Wandering at a Crossroad: An Exploration of Gendered Mobility Aspirations in the Study-to-work Transition of Chinese Graduates at Dutch Universities

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Abstract:

The value of a gender lens in immigration study is increasingly highlighted nowadays, but gender analysis is infrequently applied to research on international student mobility. This study aims to unpack how gender impacts on mobility aspirations of Chinese international graduates in the Netherlands. Drawing on an online survey (n=96) and semi-structured in-depth interviews followed by the method 'story completion' with 25 international graduates and 3 Chinese parents of international students, this paper analyses gender intertwining with post-graduation mobility at individual, inter-relational and international level. The findings underline how gender identities shape the personal goals of mobility, how gender roles in a relationship and international settings confine or facilitate mobility desires and how these gender effects are intersected. This research also stresses how gender-role ideologies are diverse and dynamic in one's life course. Therefore, the study-to-work transition means not only a career start for Chinese international graduates. They attach more gendered meanings and responsibilities to post-education mobility, considering social roles they are engaging or will engage in. This research conduces to depicting unequal gender patterns in international students' after-study mobility trajectories.

<u>Introduction</u>

In recent years, a rocketing flow of students migrating from their motherlands for international education has been noticed. They expect to elevate their personal academic, economic and social conditions (Waters, 2008; Collins et al., 2014). With knowledge and skills accumulated from home and host countries, international students are usually perceived as valuable skilled workers in the increasingly globalised world. Many countries hence promote international education and allure international graduates with policy instruments for mitigating the pressures of the ageing problem and the 'brain drain' (Ziguras & Law, 2006). This trend recently brings forth the international students' after-graduation plans as an emerging field in the study of student mobility. The overseas study expands a world scale of job opportunities for international graduates, which enables a diversity of migration plans to either return to the home country, remain in the host country of their education, head to another country or aspire a transnational life (Shen & Herr, 2004; Gao, 2016). This mobility ties up with the beginning of a career and also a place to perform multiple identities in the life stage, such as a wife, a mother and a child (King & Raghuram, 2013). Performing these identities usually pronounces gender differentials which are argued to be advantageous to connect with the study of immigration and international student mobility (Schaer et al., 2017; Sondhi and King, 2017).

Previous studies on international students' study-to-work transition majorly land at the determinants driving the decision-making process. They usually provide an array of attracting elements, ranging from economic benefits to social networks and livability, that persuade international students to start their career in different countries (Costa & Kahn, 2000; Mosneaga & Winther, 2013; Shen & Herr, 2004). Far fewer studies understand the lived process that graduates negotiate various impacting elements and strategise their mobility aspirations and trajectories. Especially, the gender perspective is not popularly referred.

Drawing on Risman's 'three-level' framework of gender analysis (2004), this study addresses this lacuna with a case study of Chinese students in the Netherlands. This research also builds on Findlay and his colleagues' (2012) argument that the post-study status transition should be understood within the life course rather than as a separate period. In this study, the overseas education and periods of and after the transition are considered as a continuum and interactions between multiple social roles coming at different times of an international student are detected. Results are beneficial to comprehend and predict international students' career actions and mobility aspirations.   This research responds to three questions drawing on qualitative and quantitative data. First, what are the gender differences expressed by Chinese graduates in personal aspirations of upon-graduation mobility plans? Second, how do interrelations with other individuals (re)construct the gendered patterns of mobility decisions? Third, how do gendered settings in cross-national contexts influence their decisions? With these questions answered, the influence of gender could be traced from various dimensions and time-space variations in the decision process of mobility pathways.

The next section reviews previous literature on international students' status transition with a highlight of gender and introduces Chinese contexts underpinning this paper. A note follows it on the methods used in the study. In the result section of the paper, specific emphasis is placed on sketching

out how gender is implanted in mobility aspirations at the individual, inter-relational and international level. The article concludes with a summary and discussion of this research.

Literature Review: Gender in International Students

Since anthropologists, sociologists, geographers and scholars from other disciplines identified gender as a new frontier of immigration and mobility studies few decades ago, a growing body of research begins to centre gender distinctions in households, kinship, social networks, social identities and employment by applying multiple methods and generational focus (Mahler, 2006). A useful framework is proposed by Risman (2004) to analyse gender as a social system with three dimensions: individual level depicting the construction and socialisation of gendered selves; interactional level sketching daily interactions with and expectations from other individuals; and institutional level regulating gender ideologies and performances in society, economy and other systems. This framework helps disclose gender differences and inequality embedded in various relations with society.

