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***Book Review Essay: Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students
in the West***¹
Zeyi Liu²

Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West offers significant insight into how gender is intertwined with the educational mobility of middle-class Chinese students, shaping their experience and subjectivity. The author Fran Martin is a prominent scholar in culture and gender studies. Her work presents a longitudinal framework into microscale experiences of macroscopic processes characterized as “feminisation of migration.” Between 2012 and 2020, Martin carried out an ethnographic study with fifty female Chinese students studying in Australia. In *Dreams of Flight*, she refers to them as “student transmigrants” due to their constant transnational interconnections and she emphasizes the importance of transmigration in identity formation. Her approach offers a unique blend of ethnographic observation, individual narrative, and theoretical considerations and is an excellent addition to the field of gender studies and the study of educational mobility.

In the first half of *Dreams of Flight*, Martin examines participants’ initial incentives to study abroad (Chapter 1) and depicts everyday practices of habitation, social media communication, and work (Chapters 2, 3 & 4). The remainder of the book explores the spiritual world of the participants, including intimate relationships (Chapter 5), religion (Chapter 6), Chinese patriotism (Chapter 7), and the tendency of self-understanding to shift from neo-traditionalist femininity to neoliberal enterprising selfhood (Chapter 8). The content arrangement resonates with the purpose of the book and clearly demonstrates how the experience and subjectivity of the selected middle-class female Chinese students are affected by educational mobility.

Specifically, Martin illustrates these Chinese women students’ motivations for studying abroad through an agentic perspective in Chapter 1, emphasizing the gendered job-landing pressure in a patriarchal society and their self-fashioning aspirations. This is consistent with the results of many studies in this field (e.g., Zhang & Tang, 2021; Bamber, 2014). What distinguishes Martin’s argument is that she avoids overstating the role of personalized agency in the analysis, by emphasizing the social-cultural construction of not only individual agency due to human factors but also familial agency arising from non-human factors. For example, some women’s “academic deficits” deny them a high-status university diploma in China. Relatively affluent parents can circumvent this limitation by exercising proxy agency (Bandura, 2017). Middle-class parents can afford high tuition fees, so their children are able to receive a high-quality Western college education even with an unqualified score in the Chinese College Entrance Examination. Martin argues that “capacities to exercise agency are shared out unevenly between subjects with different levels of social power” (p. 55). As a result, women who have access and ability to secure higher education gain an extra edge in negotiating with patriarchal power compared with women from families with lower socioeconomic status. There are hierarchies of oppression among different subgroups of women, highlighting the significance of the limitations in evaluating gender in isolation.

¹ Martin, F. (2022). *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West*. Duke University Press.

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Martin also emphasizes the limitations of educational mobility addressing how mobility may in fact promote social isolation. Many of the student subjects of her book lived within a relatively isolated Chinese circle, “the expatriate microworld” (p. 66): Chinese friends, Chinese restaurants, and accommodation shared with other Chinese students (Chapter 2). The social separation of international students from domestic peers is intensified not merely by the segregation in accommodation, but also by participants’ overreliance in using social Apps developed in and run from China, which are used to keep in close contact with Chinese people both in China and Australia (Chapter 3). Additionally, as highlighted in Chapter 4, as temporary visa holders, Chinese students often get rejected by non-Chinese-run businesses when they try to access professional positions. Their Chinese middle-class background seems to be powerless, partly because they lack social capital in Australia. Many student workers have no choice but to be trapped in the Chinese restaurant sector or *Daigou* (parallel trading). Martin shows that the catering sector and *Daigou* are highly feminized: feminine network capital plays a role in negotiating with the serving and hospitality nature of the work. Even though there are male workers in restaurants, the division of labor is highly gendered, with female students more likely to be employed for customer-facing service tasks, while male students typically work as dishwashers or kitchen hands. The distribution reflects the stereotyped gendered social patterns where women are generally regarded as being good at communication while males are distinguished for more advantaged body strength (Connell & Pearse, 2015).

In addition to detailed descriptions of expatriate experiences, Martin writes with a critical understanding of gender identity transformation, evidence of her expertise as a scholar of gender studies. She argues that the experience of transnational educational mobility tends to enhance participants’ desire for mobile enterprising selfhood, while correspondingly reducing their attachment to neo-traditionalist femininity as “the obedient daughter, the self-sacrificing woman, and the family-focused mother” (p. 188). This change of gender identity can be more easily constructed via socialization in the trans-locality. However, after such women graduate from universities in Australia, when some of them choose to find employment in China, after a short period of struggle many acquiesce to their parents’ wishes that they marry a nice man and find a stable job traditionally suitable for women (Chapter 8). Such findings resonate with the argument of Fu & Clarke (2020) that agency and social structure both shape and are reciprocally shaped in a spiral and conjoined manner of structuration. As a result, Martin notes in Chapter 5 and 8 that contradictions of femininity and life script tend to be reconfigured, resisting any neat conclusion, in the suspension zone offered by educational mobility. In addition to gender detraditionalization, she outlines the post-overseas-study subjectivity that includes a mobile imaginary, ideological individualization, ambition, reflexivity, consumerism, employer identification and professional orientation (Chapter 8), a powerful summary of what has been reflected in the stories of the research participants.

Martin harnesses sophisticated theoretical illustrations, citing a variety of literature in related areas of scholarship such as female capital and feminine capital, the relationship of mobility with geofixity, how neo-traditionalist gender rules and the socialist nation are aligned with one another and theories of distributed agency. Nevertheless, the reader would be supported in understanding “agency” (Chapter 1) if this theoretical concept were explained in more detail. Martin writes that “this book is dedicated to Chinese women everywhere pursuing the dream of overseas study” (p. 6). As a Chinese woman studying abroad, I was challenged to understand the academic term “agency” at the beginning of my doctorate, since the most common translation of agency into Chinese refers to an organization that provides a

particular service, especially on behalf of other organizations – which has little in common with the cognitive ability to make choices. The term might therefore confuse some readers without an academic background of sociology or psychology, especially if their mother tongue is not English. Such attention would also strengthen the position of this book's role in developing the theorization of agency from gender and intersectional lenses in Chinese educational mobility.

Overall, this book reveals the geographic and subjective worlds inhabited and produced by female Chinese student trans-migrants when pursuing their dreams of flight in Australia. It is intriguing to follow these young women's transformation from a rising middle-class elite in China to a racialized migrant minority group in Australia, and Chinese overseas students will readily identify with the narratives exposed. The book will undoubtedly have a strong and enduring impact on scholarship about educational mobility, gender studies, and China studies.

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