

# **Gendered Differences in International Graduates' Mobility, Identity, and Career Development**

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## **Abstract**

Although there is an abundance of research on international students' experiences of adapting to a new learning and living environment in their receiving countries and at universities abroad, their post-study transitions have rarely been studied. This paper reports primary research on Asian international postgraduate students, following their graduation and return home and their considerations of how their study experience and feelings on return relate to their imagined future plans. In theoretical considerations of the role of the students' mobility and their identity capital in the broader process of becoming and personal development, Côté's identity capital model helps identify notable resource differences among international postgraduates. The analyses focus on how the postgraduates perceived the role of their educational mobility, what their experiences meant to them, and their range of passive and active approaches to personal growth and life projects. The gender perspective seems to be particularly important in relation to post-study transitions, career development and trajectories. The discourse of return is related to becoming an adult, but this process is different for females and males. Male postgraduates seem to enjoy greater freedom in developing professional careers, while females more often face greater challenges to career development curtailed by family pressures and social conventions.

## **Introduction**

The post-study transitions of international graduates have rarely been researched, although many studies exist on these students' experience of adaptation in a new learning and living environment in the receiving countries and at the universities abroad. Recently, several studies have started to explore the question of international graduates' occupational trajectories (Cammelli et al., 2008; Kim, 2016; Wiers-Jenssen, 2013; Moskal, 2017), their social positioning upon returning to their home

countries (Xiang and Shen, 2009), and their identity transformation and maturation (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). What still remains unclear is how individuals perceive, experience, negotiate, and manage the complex personal and employment transitions they face after completing their degrees abroad (Li, 2013:475).

Educational mobility can be viewed through Bynner's (2005:380) wider interpretation of changes to people lifestyle and identity, whereby 'emerging adults have available, at least in principle, a more extended set of opportunities than at any other time' (Smith, Rérat, and Sage, 2014). This paper looks at the students' stories of mobility as an ongoing process of transformation, which follows Findlay et al.'s (2012) argument that students' mobility should be considered in the context of mobile careers and mobile lives rather than by conceptualising travel for international study as an isolated 'moment' in which students develop the capital required for 'employability' (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo, 2015:684). Liu-Farrer (2014:187) observes that research on international education frequently adopts an instrumental approach, considering such education to be a means of obtaining human and cultural capital for labour market competition. Geographers' and sociologists' work often focuses on Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) ideas of the middle-class building cultural capital through the education system, with the particularity of international education opportunities helping to reproduce advantage (Findlay et al., 2012:128), upward social mobility (Sin, 2006), and social distinction (Tindal et al., 2015; Sin, 2009). Waters (2006) shows that Hong Kong Chinese students and their families use international education as a form of transnational capital accumulation. King et al. (2011:23) highlight the diverse and 'mutually reinforcing forms of capital' that international students are able to accumulate, including mobility, human, social (in the form of social networks), cultural (with the English language as the most obvious form), and, eventually, economic capital. Xing and Shen (2009) make an explicit effort to examine the process of capital accumulation and explain how international educational mobility can be converted to social and cultural capital that fosters social and economic advantage, and social mobility among returnees in China. In her insightful work on Chinese academic mobility in Germany, Leung (2013:15) argues against a mechanical translation of international academic mobility to capital accumulation. Combining the notion of personal development with the concepts of capital accumulation and

conversion, Leung emphasises the importance of a grounded understanding of the highly individualised and contextualised development processes.

Bynner (2005:370) suggests capital accumulation becomes consolidated through the development of clear occupational career tracks. He shows how human capital is accumulated through lifelong learning and occupational profile building by gaining experience in a variety of occupational roles as well as how it develops through social capital acquisition (Coleman, 1988). The concept of capital accumulation is extended further in the more recent idea of *identity capital* (Côté, 2002), which adds in psychological attributes, such as adaptability or creativity, which are at a premium for survival in the modern labour market. Acknowledging these recent advancements, this paper extends beyond debates around employability and capital accumulation and conversion to consider the role of student mobility and identity capital in the broader *process of becoming* (Hall, 1996) and personal development (Leung, 2013).

This paper draws on findings from 47 in-depth interviews with Asian international postgraduates enrolled at UK universities, following their graduation and return home, and their considerations of how their study experiences and feelings upon their return relate to their imagined future plans. The analyses focus on how the postgraduates perceived the role of their educational mobility and what the experiences meant to them, on their career trajectories, and on the various post-study transitions. The gender perspective seems to be particularly important in relation to post-study transitions and career developments relating to the life course (Findlay et al., 2015; Pakwood et al., 2015). Despite the increasing importance of gender in migration research (Willis and Yeoh 2002), very limited literature has been published on gender and international student mobility (Sondhi and King, 2017; Martin, 2017; Geddie, 2013; Halloway, O'Hara, and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). Therefore, this paper considers the gender-specific consequences of study abroad experiences for male and female postgraduate students. The paper poses the following research questions: How does the post-study career development of female and male international students from Asian countries challenge or reinforce gender roles? What do international postgraduates make of their return experience? Is return a failure or a success? Do they actively mediate these developments, and if so, how? Do attributes associated

with identity capital such as adaptability and creativity help them to negotiate their post-study transitions?