Literature on international student mobility explores gender configuration around some main topics, despite gender sometimes is not the primary centre, including uneven flows of international students (e.g. Böttcher et al., 2016; Jöns; 2011); motivations to overseas education (e.g. King & Sondhi, 2016; Wu, 2014); lived experience and integration (e.g. Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Yu & Wang, 2011) and skills and participation in employment (e.g. Shinozaki, 2017; Cheng, 2018). However, in the sprouting direction of international students' post-study migration, gendered experiences are barely explored and focused (King & Raghuram, 2013). Findings of existing studies also situate in Risman's analytical framework, and some of them indicate the intersections of different levels.

At the individual level, some quantitative research examines how significant gender impacts on stay-or-leave aspirations after finishing a degree in foreign countries. These studies usually include gender as a demographic viable, yet statistic association of gender to mobility decisions is not always received. A survey on Thai students' mobility after education in China found marriage status and acculturation attitudes are most influential, but no impact from gender (Lin & Kingminghae, 2017). Findley and his team (2017) further zoom into the connection between gender and the stay-or-return decision in light of their data of international students in the UK. They argue the statistical significance between two elements are detectable before more dominant explanatory variables added, which implies gender might entwine other personal or contextual factors to influence students' mobility. Another track unpacks that gendered mobility aspirations at the individual level are interlaced with widely accepted gender roles in society at the institutional level. Moskal (2018) underlines men and women internalise social norms and attach gender meanings to the destination of early career and a new phase of life. In her case study on Chinese graduates in the UK, the male usually requires a high salary due to masculine responsibilities highlighted in Chinese society, such as being financially independent and affording a house. By contrast, women plan their mobility pathway more for promoting their social and marital status.

Among the research uncovering how gender, through interpersonal interactions, shapes graduates' mobility to return home or work abroad, imbalanced pictures of tied-movers in spouses are usually put forward. Lee and Kim (2010) research South Korean doctoral in the US and find women

always follow male partners' post-study decision with rare exceptions. A similar result is achieved by Geddie's (2013) research on international science and engineering graduates in Toronto and London. She shows women opt to compromise to their partner's career development and tolerate their own sacrifice of career prospects in the status transition. The negotiation of a couple is a process of accommodation, which usually drives them to large cities where the male can get a desirable job and the following female has ample job opportunities. However, it is not homogeneous over the globe that women are always led. Schaer and her colleagues (2017) explore life stories of three couples raised in the western world and study in the US, the UK and Switzerland. They classify three types of gendered management of couples' mobility upon graduation: dual-career mobility; male-primary mobility and female-primary mobility. Underpinning the three modes is the ideology that the one with less clear plan conforms to the person's career-driven mobility pathways regardless of gender. Besides, some recent studies analyse how mobility decision interplays with a simultaneous transition in life course from youthhood to adult life. This transition usually connects with starting a family. For example, Martin (2018) conducts an ethnographic project with Chinese women students in Australia, exploring time-space opportunities that overseas education brings for students to reconfigure their social role of youths and women. He proposed the concept of 'Zone of Suspension', referring that remaining in other countries after study somewhat delays or removes the burden of traditional gender ideologies embedded in becoming an adult such as wifely duties and motherhood. In his study, Chinese female international graduates strategise their pace to adulthood and create a space for personal development within the 'Zone of Suspension'. These studies affirm a graduate's mobility decision is more than individual aspirations, but also concerns of inter-relationship. Since these concerns often advocate contrasting life pathways, students would feel ambivalent about their choice in the transition. In the study of Sondhi and King (2017), an Indian female interviewee in Canada confesses that her hesitation is caused by the debate between parent care in the home country and her long-term career prospects which are favoured in Canada.

