Chapter 4

From Familial Pressure to Seeking One's Fortune: Chinese International Students' Search for Geographical and Social Mobility as a Response to Societal and Familial Pressures

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4.1 Introduction

In many ways, post-1978 China is unrecognisable compared to how it was under Mao. The transition to a market economy, its cultural opening to the outside world and a multitude of societal reforms made for a sharp generational divide between those who grew up in the pre-reform era and those in the post-reform period (Clark 2012; Dychwald 2018; Fong 2004). The latter cohort has been raised in a country with near-constant economic growth, has been exposed to international media and has not experienced the political and societal turmoil that their parents lived through (see Chan, Madsen and Unger 1984; Clark 2012). Particularly in urban areas where the one-child policy was more easily enforced (Kane and Choi 1999), most Chinese youth are single children. This may place the child in a precarious position as the social convention is that he or she supports the parent in old age (Fong 2016). This leads to a situation where this one child grows up with the totality of his or her parent's hopes resting on them (Fong 2004). In addition, the official narrative of ever-increasing prosperity coupled with exposure to images from Western countries, means that young people also tend to have built up high expectations as to their own lifestyles (Dychwald 2018; Fong 2011). However, it soon becomes apparent that only an extreme minority, such as those with well-connected parents or with outstanding academic records, will realistically be able to achieve the socio-economic lifestyles envisioned. Of course, some achieve this through entrepreneurship – colloquially termed ‘jumping into the ocean’ – but this is risky and here, too, only a few are able to achieve significant socio-economic advancement. For many, educational sojourns abroad are seen as an alternative route to social mobility (Fong 2011; Page 2019b). This view is often shared by the students' parents, who can therefore go to

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great lengths to pay for these sojourns. Some take up loans from friends and family, empty their savings or even sell their homes in order to fund their children's studies. While they have high expectations that their children will become successful, the convention of familial eldercare acts as a ticking clock. As their parents age, the sojourning youth seeking their fortune know that they are expected to eventually return.

This chapter is based on an ethnographic study of a group of Chinese international students in Norway. The topics addressed here are, first, what motivated them to travel, second, their aspirations for the future and third, how they envision their present experiences as facilitating this future. Norway is a welfare state and, much like in other such countries, there has been significant public discourse regarding migrants' perceived abuse of welfare services. However, the Chinese youth studied here seem to be focused on a different aspect of Western European welfare – namely substantive freedom. This is a central part of the work of Sen (1999), who measured a country's development by the freedom available to its inhabitants. Many of the participants stated freedom of choice as a driving reason for leaving China, suggesting that, had they remained, they would have been stuck in a middle- to lower-middle-class situation with no realistic pathway to the lifestyle they envisioned for themselves. Thus, the potential outcome of migration the most ardently anticipated is increased control over one's own life trajectory. A belief was repeatedly expressed that a degree from a Western country would be more internationally transferable than one from a Chinese university. In addition, many also stated that studying abroad would allow them to cultivate cross-cultural communicative skills. Thus, through studying in a country that is developed in terms of its substantive freedom, they seek to gain a wider range of possibilities than they would otherwise have had, recreating themselves from locally situated people with fixed life trajectories, to globally and socially mobile people. In this way, their migration may be seen as intended to provide the ability to shape their life courses through individual agency.

While the participants are focused on their own aspirations, many also explain that the well-being and future needs of the parents also weigh on their minds. The knowledge of the financial sacrifices of their families is a source of pressure, as is the knowledge that a deterioration of the parents' health might necessitate an early return. Thus, while they present an image of an ideal future self as a global citizen, able to travel anywhere and do anything, they are tethered to China through familial obligations. In a manner of speaking, the students' welfare needs may one day have to be weighed against those of their parents – a dilemma that some of the participants are already dreading. However, even those who expect this call to come sooner rather than later believe that they will retain the mobility they have earned. Thus, the mobility that these students seem to wish to cultivate for themselves may be seen as the *potential* for movement. They envision that, even should their familial situations force them to return, their Western degree and cross-cultural skills will allow them to activate their global lifestyles when their life-circumstances permit.