### **International Student Mobility and Gender in Post-Study Transitions**

The growing wealth and size of the middle class in a number of primary source countries, including the Asian countries in the study (China, Thailand and Indonesia), are important drivers of international student mobility (Xiang and Shen, 2009). China, in particular makes a unique study site for international students' mobility research due to the various social, political, and economic changes over the past century that have continuously altered the position of women in society. These political and economic changes have had numerous impacts on all aspects of Chinese society and, perhaps most importantly, people's identities. This is particularly the case for women, as gendered norms and expectations have shifted with each change in political and economic organisation (Jin and Whitson 2014: 451).

Several studies have confirmed that international student mobility is socially selective (Lörz, Netz, and Quast, 2016). Statistics released by the UK's Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA, 2015) show that foreign students going to the UK to study constituted almost 19 per cent of the country's overall higher education student population and 58 per cent of its full-time postgraduates. The largest contributors (13.5% of the total international student population) come from outside of Europe, with the number of Chinese students far exceeding that of any other nationality, at 89,540 students (out of 436,585) in 2014-15. The majority of students among European Economic Area (EEA)-born migrants were females (59 per cent). Among non-EEA-born migrants, males constituted the majority, at 58 per cent. While there was a bias in the non-EEA-born student figures towards men, this is often less exaggerated than in the education systems of these students' home countries (Findlay, 2011). Financial capital also played a decisive role in shaping the student demographics as many middle-class Asian families protect their children from the risk of failure in the highly competitive educational systems of their home countries. The families' financial capital is used to make up for their children's inability to acquire the "desired" cultural capital in their home countries by providing them with the opportunity to gain foreign qualifications (Tran, 2016:127), which in turn helps to

reproduce social status (Brooks and Waters, 2011; Holloway, O'Hara, and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Waters, 2006).

Very few studies have analysed international students' mobility from a gender perspective. A recent Sondhi and King (2017) study contributes to remedying this deficit. Based on research of the motivations and experiences of Indian students in Canada, they found clear differences in socio-economic backgrounds, with male students encompassing a wider social spectrum and having greater access to mobility post-return. Holloway, O'Hara, and Pimlott-Wilson's (2012:2287) gendered analysis of undergraduate students from Kazakhstan studying in the UK also shows how these students seek to acquire cultural capital through overseas education and how they hope to convert this positional advantage after graduation. Young women's abilities to realise the value of their cultural capital are not only shaped within the labour market but, crucially, within the family too, and, more specifically, within heterosexual marriage. Localised forms of Islam in Kazakhstan continue to shape life course expectations, with women marrying in their early twenties and having above-replacement fertility (Roberts, 2010). There is other limited research adopting a gender lens to study international students' mobility (Bordoloi, 2014; King and Sondhi, 2017; Moskal, 2016) that suggests the experiences and outcomes of international students might well be different for men and for women. Earlier studies consider gender equality for women, including work on female Japanese students in the UK (Habu, 2000) and in the US (Ono and Piper, 2004). In both studies most international female students return to Japan to work following graduation, but opt to work in foreign-owned companies. Japanese women feel that an overseas qualification will allow them, once they get home, to work for foreign companies, which are assumed to be more egalitarian. Women are seen to be pushed abroad for study by conservative social norms that constrain their lives and limit their job prospects in Japan (Habu, 2004:43).

In an excellent discussion of the linkages between mobility and transition in the case of the UK university students, Holdsworth (2009:1850) highlights the mobility literature that considers the importance of the technological, social, and economic changes that frame not only the greater opportunities to travel but also the meanings ascribed to this increasing mobility (Cresswell, 2011; Urry, 2007). Holdsworth argues

that for young people, the significance of contemporary mobility takes on additional meaning in how it relates to transitions to adulthood and independence. Within this field, there is a comparatively mature literature on transitions among young people (Valentine, 2003) that particularly focuses on their transitions from youth to adulthood and from school to work. Within the research on adult transitions, the largest body of work by far has been concerned with movement into higher education (Ingram, Field, and Gallacher, 2009:3-4). Higher education, as pointed out by Falconer and Taylor (2016:1), is often characterised as a rite of passage and as a space of personal and professional transformation. Such transitions are seen as significant periods in the life course for shaping young people's identities (Berzonsky and Kuk, 2000).