At the institutional scale, contextual settings and regulations are argued to modify students' mobility decision and experience. Some researchers illustrate the sense of freedom in a country's social atmosphere or students' imagination shapes remain-or-return arrangement. For instance, Hazen and Alberts (2006) descriptively analyse their survey of internationals in American universities, revealing over one in ten respondents, especially women, perceive that cultural practices at home restrict the self-development and refuse to return. Research in Norway also reports remaining in Norway removes arduous struggles with gendered social ideologies in their home country (Basford & Riemsdijk, 2017). Few articles detail the effects of contrastive contexts. In a study on the career decision of South Korean doctoral from American universities, staying abroad helps some informants unload undesirable duties of being a woman in Korea, like the necessity of makeup, and keeps attracting them with this freedom (Yoon & Kim, 2019). Arriving at similar findings, Sondhi and King (2017) reveal female returnees feel circumscribed with lack of freedom for women to walk alone and drink alcohol in India and thus search for future chances to be mobile. Besides, imbalanced gendered distributions of employment are also examined. Holloway's team (2012) touches the impact of labour markets in both countries with an investigation on Kazakhstan students in the UK. Because of the

gender-discrimination advantaging male's position in Kazakh employment and shortages of ability to secure a job in the UK, women show their preference to native multinational corporations.

This survey of literature exposes in what ways gender connects to students' mobility aspirations and practices following education. Nevertheless, only a small segment of studies reports a more overall analysis of gender impacts from individual, interactional and institutional aspects. For better accustoming this 'three-level' framework to student mobility study, this study modifies the categories of gender impacts to individual, inter-relational and international factors. Moreover, existing studies on diverse ethnic groups have proved impacts of gender on migration trajectories of international students vary with the cultural contexts of origin and education countries. These geographical and cultural variations highlight the essentiality to contextualise gender analysis in particular transnational cultural contexts. This research adds the case of Chinese students in the Netherlands, where the two countries hold considerable contrasts in cultural and social gender norms from history (Hamilton, 1990). Methodologically, most studies in this field produce insights with more in-depth ethnographic methods (Riaño & Piguet, 2016), while quantitative methods are also called for explaining links between international student mobility and gender. This research complements a quantitative survey explaining how gender leads to disparities in international graduates' mobility aspiration.

Transforming Gender Ideologies in China

For building a Chinese-concentrated insight on gender power intertwined with the status transition from study to work, this section introduces gender configurations in today China. Gender values raised by Confucianism, as the spiritual orientation throughout thousands of years, are still embedded in contemporary Chinese lifestyles, education and constitution despite some fluctuations and reforms. The traditional gender values in conjugal and broader social contexts were built on 'nan nü you bie' (A distinction should be made between males and females). This distinction concerns not only physical differences but also the social roles of men and women (Xu, 2017), connecting a male with nobleness while a female with lowliness (Leung, 2014). As a result, the typical picture of the labour division in a family is depicted by another proverb 'nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei' (man outside, women inside the family) which implied that women are responsible for domestic housework while men fight for the socioeconomic position (Hu & Scott, 2016). The improvement of female status was approved and encouraged in the pre-reform era of China in the 1970s. Significantly influenced by the Marxist idea of gender egalitarian, China's Communist Party propagandised 'gender sameness' and constructed a 'work-unit' (danwei) system which ties up individuals' work and life in social work-units providing employment, housing, education, etc (Ji, 2015). These actions enhanced the participation of female in the labour market and the slogan 'fu nü neng ding ban bian tian' (women hold up half the sky) was very prevalent (Ji et al., 2017).

However, since the marketisation in the post-reform era, masculine conventions has revived to some extent. Due to the privatisation of Chinese economic market, employers increasingly require women to perform as men at work, but burdens of domestic tasks are not unloaded from women shoulders (Ji, 2015). Many employers then perceive that women devote less to the job, and their

careers are more possibly interrupted by childbirth. Many vacancies are then only reserved for male candidates (CERN, 2011; Zhang & Zheng, 2019). The gender inequality in employment becomes severer in recent Chinese society (Cooke, 2005). From 1990 to 2010, the gender gap in employment rate increases from 11.4% to 15.1% (Attané, 2017). Cooke and Xiao (2014) also noticed this trend in higher executive positions in most industries. The inequality manifests In the asymmetrical social expectations for men and women as well. For instance, educated female growing express frustration with over-centring marriage in the mainstream female life course (Ji, 2015). Disrespectful expressions like 'the third gender people' and 'leftover women' imposed on female PhD underline discrimination against highly educated women (Fincher, 2014)