4.2 The Post-1980s Generation or *bālíng hòu*

The concept of generational shifts needs clarification, as births take place continuously and any delineation will unavoidably carry ambiguity (Spitzer 1973). Mannheim (1923) is often thought of as having provided the seminal work on generations or cohorts within the social sciences. A person's age determines his or her cultural location, frames of reference and social and intellectual currents that formed them. Members of a given generation will here be seen as 'those people within a delineated population who experience the same significant event within a given period of time' (Pilcher 1994, 483) as '[c]ontemporaneity becomes sociologically significant only when it also involves "participation in the same social and historical circumstances"' (1994, 490). In the case of societies experiencing rapid cultural change, it seems reasonable that this will create similar, if not stronger, generational differences than formative events. In both these senses, there is a significant gap between those who grew up in China's pre-reform era and those born after it. The former experienced famine, political instability and an almost Orwellian demand for political orthodoxy. Deng's premiership, following the death of Mao, was marked by a series of reforms that led to rapid economic growth. Because of this, the children born thereafter grew up in a very different country to their parents. While there are numerous terms used for them both within and outside China, such as the 'me generation', the 'Y generation' or the 'little emperors', here the term *bālíng hòu*, which translates as the 'post-1980s generation' will be used. It is common in China to speak of children born in each decade in separate terms, differentiating the post-1980s from the post-1990s, post-2000s, etc. However, I argue here that the marked generational shift we see around 1980 makes *bālíng hòu* a fitting synecdoche. With the economic reforms introduced in 1978 and the one-child policy in 1979, it is in those born from 1980 onwards that the most marked generational shift may be observed. They have grown up with near-constant economic growth and have not experienced the hardships and turbulence that their parents lived through.

The parents of the *bālíng hòu*, many of whom missed out on tertiary schooling themselves, tend to be very intent on their offspring's higher education. It has become usual for urban parents to expect their children to go to a good university and to invest time and resources into securing this outcome (Liu 2015). Access to higher education for school leavers has risen dramatically since the reform era, from 0.26 per cent in 1949 to 1.55 per cent in 1978 and 42.7 per cent in 2016 (Sun 2017). This means that going to university has shifted from a privilege reserved for but a few to being the norm among urban youth. The one-child policy also plays a role in the parents' expectations, as it allows the parents' resources to be concentrated onto a single child. This has also alleviated the gender imbalance in formal education, as the limit on the number of offspring prevents sons being prioritised over daughters (Fong 2002; Lee 2012).

As is implied by terms such as the 'me-generation', those born after the 1980s are seen as representing an unfortunate break with previous generations. They are

viewed as having lost their forebears' ability to *chīkǔ* or "eat bitterness" – meaning to stoically endure hardship (Dychwald 2018). Many older Chinese lament what they see as a rising materialism and individualism among the *bālíng hòu* (Chan, Zhang and Wang 2006; Shi et al. 2016). One of the typical culprits blamed for this is the high level of parental investment and attention. Indeed, compared to Europeans, Chinese youth tend to be quite dependant on their parents and are less accustomed to taking care of themselves (Stanat 2005).

To think of the *bālíng hòu* as being spoiled would be quite unfair, though, as the familial pressures many experience are considerable. While the parents are able to invest much of their time and resources in their single offspring, their expectations are similarly concentrated (Fong 2004). The convention of familial eldercare is one of the reasons why parents are so invested in their children's education, as they will one day be dependent on them (Fong 2016). While private enterprise may be lucrative, it is also risky; education is thus seen as the most reliable road to economic stability. Young people often feel a great deal of pressure to become 'successful', both economically and in terms of self-realisation. All these factors, combined with rapid urbanisation and economic development, have led to intense competition for university admission. While the number of available places has expanded, it has increased nowhere near enough to match growing demand. Even a mediocre student often spends upwards of 10 hours a day studying, leading some to opine that they have given up their youth in exchange for China's economic rise (Dychwald 2018).