Student transition studies are part of a broader research endeavour on life transitions understood not only as a simple process of change extending over a particular period (Colley, 2007) but related to a process of becoming. Worth (2009) argues that biological and developmental understandings of age and transition have been challenged across the field of youth studies, with Valentine (2003) advocating a shift to a 'performative and processual identity' that understands the multiplicity, which is no longer linear but complex (Valentine and Skelton, 2007). Contemporary theories of youth transition highlight the fallacy of distinct stages of the life course by instead addressing the new imperatives of a flexible labour market (multiple jobs instead of one career), diverse family dynamics (lower rates of marriage), and the expansion of the education sector (higher/further education).

Contemporary youth scholars also emphasise the continuing importance of studying the structural barriers that often preclude the possibility of following desired career paths (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Woodman, 2009). Looking at this transition as an act of becoming helps to explain the dynamic process of growing up, attending to the multiple perspectives such as personal motivations, the fluid experience of time, and the perceived constraints on future success. Although not unproblematic and charged with multiple meanings, the concept of becoming adds to youth transitions theory by understanding transitions as continually open to the future, with a fluid understanding of both time and personal identity (Pollock, 2008; Worth, 2009). Mobility as becoming has been explored in the literature on space and mobility as a practice in

daily life (Cresswell, 2006). Tran (2016:129) suggests international students imagine their spatial movement as producing new conditions and possibilities for the transformation of themselves and for their identity re-construction. Thus, international student mobility is regarded as a resourceful vehicle to help them “become” the kind of person, professional or citizen that they aspire to be. Côté (2002:120) proposes that these kinds of resources be considered identity capital to understand how a person can nurture and develop the means of “fitting in” and “becoming” in an environment like the globalised university, the workplace, and the community. The “fitting in” and “becoming” now take place in the context of the individualisation process, which is increasingly required of people as they make the transition into the adult world. Given the compulsory nature of this task, people will differ regarding how actively they approach it.

This article considers mobility as providing possibilities and challenges for international students’ self-formation process (Marginson, 2014; Tran, 2016; Tran and Gomes, 2017) and generating identity capital (Côté, 2002). It uses interview material to illustrate the complexities of international postgraduates’ transitional experiences mediated through mobility.

### **The study**

Drawing on a multi-sited longitudinal study, this paper discusses the experiences, expectations, and capabilities of Asian international students at UK universities and their subsequent transitions into the labour market. It focuses, in particular, on the transformative potential of students’ international mobility in the sense of identity capital building. The paper uses the interview data to illustrate how the students’ “becoming” is mediated through mobility. The study aimed to capture their experiences and gather their self-reflections on the changes in their lives and within themselves. The analysis is based on the data from 47 participants - Chinese (10), Indonesian (25) and Thai (12) former international students, 29 of whom were female and 18 were male. The interviews were conducted in English between November 2012 and January 2015. The project included only the postgraduates who had studied in the UK and returned to their home countries. Most of the interviews were conducted in the participants’ home countries, but seven people took part in the longitudinal study, for which they were interviewed multiple times (at least twice)

during and after their international study periods. A minority (11) of the 47 participants did not have scholarships at the time of their study abroad and thus faced associated obligations. The independently funded participants were mostly Chinese (9 cases). The majority of the students from Indonesia and Thailand were still supported by their governments and had been offered or were obliged to take employment back home after graduation. Some degree-funding agencies obliged the students to return to their countries and curtailed their freedom of choice and further mobility. In contrast, the self-funded students often had more flexibility in their plans. However, only a few of them were willing to travel widely to find the best life prospects.

The participants who undertook a full postgraduate degree programme (master's or doctoral) in the UK were approached with the assumption that their previous study and maturity would likely endow them with a stronger sense of their place in the world and of their employment and mobility futures than undergraduate students would possess. The following sections report their views on the role of educational mobility and what the experiences meant to them, their career trajectories, and their various post-study transitions.

### **Post-Study mobility of Asian international students**

The increasing presence of non-EEA students and graduates poses a significant challenge for the UK immigration system, forcing policy-makers to tighten visa policies that control the access of the highly skilled (Jasiewicz, 2013). Non-EEA international students have become problematised by migration authorities (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo, 2015), so the vast majority of non-European mobile students struggle with visa issues, which hinder their opportunities to gain valuable post-study experience in the UK (Murphy-Lejeune, 2008). The obstacles put in place by the strict visa regime and the tightening of labour markets in the UK and in many other highly developed OECD countries connect directly to graduates' life course trajectories, especially in terms of career planning and their inability to "move on" (rather than "move back"). In this context, having studied abroad may, in fact, be detrimental since the existence of structural obstacles, such as strict immigration regimes and family obligations, limit individuals' abilities to adapt their strategies around mobility, education and work. In addition to the external structures mentioned above, internal constraints, such as gender or social class background, are important



influencing factors in transition and spatial mobility (Smith et al., 2014; Holdsworth, 2006, 2009).

