.

During this period, before the Covid-19 pandemic, Chinese collectively were the largest proportion of international students in Australia (as in the US and UK), and women comprised nearly two-thirds of these Chinese 'student transmigrants' (p. 4, p. 24).

The methodology is innovative, incorporating study participants' hand-drawn maps, photos, text messages, and social media (WeChat) posts in addition to interviews and observations. Martin includes these data along with 'sensory and affective elements' (p. 29) of her fieldwork to viscerally convey the study participants' embodied experiences of study abroad, and underscore that transnational mobility is grounded in, and often bound by, materiality, practices, emotions, and specific geographies, which may limit its privilege and power. Further, Martin judiciously inserts herself into the narrative to reveal her research process, partial perspective, and ethical challenges, such as when she is confronted with participants' trauma (i.e., mental illness, interpersonal violence, medical emergency). The writing is exceptionally clear, and the arguments are well-supported. From study participants' stories and quotations, Martin extrapolates the complexity and variability of their individual circumstances and views, which confound generalisations and complicate abstract explanations. She contextualises thick descriptions with thoughtful analysis that engages broader scholarly concerns in migration and transnationalism, contemporary China, international education, and feminism.

Chapter 1 ('Before Study') draws on predeparture interviews with Australian-university bound study participants and their mothers to explore how gender, as well as class and race, contours their motivations and options, in complex ways. For Chinese students and their families, Western higher education is a mobility strategy to attain the credentials needed to secure desirable jobs, as well as the cosmopolitan habitus associated with urbane lifestyles, which together 'consolidate and reproduce [their] middle-class identity and privilege' (p. 13). Chinese daughters pursue transnational education to mitigate or even escape gendered constraints imposed by too-early marriage and male bias in local employment markets. Yet, women students concentrate in areas of study like

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finance that are considered appropriate to their gender (p. 11). Parents support tertiary education abroad in the hopes it will 'facilitate their daughter's progress toward normative feminine adulthood' (p. 4), by improving job prospects and inculcating qualities necessary to thrive in a highly competitive society. Australia, as a study destination, especially appeals to parents of daughters for its reputedly safe, low-crime environment. Martin rightly foregrounds her study participants' dreams and agency but recognises that choice is unevenly distributed; for academic underperformers and others without social or material advantages, transnational education is not an aspiration but rather a last resort to prevent downward social mobility.

Chapters 2-4 ('Place,' 'Media,' and 'Work') concentrate on participants' emplacement practices and self-making in Australia. Due to their structural, social, and spatial marginalisation in the host society, Chinese transmigrant students typically dwell in their own 'expatriate microworld' (p. 66). Study participants experienced Melbourne positively as a translocal place of self-extension and belonging, enhanced by digital technology and social media that connect them to friends and family near and far. But the city was also a site of their sociospatial encapsulation and racialised (as well as gendered) exclusion, sometimes manifest in violence directed toward them, which together negated their transnational mobile class privilege.

Understandably, Chinese transmigrant students held contradictory feelings about Melbourne, simultaneously affectionate toward and disdainful of its provincialism, which belies the city's cosmopolitan image projected in 'edu-tourism' marketing (p. 64). Martin sketches how the influx of Chinese transnational students transformed urban architecture and provided a windfall for real estate developers and service and retail businesses. Families of some students invested in newly constructed glassy high rises clustered in the central business district (CBD). Many students leased apartments in these new complexes or rented rooms in older 'dogbox' buildings (p. 70). Others congregated in the suburban 'ethnoburbs' (p. 84). Typically, the property owners and landlords were local or overseas Chinese, and occasionally were university faculty. Despite this spatial segregation, study participants endeavoured to make Melbourne the place of their dream; those who resided outside the CBD and shared housing with peers or a host family seemed to cultivate a stronger sense of belonging; others gained satisfaction through independent living.

Mobile technology is ubiquitous and essential to the translocal lives of Chinese students abroad. Digital media, particularly the popular WeChat app, expands and contracts their sociospatial bubble. It provides useful information; connects students to home; assists their navigation of geography, academics, and daily life; and forges shared interest groups, among other benefits. It also functions as an echo chamber; the 'affiliative structure' of groups and subscription feeds reinforces users' local marginalisation and strengthens their national-ethnic identification (p. 115). To demonstrate, Martin homes in on an incident in 2016 when a (racist) rumour about 'African gangs' perpetrating violent crimes against Chinese students went viral on WeChat, igniting fear among Chinese students and inflaming latent racial and class prejudice. Martin gathers evidence that disproves the rumour and shares it with her study participants, to no avail. She subsequently provides concrete suggestions for municipal and university authorities to better facilitate Chinese transnational students' integration into Melbourne's highly diverse society.