4.3 Sen's Development as Freedom

Economic development is central to many of the major theoretical frameworks of migration. The neoclassical model (e.g. Ravenstein 1895), the New Economics of Migration (Stark 1978) and the World Systems Theory (Wallerstein 1974) to name a few, all focus on the idea that people move for primarily economic reasons. Indeed, this is not illogical as the wish to escape poverty seems to be a central cause of migration. The argument of this chapter also fits within this framework as long as the view of what constitutes poverty is broadened. While most of the major theories of migration take a macroscopic economic view, Amartya Sen (1999) views development on an individual level. He argues that there are three metrics that are important in gauging economic development, these being political freedom, freedom of choice and economic freedom. He defines poverty as the lack of any or all of these metrics. Thus, even someone with an income above the poverty line would still be considered poor if this individual is lacking political freedom and/or freedom of choice. These three measures comprise what are variously known as 'substantive freedoms' or 'human capabilities'. These are, in Sen's analysis, central to development. They serve both as a measure of development and as a driver of it, as it is often possible to access one type of freedom through another or, in Bourdieu's (1986) terms, transfer capital from one form to another. However, this is not to say that

access to one form may always provide access to the others. In fact, Sen (1988, 1999) suggests that one reason for this extended view of poverty is that a lack of political freedom and freedom of choice may limit human capability and development in a way which would be masked should one only use strictly economic measures.

4.4 Method and Participants

The focus of this chapter is to explore the juxtaposition between the global ambitions of a group of Chinese students enrolled at a Norwegian university (hereafter IUN) and the way in which they are tied to the sending communities by their filial responsibilities. IUN is situated in a medium-sized university town in Norway and is undergoing a push for the diversification of both students and staff. This began in the 1990s with the stated goal of making the university 'internationally excellent'. During this internationalisation initiative, the student body has become significantly more diverse, at least within certain disciplines such as engineering and computer science. While the majority of international students at IUN are from various European countries, there are a significant number of 'non-Western' students as well, the Chinese being the largest group. This study was conducted from September 2012 to April 2014 and was conceived as an inquiry into the experiences of the Chinese students enrolled at IUN. It was an open-ended ethnographic study focusing on many aspects of the students' lives. As such, the findings are too many and diverse to fit in a single paper and some have been published elsewhere (Page 2019a, b). The study was conducted using both participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The group-based nature of the field setting compared to the one-to-one interviews meant that different types of data emerged in the two settings – this chapter is mostly based on the interviews. The research questions concern (a) what motivates their sojourn, (b) their aspirations for the future and (c) how their migration would facilitate this.

At the time of this study, approximately 100 Chinese students were enrolling at IUN each year. Most of these were on Master's programmes in engineering, material science and IT. It is well-documented that, when there are sufficient numbers, international students tend to cluster into co-national groupings (Taha and Cox 2016). The Chinese, being one of the largest national groupings at IUN, were numerous enough to comprise several cliques and milieus and it is on one of these that the current study is based. These milieus have fluid boundaries and rotating memberships as senior members graduate and new ones enrol. As such, it is hard to enumerate how large this group is, although for the purposes of this chapter it can be said to consist of approximately 40 individuals.

All the participants quoted herein were in Norway on student visas and were engaged on programmes of at least one year's duration and most commonly two. The average participant was a member of China's urban middle class from a coastal city, born in the late 1980s and an only child. For most, it was their first extended

stay outside China and, for some, their first ever trip abroad. The group was fairly evenly balanced in terms of gender. In order to minimise the participants' inconvenience, interviews were held where and when they considered it the most convenient, with most taking place on campus after lectures. While some Chinese and Norwegian was used, the primary language was English. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and all names used herein are randomly selected pseudonyms.