The context created by the UK's restrictive immigration policy is particularly relevant to the discussion of the mobility outcomes of those Asian postgraduates who travel to the UK freely, without government scholarship and obligations to return home. The data shows that students' plans and desires can evolve over the course of their migration journeys. Along with emerging opportunities and challenges, some students who intended to stay ended up not doing so because they changed their minds. For instance, Lily (24, female, China, MSc in Education, self-funded), interviewed in the middle of her postgraduate studies in the UK, said with great certainty: 'Yes, I want to stay here.' Then, she explained how her plans had changed since her arrival in the UK: 'The first couple of months when I was here, I intended to do a PhD degree, but later on, especially now, I'm not so interested in doing a PhD. I just want to work. I just want to apply for a job.' Lily explained that she needed to become a 'professional' as her lack of work experience led her to feel that 'a part-time job doesn't count as a real profession.'

From a long-term perspective, most of the participants declared that they wished to return, but many thought that employment experience in the UK would enhance their employability back home. The desire to live in the UK after graduation was particularly expressed by young women wishing to pursue an international career. For example, during her first interview, Chen (24, female, China, MSc in Marketing, self-funded) declared that she intended to work for a short time and get experience in the UK. After returning to her home country, however, she admitted: 'I just did some part-time job. You know, like in a restaurant. So it was not related to my degree because it's hard, especially for Asian people, to find an internship in terms of the time. I distributed my résumé, but there were no replies because I only had three-month approvals to stay in Britain. So I just continued the part-time job, and after that, I didn't try anymore.' Chen highlighted the difficulties in obtaining employment in the UK due to the current economic situation, the immigration policy, and the lack of sufficient time to find relevant employment. She was also aware of other factors such as 'language ability', and 'the unfamiliar culture' that might put Asian graduates in an unfavourable position in relation to home graduates. In the same vein, Alice (24,

female, China, MSc in Finance, self-funded), who had studied for three years for an undergraduate and a one-year postgraduate degree in the UK, reported: 'I was looking for a job in the UK actually, but it's not easy. I got an interview at [company], and I got a telephone interview, but I failed the interview so I couldn't work there.' Although students like Lily, Chen and Alice did plan to gain work experience in the UK when they first arrived, their experiences made them accept that these plans were unrealistic. For Bert (25, male, China, MSc in Finance Management, self-funded), coming back to a small-sized home city after graduation was an obvious choice. He would not consider staying abroad or moving anywhere else because he felt that he had to take care of his parents when they got older: 'Why do they [other students] travel?' he asked. 'I love my parents so I want to live near my parents.' At the time of the interview, he was working for a trading company at the city harbour. He had secured the job immediately upon return through his parents' social network. The students' statuses of temporary residents had a crucial impact on their employment prospects in the UK and on their subsequent decisions to return home. 'I had to come back home and face the challenge,' commented Alice. She thought overseas education could be used as a way to avoid the highly competitive domestic labour market: 'When I graduated, I didn't want to come back to China actually because it's not easy to find a job here, especially for a girl.'

### **Post-study transitions and experiences of return**

The participants' discourse of return is related to becoming an adult. Upon their returns to their home countries, those who had not yet set up their own households prior to departure abroad (all of the Chinese participants and a minority of the Indonesian and Thai participants) connected to their status of dependent children and faced the necessity of negotiating their independent status with others – parents, wider family, and friends. In their narratives, the students highlighted the significance of the broader experience of mobility and life abroad as young people, eliciting once again the meaning of the students' mobility associated with the transition to adulthood (Holdsworth, 2009) and the ability to move from being a dependent child to an independent adult.

'It was my first time going abroad, and it was my first time being apart from my parents. When I was going there, I was sitting on the plane, and thinking: "Okay, no

way back. I could just do a year there.” So this was the start of my life, it began here,’ admitted Peter (26, male, Indonesia, MSc in HR management, scholarship).

Jasmin’s report (24, female, Indonesia, MSc in Social Research Methods, scholarship) also illustrates this argument, when she said: ‘I could say that I’m an independent person at first, but actually it’s hard for me to be far away from my mother because I was always telling everything, literally everything, to her; but now I can’t do it anymore because if I tell her the truth, she may worry about me. It’s hard for me, but I learn a lot about how to deal with stuff myself, and I have become more independent now.’

*Individualisation*, as Beck (1992) terms the increasing role of personal agency in youth transitions, does not however so much replace the traditional forms of socialisation in the family, school, and workplace; rather, it introduces more risk and uncertainty into the pathways leading from them (Côté and Bynner, 2008). Structural factors, such as those mediated by the family and local opportunity structures, continue to have a commanding place in the shaping of youth transitions (Côté and Bynner, 2008) after the students’ return. For example, one of the participants, Mei (24, female, China, MSc in Sociology, self-funded), who spent three years studying in the UK for her undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, reflected on the varied prospects for overseas graduates in China:

Smaller Chinese companies are maybe afraid to employ people with foreign degrees. They may prefer not to employ them because they may see them as having higher demands. Many international graduates would choose to work for banks, the media or NGOs in the big cities. Some of them would work in the family business or go to a state-owned company; it's more stable. It's boring but stable. Parents want that. They just want their kids to be safe and stable. So even if they send their children away to gain a degree, they still want them to stay close to them, and some children may still like to follow this path.