Owing to the increasing globalisation and penetration of western culture in Chinese society, the voice of gender equality starts trying to remove the gendered deprivation on the female with generational and geographical disparities. Some scholars indicate a generational change on gender roles; young women tend to behave more gender-egalitarian and relieve some social gender conventions, whereas this evolution is less noticeable from Chinese young men (Pimental, 2006; Ji & Chen, 2015; Ji et al., 2017). Martin (2018) notices this evolution is more pronounced in large cities, but practising the more equal gender notion is still under some external pressures. Therefore, Chinese gender equality nowadays is a complex notion, given the large scale of region and labour force, entrenched gender notions and continuous transformations (Chen et al., 2013). Gender prejudice in Chinese lifestyles is supposed to be researched across time, spaces and ethnography. This research adds an understanding of young Chinese graduates sojourning in the Netherlands to see how they perceive, negotiate and behave Chinese gender roles through their mobility strategies.

Research Context: the development of Chinese student mobility to the Netherlands

China is the largest sending country in the global flow of international students. The number of outbound Chinese students has excelled 560,000, which is twice more students ahead of the second place, India (Börjesson, 2017). Reported by Chinese Ministry of Education (2018), most outbound students favour the developed world, including the US and Western Europe to pursue advanced education. The Netherlands, with no surprise, experiences a growing inflow of international students from China these years. In 2018, approximately 4,500 Chinese students decide to study in the Netherlands. The number ranks third place, following Germany (22,500) and Italy (4,800) (Nuffic, 2018). Chinese students are attracted to the quality and cost-effective education in Dutch universities and the egalitarian social atmosphere (Hong et al., 2017). However, recent demographic statistics of the gender of Chinese students in the Netherlands are not well reported, which indicates gender is rather under-researched in current investigations.

Possible work opportunity in the Netherlands opened up by the 'search year' policy (*zoekjaar hoogopgeleiden*) is another attractiveness for Chinese students (Hong et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2019). This policy was implemented from December 2007 and allow non-EEA graduates from Dutch universities to work in the Netherlands and search for long-term employment (Wagenaar, 2013). According to a survey in 2016, at least 30 per cent of Chinese graduates activated their one-year

residence permit (Hong et al., 2017). The 'search year' policy, while providing more possible post-study plans, also complicates Chinese students' career and mobility aspirations.

Methodologies

The research questions are answered with mixed methods composing of an online survey, semi-structured interviews and story completion from March 2018 to January 2019. The quantitative method is beneficial to get an overview of the background information of Chinese students in the Netherlands and after-graduate planning process, while the qualitative methods function as an in-depth discovery of negotiations during the process.

The online questionnaire investigates respondents' basic demographics and the importance of various factors in the formation of mobility aspirations. The investigated factors are gathered from previous research on underlying factors driving after-graduation mobilities of Chinese international students all around the world. This survey is spread via student associations, social media groups on Wechat, personal social network and snowballing and finally receives 96 responses. Table 1 displays the demographics of respondents. These respondents include Chinese graduates from Dutch universities and currently enrolled students in Dutch universities. The reason for involving students is that Chinese students usually start planning their after-graduate trajectories and

Table 1 Demographics of survey respondents (n=96)

Gender	Male	38	39.60%
	Female	58	60.40%
Age	18-25	54	56.30%
	26-32	41	42.70%
	33-40	1	1.04%

striving for them ahead of graduation, under the pressure of visa issues and limited residence permit. In this report, I descriptively analyse the survey data with SPSS 24.0 and identify how the picture of mobility aspirations is gendered.