4.5 Embodying Modernity Through Global Capital

As already mentioned, the *bālíng hòu* participating in this study are in Norway on temporary visas and, as such, would be thought of by many as sojourners. However, as the duration of their sojourns exceeds a year, they also meet most scholars' criteria to be considered migrants. Migration is defined in many ways but, in a broader sense, may be seen as the crossing of a political, geographic or administrative boundary with the intention of remaining for a certain amount of time – 1 year being a typical stipulation (Castles, de Haas and Miller 2014). The crossing of a boundary signifies the movement from one type of place to another and thus involves movement from a sending to a receiving region. One common way to understand migration is as a result of a calculation between the factors that push someone to leave one place and those that draw them to another (e.g. Moon 1995; Ravenstein 1895; Zhang et al. 2012). From this perspective, asking why the *bālíng hòu* youth in this study embarked on their educational travels may be seen as a two-part question: Why did they leave China and why did they go to Norway?

4.5.1 Reasons for Leaving China

For many of the participants, their reason for migrating was more marked by the factors that pushed them to leave China rather than those that drew them to Norway. A surprisingly small proportion of the research on Chinese international students deals with the question of why they leave, focusing more on their reasons for choosing the receiving country (e.g. Ahmad and Hussain 2017; Bodycott 2009; Yang 2007) and their likelihood of staying (e.g. Alberts and Hazen 2005; Han et al. 2015). One large-scale study that does deal with push factors is that of Fong (2011) whose findings in this regard also fit well with those of this chapter. The participants of this study echoed those in Fong's work in that they expressed a variety of reasons for leaving China, some of which were unique to the individual student. However, there was a recurrent expression that migration would allow them more control over what would otherwise have been relatively fixed life courses, as Yao, a 25-year-old male student explained:

I worry that, in China, I have no choice in my life. I would, like, do *this* job, or *that* job. I live *here*, get married *then* to *this* person... I think that you, in these countries, can chose your own future.

As previously intimated, the intense competition in China means that only the very top academic performers would have their choice of university and the others would have to take whatever studies would give the best prospects for employment. Thus, they would be required to maximise the benefits of each potential area of study and choose the most materially beneficial one. In a sense, the choice would be made for them, leading to the feeling of being railroaded. Yao's statement above is an indication that such feelings are also prominent among the participants of this study, sentiments echoed by others such as Xuegang (26, m):

In China, I can't take the Master's I want. I have to see what I can get into, what will give me a job. You can't just... study the thing your heart says, or your dream. With these results, there may be only one thing you can do.

Xuegang and Yao, as well as many of their peers, had begun their studies in China. They had enrolled on the best programme that they could get onto with the results they had from their higher-education entrance exams (*Gāokǎo*). The point at which the students decided to study abroad varied greatly. One had made up her mind to study elsewhere immediately after receiving her *Gāokǎo*. For her BA in China, rather than focusing on her employment prospects, she had attempted to maximise her chances of being accepted on a foreign MA programme. Others had begun their studies with the intention of completing them in China but had realised that the course they had chosen was not for them. They had applied abroad because of a belief that this would allow them access to postgraduate studies further removed from their BAs and/or that the degrees they received would make them more desirable on the job market and thus give them access to a wider field of choice. One indication that leaving the sending country was more important than the choice of receiving country was that many of the students, including Xuegang and Yao, had merely sent out applications to any foreign university they could, in the hope of being accepted in at least one.

In Sen's (1988) terms, we can argue that the students were fleeing poverty in the sense of freedom of choice. Such freedom has both an intrinsic value in itself and an instrumental value in allowing access to other 'commodities'. In this specific case, what they would be accessing by achieving greater control over their academic and career trajectories could be such things as higher pay or greater job satisfaction. However, as I demonstrate more clearly later, the students seemed more concerned with freedom of choice for its intrinsic value, as its mere possession becomes an important factor in their identity construction.