Like many graduates, Mei tried to make sense of her peers’ and her own return experience in terms of failure or success. She blamed family expectations for many of the young graduates’ failed returns:

The difficulty with coming back to China is the people. Now I live with my parents...now I've tasted the freedom, I would just like to be free, so here I feel like I'm supervised, I'm like a kid, I'm like a child here. I can't do whatever I want, and it's not okay...your family will help you. They will protect you, and it's not independence.

Mei moved back to her parents' house. She obtained her first job through family connections. Her drive for development and independent living did not, however, seem to match her family's ideas regarding the stability and security of her future: 'After six months, I realised that I just didn't have anything to do at work. It was killing me, and it didn't go the way I wanted it to go. I still got the salary, but I didn't feel like I was learning that much, so I quit it.' By leaving her job, she brought shame on her family: 'It was a horrible experience, so I don't want to do it; I want to try on my own.' Mei had been job-hunting for a while, still planning to live on her own, in a larger city, such as Shanghai. Her plans for the future were uncertain: 'I don't have a clear career path, so I'm still trying to figure out what to do.'

On the one hand, the experiences of returning home were seen as disabling for many international graduates who had tasted the freedom and "adult" independence associated with overseas mobility. This echoes the findings of Geddie (2013), who reported that students felt pulled in multiple directions and faced gendered expectations from parents and partners. Lee's case powerfully illustrates how problematic the notion of youth and youth transition can be when a 25-to-30-year-old graduate goes back and has to live as a child with their family again:

For instance, Lee (25, female, China, MSc in Accounting, self-funded), who spent three years in the UK for undergraduate and postgraduate study, would have stayed in London because she had been offered a job after graduation at a Chinese international company, but her parents asked her to go back home. When she went back, she took on a few internships in her home city for seven months or so, and then she found herself waiting for a job, depressed, with no vision of the future: 'Those months were tough for me. When I woke up in the morning, I didn't know what was going on and what my job was...where my job was. I just stayed like that all day and watched TV.'

She and her parents were under pressure to find the best working environment for her. The job her parents chose did not pay much compared to the city average, but the working environment was good; working for the Government is considered prestigious and secure: 'It's very comfortable for me to stay in a high-class building, and the view is excellent,' commented Lee.

On the other hand, the sense of responsibility towards or even dependence on family and other types of ties with their home countries were the principal factors that brought the participating students back home (Martin, 2017). Caroline (26, female, Thailand, MSc in Business Management, self-funded) said: 'At least when your parents are older, you would like to take care of them... bring them to your house if they can't look after themselves.' She further explained that it is a kind of obvious obligation in Thailand 'to take care of [one's] parents,' and she needed to take care of them along with establishing and looking after her own family. This is a particular concern in China, where according to Kong (2010) that the primary motivation for marital fidelity and preservation of the family is the prospect for intergenerational support, coupled with the fact that in many households, the parents live with their adult child, resulting in situations where intergenerational support is widespread (Zimmer and Kwong, 2003:25–26). As social and cultural values change, the question arises: how will intergenerational relations evolve, and how will the burden of care shift? How will notions of "the family" be shaped? (Kong 2010). The cases of Mei, Lee and Caroline suggested that the individualisation process these young women were subjected to might be interwoven with family connections and loyalties (Martin, 2017). Beside traditional beliefs and practices related to the family and gender, the economic changes have also made it more difficult for young people in contemporary societies to establish a basis for financial independence, while social structural factors have eroded the meaning-basis of adulthood, their partial dependency on the family continues (Côté and Bynner 2008:261).

### **Post-study career developments of females and males**

In the increasingly global higher education sector, there is a strong emphasis on individuals' responsibility for succeeding in their chosen careers (Van Mol, 2014:24). International students are expected to embrace risk and to be flexible enough in their

life choices for the sake of pursuing a successful career. Actively developing an individual life project could be seen as a 'rational action' (Weber, 2013), with the main problematic turning on the question of individual choice and freedom in contemporary society. Song (25, male, China, MSc in Finance, self-funded) spent four years in the UK, three years of which were for undergraduate and postgraduate studies. He now works in one of the main Chinese cities for a large Chinese, but internationally operating, financial liaising company. He applied for his current job while he was still in the UK: 'I had the interview online in September, and then when I came back to China, I had another interview. I've been through four rounds of interviews. Just for this job.' He described the complex process of his job application and continued: 'The application was for the whole of China and over 10,000 graduate students applied for this job, and they only had six positions for over 10,000. After the first two rounds of interviews, they told me, "We've got six others," so I was not in their plan. But after one week, they called me and said, "There's a guy in our department who is about to leave," so they asked me to come again for another two rounds of interviews to check if I can do the particular job.' Starting with the lowest grade salary, Song still felt privileged to finally be hired in the very competitive labour market where only a few can end the challenging and stressful selection processes happy. On the one hand, calculability in the social environment helps individuals like Song understand and navigate the complex web of institutions to realise their choices. On the other hand, freedom and agency are seriously reduced by the same rational, irresistible efficiency of the neoliberal labour market, and at the expense of individual rationality (Weber, 2013).