In-depth interviews only target graduates who are looking for a job or already work to probe their lived strategy and negotiations in developing and shifting career and mobility aspirations. Some of them secure a job after their first interview and attend a second interview as employees. Twenty-five graduates from an either Bachelor, Master or unpaid PhD[1] programme in the Netherlands participate in interviews. Interviewed students aspire or start their life in a great variety of countries, including the Netherlands, China, Germany, Norway, the US and Japan. With the primary focus of graduates' perceptions and experiences, this

Table 2 Demographics of interview participants (n=28)

Graduates n=25	Gender	Male	10	40.00%
		Female	15	60.00%
	Age	18-25	10	40.00%
		26-32	14	56.00%
		33-40	1	4.00%
	(Planned) Destination of status transition	The Netherlands	14	56.00%
		China	7	28.00%
		Germany	1	4.00%
		Norway	1	4.00%
		The US	1	4.00%
		Japan	1	4.00%
Parents n=3	Gender	Male	1	33.33%
		Female	2	66.66%
	Age	48-55	2	66.66%
		56-63	1	33.33%
	Children's Destination	The Netherlands	2	66.66%
		China	1	33.33%

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[1] Unpaid PhD refers to PhD students who do not receive salary from Dutch universities but are funded by other institutions, mostly Chinese Scholarship Council in this case study. The reason for recruiting unpaid PhD in this research is that they are more likely identify themselves as students rather than employees due to the source of income.

research also invited three parents of international students to complement insights on their interplay with children's mobility aspirations. Table 2 shows more demographics of interview participants. Most of the informants are recruited from the survey while the rest is from my social network and snowballing.

The story completion is conducted along with the interviews, asking participants to make a return-or-stay decision for the characters in 3 hypothetical scenarios. These scenarios are made up based on real stories from my observation and first-round interviews in March 2018, foregrounding gendered considerations intertwined with other personal and contextual factors and contradictions in the decision-making process. This innovative approach is borrowed from the psychology researchers who managed to approach the unconscious or hidden feelings (Braun et al., 2017). In practice, this method added depth to conversations. Most informants felt more comfortable to comment on others' stories and related them with more broader contexts. When I jumped back to questions about their personal experience after the story completion, they were more willing to share how these contextual aspects influence themselves. Therefore, albeit quotes used in this paper rarely discuss the hypothetical stories, some interesting quotes are inspired by this method.

The qualitative data collection is conducted via Wechat or phone call and last from 40 minutes and 120 minutes. Interviewing with online and telecommuting approaches provides researchers and informants with more temporal flexibility and availability (Beech, 2018) and overcomes obstacles of physical distance. Interviews are in Mandarin Chinese because sharing one's life stories in native language would yield more in-depth information (Jon et al., 2014). I fully audio record interviews, transcribe and simultaneously translate into English with some colloquial Chinese words and proverbs retained and assign each participant a fictitious name. The qualitative data is analysed partially with NVIVO 11, but primarily in a traditional way of deliberately selecting narratives from interview data to illustrate relevant topics.

Results

Individual factors: Gendered Expectations and Personalities

Individual factors refer to the construction of gender selves and subjectivities which drives students to their mobility trajectories. This research achieves an overview of how gender differentiates Chinese students' concerns in career and mobility aspirations, with the favour of a ranking task in the survey. This task requires respondents to rank-order a list of 12 influence factors. They are surveyed from previous studies on migratory and career strategies of Chinese graduates around the world (e.g. Liu & Shen, 2014; Mosneaga & Winther, 2013; Bodycott and Lai, 2012; Szelényi, 2006; Ley & Kobayashi, 2005). Only the respondents who have at least initial ideas about upon-graduation plans participate this ranking task. When completing the ranking task, the students are encouraged to contrast values and the relative importance of factors with additional cognitive effort and deliberation than a rating task (McCarty & Shrum, 2000). They number from the most to the least important option in their decision making from one to twelve correspondingly. In this section, the survey complementing with interview narratives express how selves are differently built by men and women, and influence mobility.

Table 3 Importance of various factors in male's and female's mobility aspirations

Gender		Income	Promotion Chance	Workload	Life Comfort	Cultural Integration	Social Recognition	Natural Environment	Parents' Expectation	Social Network	Familial Duty	Political Environment	Preferential Policy
Female	Mean	2.40	2.73	4.68	3.83	5.65	6.43	7.05	8.60	7.50	8.43	9.68	11.05
	Std. Deviation	1.795	1.894	2.269	1.973	2.271	2.561	2.342	2.216	2.552	2.374	2.759	2.087
Male	Mean	2.65	2.00	5.39	4.39	5.43	6.96	7.91	8.35	6.70	9.17	9.04	10.00
	Std. Deviation	2.014	1.567	2.904	1.373	1.950	1.846	2.065	2.036	3.698	2.329	3.457	3.045
Total	Mean	2.49	2.46	4.94	4.03	5.57	6.62	7.37	8.51	7.21	8.70	9.44	10.67
	Std. Deviation	1.865	1.803	2.520	1.787	2.146	2.324	2.267	2.139	3.017	2.367	3.020	2.508