4.5.2 *Why IUN?*

We saw above that many of the participants were primarily concerned with leaving China and that the actual destination was secondary. Those following this strategy might have preferred English-speaking countries as this would make communication easier. However, Norwegian universities were also an attractive alternative as there were no application or tuition fees at the time. The absence of the former was especially important to those employing a scattershot approach to application. Among the participants of this study, while their reasons for leaving China were very much in line with prior studies, their reasons for doing studying at IUN were more idiosyncratic.

For some of the scattershot applicants, IUN had merely been the first and/or best university which had accepted them. Others had sought IUN specifically because of their fields of interest. One student, for instance, was researching a technique of underwater pipeline construction in which IUN has special competence. A few students had even known of particular professors under whom they wished to study. One of these students, Shi, had actually met her future supervisor when he had been giving a talk in Shanghai. The two had struck up a conversation, and it was the professor himself who had told Shi that the IUN might be of interest for her postgraduate work.

Two of the participants, Chan and Dewei, had personal reasons for applying to IUN. Chan had a girlfriend who was studying elsewhere in Norway and entering on a student visa was Chan's best option of being close to her. He had done some research and found that IUN was the closest institution to her that had a Master's programme which might be suitable for him. The two took the train to visit each other over the long weekends and the shorter breaks where visiting their families in China would be impractical. Dewei, on the other hand, had previously held an internship with a company in Europe and had taken the opportunity to travel within the Schengen area. Among the countries he visited was Norway and he had fallen in love with the place. For him, applying to IUN had been primarily about returning to Norway and about attaining formal qualifications that would increase his chances of being able to remain.

4.5.3 *The Opening Up of Life Trajectories*

As we have seen, the students expressed a belief that staying in China would mean constricting their life courses, that the progression of both their careers and their social lives would be more or less determined by their relatively limited options. Many of the students said that this was one of their main reasons for studying abroad – that this would give them more control over their lives by opening up a larger number of potential avenues (Page 2019a). These avenues were primarily concerned with access to more choices in the place of residence and the career. For

the former, several participants suggested that a Chinese degree would primarily be of interest within China, whereas a degree from a Western country would be far more internationally transferable. Holding such a degree, it was said, would make it easier to get visas and residency permits in whatever place they might wish to go. One student, 28-year-old Ni, also intimated that she might wish to continue studying in the US and that she would be more likely to gain access based on a degree from IUN than from the Chinese university where she had received her BA. However, she had not made up her mind yet. Rather than working towards the goal of further education, she wanted to open up the greatest possible range of options.

One of the reasons why I came here is that I want to be free to move around the world. If I study in Norway, I have more opportunities. Even if I cannot get a job in Norway, it is easier to apply for other universities in other places in the world. [...] Also, because, although I think even China is developing very fast now, I could not see my career in China. Not yet here. I still cannot see my future now but I think that, if I study abroad and I move, I will have more possibilities and opportunities.

Both the terms that Ni employed – possibility and opportunity – were very much recurrent, appearing in the majority of interviews. Ni notes that, although she does not know exactly what she wants to do, she wants the ability to create options for herself. In fact, very few of the participants had concrete plans for their future after graduation. Rather than being an entry point into a specific career or discipline, a Western degree was presented as a commodity granting general access to a type cosmopolitan, globally mobile lifestyle. In fact, many of the students placed a premium on both geographic and social mobility and seemed to aspire to a near-nomadic lifestyle.

I'd like to, maybe, not stay in one place, may be stay in some other locations. It's more fun (...) [M]oving different places and working different positions, maybe, like, can make better opportunities for me (Chunlei, 27, f).

I really do not have any real plan. I mean, no real plan on what job I want, or where. Maybe, like, work three months in one position, then move to another place and another position (...) you can gain a lot of different experiences (Lanfen, 28, m).

From this it seems as though the lack of a plan or, rather, the lack of the obligation to have a fixed life course, is itself a desirable quality. From the above quotes, we can infer that the ideal future to which these youth are aspiring is a semi-nomadic existence where more thought is given to the potentiality for mobility than to where this mobility might lead.