The participants' stories of mobility and independence are linked with their projects of self and transitions to adulthood. The participants reflected on their educational migration journey, which they associated with being free from the constraints of their home countries, and they appreciated the social environments which gave them the opportunity to be independent. The confidence gained from dealing with the challenges of the study abroad damaged their self-concepts and their ways of living and working (Gu and Schwiesfurth, 2015:695). For instance, during the follow-up interview in her home country, Lily (24, female, China, MSc in Education, self-funded) said: 'Living on you own teaches you lots. You have to address all the problems in daily life. The year in the UK trained me to be strong enough to live on

my own.’ What happens when the graduates move back to their home countries, whether they return to their home town or move to different urban locations, depends on diverse factors. However, the variations in the transition process seem to relate to individuals’ varying abilities to take risks and adapt. In Lily’s case, she got a job as an English language teacher at an international school in one of China’s major cities immediately after her graduation – the recruitment carried out while she was still in the UK. She reflects on the process one and a half years after graduation as follows: ‘At the beginning, I felt like my parents were hoping for me to go back to my home city, but then they realised that I’m actually starting my career in another city, and I think they have been very supportive because they’re paying my rent.’ One year later, during the follow-up interview, Lily shared her feelings of pride in owning a house, bought by her parents, in the same city.

The significant number of female students participating in this study reflects the general increase in Asian female postgraduates who pursue their degrees abroad. In the cases of female self-funded students, the experience of study abroad was often linked to the expectations of finding a suitable husband. Alice comments on her study experiences abroad: ‘In terms of my job or career, I don’t think the studying abroad was useful because a lot of students who study abroad come back to China.’ She sees however other advantages in overseas study, as she met her future husband about a month after she came back to China, and admits that her experiences abroad helped her to find a suitable fiancé: ‘When I came back, I talked with my friends, I shared my experience of study abroad and they said, "Wow, so cool!" They were impressed. My friends introduced us two to each other. And also my experience in the UK helped me.’ At the time of interview, Alice was just about to have her wedding during the Spring Festival and then move to Canada with her husband, a businessman. Alice quit her job in the bank after getting engaged. Her thoughts shifted to having a family rather than focusing on career prospects. Her husband did not want her to work either, and advised her to take another degree in Canada and spend more time at home.

Data from China suggests that graduates’ post-study choices reinforce gendered norms feminising women and emphasising a dominant model of masculinity (Jin and Whitson 2014). In Xiang and Shen’s (2009) analysis of the differences between Chinese female and male student migrants, they point to Bourdieu’s (1984)

distinction between the male-dominated “economic ladder” and the “cultural ladder”, which is more female-friendly in the process of social mobility. Lily felt somehow privileged to be a female; although previously, males had enjoyed a better position in society, it was no longer the case, and being a male was actually more challenging. While, perhaps, males enjoyed far more freedom, their lives were full of different expectations and pressures to climb the economic ladder. Song explained how after graduation, a male needed to get a good job to make enough money because ‘he is supposed to be more independent, be able to buy a house’ in order to be able to set up a family and prove his value. Females, on the other hand, do not usually need to follow this same path, which is why Lily could live in a house paid for by her parents, and use her salary only for other living expenses. The case of the Chinese participants seems to confirm the general impression that male students primarily expect higher incomes when investing in international education, and female students expect heightened social status, particularly, desirable positions in the marriage market, in addition to higher earning power (Xiang and Shen, 2009:517).

### **Identity capital - negotiating post-study transitions**

The final section of the analysis explores whether attributes associated with identity capital, such as adaptability and creativity, help graduates to negotiate their post-study transitions. Not all the participants’ stories suggested restricted aspirations and mobility. Drawing on Evans and Heinz’s (1994) concepts of “passive” and “active” individualisation, Côté and Levine’s (2002) analysis of transition pointed out that the stances toward developing an individualised life project can be seen to range from passive acceptance to active, strategic approaches to personal growth and life-projects in adulthood. Both the male and female participants in the study displayed the diverse passive and active attitudes. Similar to Wiers-Jenssen (2013:473), many participants who have undertaken parts of their education abroad perceive their sojourn abroad as an advantage in the transition from higher education to work, but not as a catalyst for a significantly more successful career. The subjective perception of success in the labour market is probably related to prior expectations. Bert (25, male, China, MSc in Finance Management, self-funded) commented that for the money his parents spent on his two years of education in the UK they could have bought a house in his home city. He thought that he was not really making any use of his education abroad in his current position but that it might prove helpful for the future. He valued more his