Table 3 compares Chinese graduates' perspectives and aspirations pertaining to work-to-study transition across genders. According to the mean of ranking, a relatively similar big picture which prioritises career-related factors (Income, Promotion chance) and takes the least notice to political effects (Preferential policy) is followed by most respondents regardless of gender. Yet it is still visible that Chinese male and female students hold different gendered selves while making mobility plans. Male students rank averagely higher than female counterparts on career prospects (male:2.00; female:2.73) and special national preferential policies (male:10.00; female:11.05) which usually attracts skilled graduates with economic incentives (Harvey, 2015). By contrast, female graduates assess this mobility decision more than the quality of career, but also the conditions of future residence. They attach more importance to life-work balance (male: 5.39; female: 4.68), living comfort (male: 4.39; female: 3.83), family duties (male: 9.17; female: 8.43) and natural environment (male: 7.91; female: 7.05). Wei (26, female, International Business Management) detailed how these gendered visions interacted with her mobility decision:

> Men may be more interested in promising jobs with a lot of chances of promotion. For women, I think the stability of a job is important, is crucial. And this is why I chose to work here [in the Netherlands]. Redundancies sometimes happen here, of course. But I can also find another job with my work experience without so many difficulties. In China, keeping a stable job is not easy. Unless you are competent for many positions in a company, you are always replaceable.

Her comments highlight the definition of 'an ideal job' has its gender meanings. Confirmed by the survey as well, in most Chinese international female graduates' conception, the role of the female has been evolving from being a full-time housewife to recognising the necessity of jobs but with more enthusiasm than men for life quality and family expectations. As such, women tend to be more drawn to stable jobs that help to reconcile demands from work and life, while men are more risk-taking in career plans. The pattern is somewhat in consistent with the Chinese popular ideology of 'men outside and women inside'. Though international students encounter opportunities and challenges in a more international context, their mindset and behaviour still carry a piece of Chinese cultural identities. It reminds that people's internalisation of culture influences the construction and practice of gender selves.

While the gender selves trigger different expectations of mobility, differences in institutional contexts then usually help to pick the destination more meeting their expectations to start the next life stage. The capabilities of multiple locations and labour markets to satisfy students' aspirations are discrepant and thus are decisive to the mobility decisions of skilled Chinese graduates with international insights and more possibilities of working overseas. For instance, Wei compares the conditions of being steadily employed in China and the Netherlands, which directs her decision to remain. Also echoed in comments from Ren (27, female, New Media, working in the Netherlands), she obtains more job security in the Dutch labour market where a lifetime contract is commonly offered to employees meeting certain requirements. By contrast, in the Chinese labour market, the neo-liberalisation has been ongoing and increasing the competition (Kipnis, 2007). The permanent contract is usually regarded as a 'lifetime burden' by the Chinese labour market and less likely to award than in the Netherlands (Lu & Song, 2006; de Lange et al., 2014).

Table 4 Comparison of aspirations across gender and return-or-stay

Mean

Gender		Income	Promotion Chance	Workload	Life Comfort	Cultural Integration	Social Recognition	Natural Environment	Parents' Expectation	Social Network	Familial Duty	Political Environment	Preferential Policy
Female	Return	2.00	2.33	4.87	4.20	5.60	5.93	7.40	8.60	7.53	8.27	10.33	10.93
	Stay	3.00	3.11	4.63	3.53	5.47	6.58	6.58	8.37	7.63	8.42	9.42	11.26
	Total	2.56	2.76	4.74	3.82	5.53	6.29	6.94	8.47	7.59	8.35	9.82	11.12
Male	Return	3.00	1.88	5.00	4.63	6.00	6.13	8.50	7.13	5.88	10.00	9.00	10.88
	Stay	2.27	1.73	4.73	4.36	5.18	7.18	8.45	9.00	7.36	8.36	8.73	10.64
	Total	2.58	1.79	4.84	4.47	5.53	6.74	8.47	8.21	6.74	9.05	8.84	10.74
Total	Return	2.35	2.17	4.91	4.35	5.74	6.00	7.78	8.09	6.96	8.87	9.87	10.91
	Stay	2.73	2.60	4.67	3.83	5.37	6.80	7.27	8.60	7.53	8.40	9.17	11.03
	Total	2.57	2.42	4.77	4.06	5.53	6.45	7.49	8.38	7.28	8.60	9.47	10.98