There are two factors to which the students attribute this mobility, one being their formal qualifications, the other being informal cross-cultural communicative skills. Of course, the idea that higher education may bring increased mobility is quite true. Many countries have relaxed immigration policies for highly skilled individuals (Wright 2015) and such migrants also tend to face less stigmatisation from the majority society (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). Whether a degree from a not-particularly-well-known Norwegian university is more internationally transferrable than one from a Chinese university is harder to determine but many of the students expressed a belief – or maybe more of an assumption – that this would be the case.

One possible reason why this might be so is that study at a foreign university would allow the *bālíng hòu* to gain exposure to other cultures and help them to develop cross-cultural communicative skills (Fong 2011; Gu and Schweisfurth 2015). These benefits would partly consist of English-language skills but would also be seen more ephemerally as an acclimatisation to difference generally. These factors, the formal and the informal, were seen as together conferring global and social mobility, allowing the student to go anywhere and do anything.

In the attainment of global and social mobility we see the intrinsic value placed on Sen's (1988, 1999) freedom of choice. It has been argued elsewhere that the ways in which these students express themselves suggest that their sojourns are more about identity work than about formal qualifications (Page 2019b). While travel and job mobility are each valuable in themselves, the vagueness with which the participants speak of both are notable. Very little emphasis was given to any specific jobs that they would like to do but focused, rather, on the movement from one to the other. The same was true of places of residence. Dewei's wish to stay in Norway and Ni's possible studies in the US were the only times when specific countries of residence were mentioned. Here, too, what was presented as a valuable commodity was the movement *between* undefined hypothetical places. This is consistent with the emergent middle-class consumer culture in China, whereby international travel is among the prime vectors of identity construction (Elfick 2011). Thus, it may be that the reason for the lack of specificity is that the specifics themselves are unimportant. Rather than the freedom to do any given thing, the participants seek to become the kind of empowered people who have freedom of choice in a more general sense.

4.5.4 Parental Pressures

One of the dominant research trends on international students follows what is sometimes termed the deficit model (Montgomery 2010). The defining trait of this model is its focus around what is *lacking* in the students' life, such as money or social interaction (Bochner, McLeod and Lin 1977; Pritchard and Skinner 2002; Ward and Kennedy 1993; Yu and Moskal 2018). While it may be argued that this perspective has been overemphasised (Page and Chahboun 2019), it is not without basis. International students typically live under pressure from multiple sources, such as social isolation, uncertainty and having to adjust to an unfamiliar educational system. While this is also the case for the participants of the current study, the general hardships of the international student experience is outside the scope of this chapter. However, one particular source of pressure is very relevant and that is parental expectations. These generally take two forms related to bidirectional support within

the parent–child relationship.¹ That is to say, at the time of study, the parents were responsible for the children's economic welfare needs but social norms dictate that this state of affairs would 1 day be inverted.

During their studies, economic support was flowing primarily from the parents to the children, a fact that weighed on the minds of some of the students. We previously saw how one factor making Norway attractive was the lack of tuition fees. There are also public subsidies, grants and stipends, some of which would have been available to Chinese students at the time of this study. However, day-to-day life in Norway is expensive and even recipients of full student stipends live well below the poverty line. The majority of my participants were supported, either wholly or in part, by their parents; in many cases, this would have been a major expense. The GDP difference between China and Norway is large enough that a typical Chinese salary does not go far. Norway has an unusually high cost of living even for a European country, leading some parents to go to extreme lengths to finance the children's sojourns. Those parents with extensive networks of friends and family were in a position to borrow what they needed, spreading it out over a large number of people – a few hundred here, a few thousand there. Other parents had been central urban residents during the economic reforms and had been given the opportunity to buy their homes from the government at a relatively low rate. These people were now in a position to sell their homes at much higher market rate and move to cheaper accommodation. While these major sacrifices were the exception rather than the rule, several of the students explicitly noted that their sojourns were an economic hardship for their parents.