social experience abroad, especially his involvement in the international students' union at his university. 'Studying for two years, gave me a big advantage in learning English, but otherwise, what other advantages?' However, he adds: 'The knowledge is not very useful for the jobs you get right now, but I think in the future, those Chinese friends from your study abroad will help you to get a higher status.' The participants seemed to actively revise their career strategies and constantly create alternatives. 'The truth is this is such a good job, and I still feel like this is not real, so I still feel like I may lose it one day. I have a two-year contract, but they might just say that they don't want me anymore in two or three months' time.' Liang (24, male, China, MSc in Education, scholarship) thus shared his anxieties about not being able to keep his job as a junior manager in the transnational education business connecting the UK and China. He viewed the job as an excellent start to his carefully considered career path in international education, but he never left himself without a backup plan: 'If I lose this job, I will probably continue my studies, or I will go to Australia.' Liang knew that the working holiday visa for people under 30 years of age was likely to become available to Chinese nationals that year, and he intended to take that opportunity. He justified his worries by saying: 'I just want to get myself ready, even if I know my manager is satisfied with what I'm doing, which is good. I just want to make sure I have a backup plan.'

The data indicate that many of the graduates' experiences abroad had made them re-evaluate not only their career choices but also their lifestyle attitudes. For instance, Yun's (25, female, China, MSc in Consulting and Management, self-funded) experiences of returning to China illustrate what Kim and Sondhi (2015:22) called 'the reverse culture shock,' which affected her view of working conditions, social interactions, and living standards in her home country. Yun talked critically about China's 'traditional' companies, where 'you would work for your manager, have to listen to him and do everything he says.' Yun appreciated the relative freedom in her current work environment (an international company based in China) and said: 'My manager and director, we are a team. We are team members...they kind of respect you and listen to your ideas and suggestions.' Although, in comparison with traditional working structures, she appreciated some aspects of her new workplace, she did not find the place completely satisfying, particularly highlighting the cold relationships between employees: 'They don't smile at you. Like in the lobby, they

never smile at you. They do not smile in response to your smile.’ She recalled in this situation her experiences in the UK: ‘Because, you know, in Britain, everybody smiles at you, and everyone says “Hi”.’ This is one of the reasons Yun had considered moving abroad again, and it also contributed to her wider concerns about the perceived quality of life in China and her desire to go to a different country, perhaps to one different from the UK because she had been there already. Yun talked about her desire ‘to live in a place without air pollution, where I can get fresh food, fruit, seafood, where I can cook many different things.’ She persuaded her parents to allow her to leave for a PhD in New Zealand. Similar to Gu and Schwiesfurth’s study (2015:695), the returnees demonstrated a reflexive awareness of their identity transformation, which included a sense of being distinctly and permanently different from others around them in the workplace and in their local networks. International work places provide an opportunity for the negotiation of new gender norms and identities, where gender norms may be reinforced, negotiated, and contested in the lives and career of young women in big China cities. (Jin and Whitson 2014: 451). International mobility could also be considered an opportunity for women in developing successful careers. In the first place, women with high educational qualifications are able to compete in the international labour market and can thus escape the rigidities of the domestic labour market, particularly where gender issues are concerned (González Ramos and Vergés Bosch 2013).

Likewise, Chen (24, female, China, MSc in Marketing, self-funded) had moved back to China and was working at an international marketing company there. Chen also wanted to move to New Zealand or Australia because the career path change would increase her chances of finding a good, better-remunerated job. Chen During the follow-up interview she revealed her plans for the near future: ‘I want to change when I get enough experience; I will try to accumulate more experience here and try to find some new type of work and find a job in the software or database development areas.’ In Chen’s account, adaptability and creativity were linked to an openness to acquire new knowledge and skills.

Liang, Yun and Chen were able to negotiate their mobility and transition. Their desire to be mobile reflected a lifestyle choice rather than a desire to enter the global labour

market. However, greater capacities to become mobile appear to translate into increased advantages in terms of labour market access and participation. To some extent, the examples above are useful to illustrate the range of agentic behaviour and potential, described by Côté and Levine (2002) as ‘variations along a default developmental dimension of individualization.’ The realisation that a credential no longer guarantees employment in the global labour market places pressure on job-seeking graduates to demonstrate a set of personal aptitudes and capabilities (Gribble, Rahimi, and Blackmore, 2017) that could be related to identity capital. According to Côté’s (2002) identity capital model, people can take advantage of the university-work transition by making “identity investments” as they individualise. This can involve a strategic development of “who one is” on the basis of exchangeable resources, like abilities, appearance, and interactional skills. These resources can be both tangible (e.g., parents’ social class and their investments in their offspring, or gender) and intangible (e.g., an agentic personality, prior identity capital acquisitions, or advanced forms of psychosocial and intellectual development). Together, these can be used to establish and accumulate individual identity gains. Students can capitalise on these qualities valued in the home country context based on a combination of hard currencies, such as diplomas and work experience, as well as soft currencies, such as interpersonal skills, appearance, and accent. Many of these attributes are subjective and open to cultural or gender bias (Gribble, Rahimi, and Blackmore, 2017:21). In this study, gender can be identified as a resource for the international postgraduates’ identity capital development and for their access to other tangible resources like ability to leave the parental home, secure a job with a living wage or higher income upon return to their home countries.