Table 4 unfolds gender disparities across return and remain groups, in order to detail the gender selves' impacts on the formation of gendered mobility aspirations. The social network is an example of jointly affecting students' choices with gendered expectations of work. The row of 'social network' in Table 4 illustrates that only Chinese male returnees highlight the role of social networks in their mobility aspirations, while it gets lower positions on the other three groups' lists. This brings forefront *'guanxi'* (social connections benefiting to task completion) which is importantly needed as professional skills in Chinese working culture. Being portrayed with an enterprising spirit in advancing his career, a male returnee, as a result, gives further considerations on networking than a remaining graduate whose workplace does not attach much importance to social contacts and a female with less obsession to career success. Tang (28, female, Electrical Engineering) provides an observation of her male classmates' mobility trajectories after finishing their degrees.

I find my male friends more possible to be called back home by parents actually. Some of them return because of the family business at home and some because they think they will return sooner or later, it makes more sense to start networking now in China and guarantee a successful career in the future.

For some Chinese students, international education has already led to a concern for the loss of guanxi because of being geographically absent from China (Tharenou, 2015; Hao & Welch, 2012). Tang's male friends who project to return in the present or future eventually have to prudently estimate whether continuing overseas life is worth the sacrifice of opportunities to network for long-effect career achievement in China. This phenomenon also suggests that the return-or-not decision is not only for desires at the moment, but sometimes is for long-term concern. In this case, the work culture in the homeland catalyses their return to catch up on domestic contacts and maximise profits of skills accumulated abroad.

These coupled features indicate that differences in the construction of gender selves usually exert influences through institutional contexts. Sometimes the institutional contexts require the same from both genders. For instance, employees in China generally experience less stability of jobs and the importance of the social network to career development. However, differences in gender selves differentiate how men and women view the opportunities, interference and restrictions of those contexts and then drive Chinese students to different destinations.

Inter-relational Factors: Relationship, Marriage and Childbirth

International students with a background of communal cultures usually face challenges in making individualised decisions (Reynolds & Constantine, 2007). Chinese students, as a typical example, show great concerns about important others in their own mobility choices. This study finds that gender identities mainly exert inter-relational impacts around intimate relationships, marriage and childbirth.

Intimate relationships are widely noticed to trigger a co-determination of the couples' upon-graduation paths (Mosneaga & Winther, 2013). This impact mirrors the 'linked lives' feature of family immigration. Couples negotiate the disagreement on moving aspirations and project moving at a household level (Bailey, 2009; Coulter et al., 2012). Much literature which examines 'linked lives' in academics' life course from a gender perspective indicates that affective ties limit the mobility and career progression of female academics with barely any impact on male academics (Ackers, 2004; Moguérou, 2004). However, in some recent studies on early-career academics, gender relations are argued to be dynamic and (re)arrange the mobility path into various scenarios in which both sexes could follow partners (Schaer et al., 2017).

In my research, females in heterosexual relationships are always tied movers when facing a dispute over the ideal destination in all informants' mobile stories and some of their life plans. Qiu (26, female, International Business and Management Studies) expresses her imagination of where she moves after marriage.

> Qiu: My long-term plan is undecided. If I am married, we will live together. If he is Dutch, then we will be in the Netherlands. If he is Chinese, we have to see where he works.
> Hao: Have you ever thought to influence him with your career ambitions when there is a disagreement?
> Qiu: I didn't think about it. This rarely happens in reality.