More common among the participants was stress stemming from the awareness that they were eventually expected to become caregivers themselves. In this way, the decision as to whether or not to return to China became modulated by the welfare needs of the parents. This responsibility would be wholly on the participants' shoulders, due to the lack of subsidised eldercare in China and the fact that all of the students interviewed were only children. In fact, when asked whether or not they intended to return, this was taken as such a natural state of affairs that many treated the question itself as ridiculous. 'Of course!' was the most common response, sometimes followed by a slightly condescending explanation of the one-child policy and its implications for parental care. This expectation certainly seemed to be taken seriously by the participants but it should not be taken for granted that all would end up going home to their parents. While most expressed an intention to return to China and none explicitly said that they intended not to, there were some who seemed unsure.

If the primary goal of the children is the attainment of freedom of choice for its intrinsic value, this is unlikely to be the priority of the parents. Being potentially financially dependent on their offspring and having invested financially in their education, they are more likely to focus on concrete and pragmatic concerns. They will want to know that their children will be in a sufficiently stable economic position to

¹For more information on the bidirectional exchange of care, as well as the older generation's perspective, see Chap. 2 in this volume by Zhao and Huang.

take care of them. While they were no doubt investing in their children's happiness, they were also investing in their own futures. One 25-year-old male student, Liao, remarks on the sometimes incompatible goals of the two generations.

I want to see the world. If I go back to China, I don't know when I'll be able to leave again, so I, like, want opportunities. My parents just ask how much money I will make and what my chances are of getting a job with such a degree.

Remembering the importance placed by the participants on mobility, we can infer from this that Liao is expressing a concern here with constructing a mobile identity. His parents, on the other hand, want to know the likelihood of his getting a job and how much this job is likely to pay. As with their offspring, agency is likely to play a role in the experiences of the parents as well. They are, as has been stated, dependent on their children and it is no doubt stressful to see the letter engaged in a costly pursuit that might or might not pay off. It is also no doubt a source of stress to them that their children are so far away. At the same time, some students have noted that their parents are wary of putting undue pressure on their offspring, as Zhelan (24, f) shows:

I call my parents as often as I can, but... many times it is difficult. They always ask me when I'm coming back to China, but without asking, you know? Like, maybe, they don't directly ask, because they know I have lot of work and they don't want to pressure me, but they'll maybe say, like, 'Someone we know is getting married at this time, and they wonder whether you will be coming. We couldn't say because we don't know when you're coming home', something like that.

From these statements, we see an implied dilemma for Zhelan's parents. They want to know when she will return but seem not to want to ask directly. Zhelan herself believes that they do not ask directly because they do not want to cause her stress and harm her academic progress. Instead, they find a way to inquire indirectly by referencing an event happening at some point in the future and saying that someone else – not them – wants to know whether Zhelan will be able to attend. However, we can see from the statement that she experiences this as a source of pressure. She further explains how draining this is, despite or perhaps because, she believes that her parents are less concerned about *when* she will come home but more about whether she will actually do so at all. Such nervousness appears to have some justification, as not everyone was equally sure about returning, as two female students, Chunlei, 27 and Lin, 24, explain:

I thought I would be returning to China immediately, maybe my parents need me. But now, I don't know, I like Norway. It's quite cold, but people are nice. It's very beautiful, with the mountains.

I don't know. I struggled over whether or not to go back. I'm worried my parents might need me. But even if I do go back, the experience from other countries would be valuable (...). Lots of good experience here. There are a lot of things Chinese people should learn.