Martin also examines the exploitation and feminisation of transmigrant students' labour. Excluded from more desirable employment due to prejudice and immigration work restrictions, Chinese transnational students accept informal jobs in Chinatown restaurants or engage in parallel e-trading, to earn money and gain business experience. Martin identifies e-trading, a form of micro entrepreneurship that utilises WeChat digital media and Chinese-run courier services, as a weak and feminine form of 'network capital' (p. 134) that underscores contradictions. Study participants operationalise transnational networks and gender capital (e.g., knowledge of feminine commodities) because they have few alternatives to gain business expertise and profit. Here again, hypermobility is circumscribed by local place-based social and material structures.

Chapters 5-7 ('Sexuality,' 'Faith,' and 'Patriotism') explore the inner lifeworld of these student transmigrants regarding intimacy, religion, and nation. Young women use the liminal time of overseas study, absent the scrutiny of parents and social milieu back home, to rework their relationship to normative femininity and gendered life course. This 'zone of suspension' (p. 163) offers the potential to experiment with premarital sex and cohabitation, explore queer intimacy, and overturn gender hierarchy in the family by harnessing their academic and mobility capital. However, while study participants 'absorb the atmosphere' of Australia's liberal norms of sexuality (p. 173), they are mindful of conservative moral codes and sexual double standards that are enforced by peer pressure. They expend much energy to manage different value systems carefully; failure brings shame and humiliation or 'intimate isolation' (i.e., closeting) (p. 188).

Martin elaborates her argument that transnational mobilities are imbricated with locality by looking at student transmigrants' interactions with deterritorialised Christianity. Study participants' gendered vulnerability and racialised exclusion in Melbourne society led some to accept social welfare interventions of evangelical churches, which avidly recruit them. Martin profiles three women students to highlight their shared and unique religious experiences. Chinese millennials seek moral guidance such as offered by religion to mediate the uncertainties of

high-risk society and as part of their neoliberal self-making, as well as for companionship and psychological needs. Martin rightly criticizes the ‘sacralisation’ of social services that has accompanied the dismantling of education as a public good in Australia (as in the US), and voices concern about the undue influence of gender reactionary religious teachings on these susceptible young transmigrants.

This generation of middle-class Chinese youth hold dichotomous worldviews: they identify with cosmopolitan globalism yet were socialised by ‘patriotic education’ curriculum. She identifies two contextual ‘logics’ by which Chinese students overseas express their nationalism: a performative ethics of national representation and a developmentalist narrative of nationhood (p. 220). Study participants defend their homeland against Westerners’ racist or patronising discourse about China. When among peers or in a neutral academic setting, they criticise China’s government and frankly discuss social or environmental problems, which they anticipate will resolve as the nation-state modernises. Indeed, their generation is confident of China’s economic and technological superiority to Western nations. As participants were exposed to diverse media and Chinese from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and elsewhere, they increasingly distinguished between nation and government and accepted the plurality of Chinese identity. Martin also remarks on the feminisation of patriotic sentiment through homeland-as-mother representations but could elaborate on how masculinity and misogyny contribute to virulent strains of nationalism.

The final chapter (‘After Study’) follows study participants’ postgraduate trajectories and assesses their subjective change. The Conclusion (‘Unsettled Dreams’) expounds on the study’s scholarly contributions to theories of subject formation, transnationalism, and higher education internationalisation. Time spent abroad increased these unmarried, middle-class, singleton women’s identification with ‘mobile entrepreneurial selfhood’ (p. 286) and weakened their attachment to neotraditional femininity. But gender traditionalism, backed by a ‘perverse alliance’ of family and state interests, diverts them from the global corporate financial track to ‘settle’ down in early marriage with a stable job in the state sector back home (p. 276). These women may wield the ideology of individualism against patriarchal pressures, refusing to compromise. Their ability to do so varies by class position as well as personal characteristics. Martin thus surmises, neoliberal self-understandings and outlook alignment with global elites produces gendered benefit for certain (i.e., upper-middle-class) women, but reinforces the capitalist-class system, which disadvantages most women.

Martin’s study ended just as the Covid-19 pandemic began. The Preface and Coda address the dramatic decline in international student enrolments in Australia (as elsewhere) precipitated by the pandemic and subsequent retrenchment of higher education globalisation still underway. *Dreams of Flight* is an invaluable resource for scholars, advanced undergraduates, and graduate students seeking a comparison or contrast to these present circumstances, a pleasurable and informative ethnography, and stimulating discussions of its themes and relevant theories.

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