## **Conclusion**

This paper adds to the understanding of international education as a self-formation process (Marginson, 2014; Tran, 2016). It shows that among the Asian international postgraduates of the study, regardless of their social class, the individuals possess highly diverse and contextualised abilities to pursue the course of life they wish to follow. The article demonstrates that educational mobility is a learning process. Some scholars highlight the transformative potential of experiences abroad to reshape students’ attitudes, values, and identities (Andersson et al., 2012; Gu and Schweisfurth, 2015). When reflecting on the life course, the period at university is

often thought of as the “formative years” in young people’s transition to adulthood. In theory, therefore, experiences with different cultures have the potential to be transformative and to re-shape attitudes and values (Andersson et al., 2012).

The paper advanced the potential of the identity capital model in the case of international graduate returnees. The longitudinal aspects of the study give voice to the same participants at different stages of their education-to-work journey to demonstrate their transitions and the mobility process, even if the latter is often a matter of confrontation with traditional social structures and family. Côté’s identity capital model (2002) helps identify notable resource differences, where structural opportunities and obstacles are met with differences in agentic potential to produce different life-course outcomes. The participants’ stories and trajectories suggest diverse transition capabilities. Greater capacities of postgraduates to become mobile appear to translate into increased advantages in terms of labour market access and participation for both males and females. Moreover, the paper emphasises the range of passive and active approaches to career development. Active approaches characterise students who are more able to accumulate resources during their mobility in terms of their development and exchange of identity capital.

Furthermore, the analyses suggest that returning home is a gendered process for Asian postgraduates. In many Asian societies (including China, Thailand and Indonesia), women are often discouraged from entering the labour market and display felt occupational interests. The division of roles in the family is not subjected to a revision of beliefs and practices. The current economic competition does not leave much margin for change to curb the gender issue (Stormquist, 2006). Most females in the study would likely stay in the UK or think about their next move abroad, while the male participants were more settled and certain when thinking about their future careers and permanent returns (see also Sondhi and King, 2017). The examples provided by the participants shed some light on the different experiences of transitioning for females and males in an aspirational as well as an actual sense. The participants’ discourse of return related to becoming adults, but this process is different for females and males. China, in particular makes a unique study site for international students’ mobility research due to the various social, political, and economic changes that have had numerous impacts on all aspects of Chinese society

and, perhaps most importantly, people's identities. However, gendered norms and expectations have shifted with each change in political and economic organization (Jin and Whitson 2014: 451), many young people are still struggling to develop professional careers and escape social conventions and pressures. Data from China suggests that many graduate's post-study choices reinforce gendered norms feminising women and emphasising a dominant model of masculinity (Jin and Whitson 2014). Family appears to be an important factor that internationally mobile graduates need to negotiate. The students' views of their UK education and experiences change over time as they renegotiate their mobility, transitions, and life priorities. In terms of the life course, the period abroad undoubtedly affects the students' attitudes towards the workplace and their views of relationships, quality of life and environment, and gender and generational roles within the family and household. This study has identified a gendered pattern but future work is needed to explore the underlying reasons in more details. International educational mobility appears to be a potential tool for breaking gender codes and for women's self-transformation and collective social transformation.

Lastly, it is worth underlining that interviewing those who returned after graduation produced a possible underestimation of the factors that help people stay abroad after their studies. This limitation of the study has to be acknowledged, as speaking only to students who returned home (as opposed to those who moved to a third country) provides just a partial understanding of the post-study transition process. Those who return home after study might be different from those who stay or who move on to a third location. Selectivity is however unavoidable in a qualitative study and leaves scope for future research to fill the gap.

To conclude, in the context of global educational mobility, international education is conceptualised as making students more able to succeed in highly competitive markets for university places or jobs when they return home (Robertson, 2013:22). Some of the research has already pointed out that this is not always the case, as the degree abroad may not always confer the privilege expected in home country markets (Robertson, Hoare, and Harwood, 2011; Wiers-Jenssen, 2013). This study supports the call for more critical thinking about the value of international education, especially in the context of post-study transitions. The connection between migration

and youth studies represents a potentially fruitful link to further investigate in future research. By exploring the ways that migration studies connect to youth studies, this paper has uncovered a promising area of research into student migration. This would involve indirectly gathering information on life course development in terms of the individuals, their households, their everyday identity work, their sociability, and their network building.

## Notes

Pseudonyms are used throughout.

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