Regardless of whether or not these two would eventually return, it is clear that the perceived obligation to the parents was palpable and that staying abroad would be felt as neglecting it. The obligation probably has multiple sources – such as the

children's love for their parents, the feeling that caregiving is socially expected of them and the tacit urge to reciprocate the care and resources the students have been given. However, honouring this obligation would be a severe interruption to the life trajectories the youth were imagining for themselves. Here we see again the clash between the younger generation's emphasis on freedom of choice and their elders' wish for freedom from material and economic hardship. While the members of both generations imagined that educational sojourns could provide welfare in the sense of freeing them from poverty, we see that the specific *type* of poverty they wish to escape from may be hard to reconcile. At first glance, remaining abroad and applying for family reunion may seem like a viable compromise. However, it must be remembered that the emphasis was on freedom of movement – on building a cosmopolitan self through the potential mobility between geographical and social spaces – and caring that for ageing parents would constrain this wherever it would eventually be carried out.

4.6 Conclusions

This chapter has explored the motives behind young Chinese people's migration to a welfare state and the inner conflicts that this migration reveals. In a sense, this conflict may be considered to be somewhere between dynamism and stability, as the students seek to utilise their sojourns to recreate themselves as people whose sense of self is bound to the potential to alter their situation, seemingly on a whim. However, they are bound by filial obligations to people who are more invested in the certainty that their material needs will be met. While the *bālíng hòu* in this study wished to travel to a welfare state and their parents largely supported this wish, the two cohorts had very different ideas as to what type of welfare was the most important. For the younger, it was the freedom of choice; for the older it was income security. Thus, while both the parents and the youth themselves wished for the sojourn to be a success, this was measured differently. Far from wishing their offspring to be globetrotting cosmopolites, the parents were far more likely to be concerned with practical considerations such as the likelihood of employment and projected earnings.

On the one hand, the *bālíng hòu* themselves seemed to engage in such stays abroad primarily as a project of self-development. For them, China is juxtaposed with the West in terms of the substantive freedom available to its residents. While China is presented as a place where their circumstances would determine their life courses, a European degree would allow the holders to affect these courses through their own agency. The end goal was not to achieve any given situation but, rather, a high level of global and social *mobility*. Any concrete destination point in the life trajectory seemed intentionally left open, so that the indefatigability itself becomes a value in its own right. This can be interpreted as a transcendence of regional belonging to a more pan-global disembeddedness.

This stands in contrast to the fact that they are tied to their sending communities by their parents. These latter are currently patrons financing the sojourns but they can at some point become dependants in need of support themselves. Indeed, it is possible that the fact that the *bālíng hòu* have obligations waiting for them in China may be part of the reason for the fluid trajectories. When they know that they will be required to return to their parents at some point and may need to care for them for many years, embedding themselves too deeply in a new community becomes more problematic. This would either mean uprooting themselves at a later date or abandoning their parents.

These differing motivations may have a number of causes, one of which is the different societies in which these two generations grew up. The *bālíng hòu* were raised in a rapidly modernising society with a powerfully expanding economy. Being only children, they never had to compete with siblings for their parents' attention; however, they also had no one to help them to shoulder the responsibility for them at a later life stage. The expectations they have for their own lives as well as those which the parents place on them are both extraordinary. One might say that they are raised with the life expectations of modern people in a modernising China. Substantive freedom in terms of economic and lifestyle agency is very important to them, as is the ability to construct identity through their own choices.

The parents, however, have seen and/or experienced privation on a scale that their children are unlikely to ever know. The oldest of them have lived through the years following the great leap forward, which saw the deadliest famine in recorded history, with a death toll in the tens of millions (Dikötter 2010; Roberts 2011). As people who have not learned to take material necessities for granted, they are more likely to be more pragmatic in such matters. In addition, the more agency their children have, the less control the parents have over them; equally, the more the children become invested in their lives abroad, the less likely they are to return.

This chapter has concerned thoughts, dreams, imaginations and desires. It has not been my goal to fact-check each of the assumptions made, nor to follow up on whether the students truly did return to their parents when and if the call came. Such questions might be the subject of a future study when the *bālíng hòu* participants have grown older and seen how their imaginations fit with the cold, hard reality. Such a future study might also shed more light on the outcome of the clash between the divergent substantive freedom sought by two groups who are intimately linked yet separated by a deep generational divide.

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