Qiu's thorough after-marriage plan shows how her mobility path is dependent on her future husband whatever his nationality is, although that Qiu proposes a career goal of taking 'a moderate-paced job in a transnational company'. Her high dependence is a consequence of internalising gender manners in her daily observation, which reflexes that a male-dominated decision-making mode in couples is endorsed in her social surroundings. Ji (2015) noticed a similar ideology from educated and career-advanced women in Shanghai. With only few accept to become a housewife, the majority approves to support (future) husbands' career achievement at the expense of theirs in order to reach family harmony and fulfil expectations of a typical Chinese wife. Some informants in relationships also share similar practices in their mobile plans. Ma (male, 24, Electrical Engineering), who has got a one-year contract with a Dutch company, presents a hypothetical mobility plan for his girlfriend and himself. His girlfriend is also a fresh graduate from a Dutch university. She desires a PhD position but fails to find any sound vacancies for now. Since she meets difficulties in securing a job in the Netherlands, she intends to return and keep looking for a PhD while working.

> In our traditional Chinese view, parents believe that women are supposed to get married around 27 years old. Maybe 26, 28.
> (......)
> I do not plan to immigrate, so my plan is to return home after a maximum of two or three years, mainly depending on whether I like my job here. My girlfriend and I are both twenty-four years old and will become 27 or 28 three or four years later. If I like this job, I should get support in these years. If she can successfully get a PhD in Holland in these two years, we will just return home at the age of 27 or 28. And then, our life should be stable, and we should consider the next stage of life.

His mobility project radiates the influence of perceived most appropriate marriage age in Chinese conservative perspectives. Marriage is a crucial juncture in the life course, separating life spans of being mobile and settled to some Chinese international students. Ma's determination to return at 'the best marriage age' extends the phase of upon-graduation mobility. Contrast to the stay-or-return decision is often described as a one-off movement, his case proves the definite 'return' intention for a later life stage creates an in-between span. In this period, the couple exploits the benefits from staying overseas to professional growth and meanwhile pave the way for the settlement in China. Ma's narrative indicates a patriarchal control running in this stretched-out period. Being implanted his decline to return, his girlfriend locates her ambition geographically and temporally centring Ma's plan in the family mobility trajectory. When I pose some hypothesis going against his imagined scenario, Ma's subtexts express how the girlfriend's opportunities are limited.

> Hao: Is it feasible that your girlfriend finds a PhD elsewhere, like in the US?
> Ma: No. She has to be in the Netherlands.
> Hao: What if you feel frustrated with the work here?
> Ma: Then I would return and then we just can stay together in China.

The girlfriend's pursuit of overseas PhD is geographically confined by Ma's workplace and is assumed to switch and terminate along with Ma's work situation. This case shows how gender impacts at different levels work together in shaping young Chinese's mobility aspirations across time and space. Chinese male graduates are always primary movers also ascribes to the uneven distribution of economic capital in the global labour market, along with the inferior power of a woman in a relationship. Ma's mobility path is career-driven as he desires while his girlfriend struggles in the Dutch labour market and PhD entrance competitions, thereby having no alternative but to return home and submit to Ma's arrangement. This reflects the one with an uncertain future is bound his mobility to the partner with a specified destination in a relationship (Schaer et al., 2017). But being disadvantaged in employment and career development as immigrant women in the Netherlands (Hartog & Salverda, 2018) and women in China (Liu & Peng, 2017), female graduates often lose their bargaining chips to negotiate partners' mobility.

And as young couples are entering adulthood and marriage, they tend to sacrifice some personal goals and desires for opportunities to live together and prepare for married life. The sacrifice is made not only by women but also by men, as women's voice is growing valued in the linked lives of young Chinese couples. Interviewed couples usually open a discussion and negotiation on career developments, marriage plan, childbirth and parent care. Albeit the outcomes are overall attached to expectations of men, women's life expectations and career advancement start to receive more respects and limit partners' mobility. For instance, Ma assumes that if his girlfriend stays in China in these years, he will start a job in or around the city where she works. Another graduate Lin (29, male, Marine Sciences) who moves to Germany with his unemployed wife and child confides he has given up all promising job opportunities in remote locations, considering the life standard of his family.

Except for Chinese graduates in a relationship, singletons' mobility is also affected by the invisible hands of marriage. As Ma highlights, the late twenties of Chinese, particularly female, are turning points to undertake crucial life events - marriage and childbearing - in Chinese public ideology (Martin, 2018). Among young generations, attitudes towards this marriage routine are getting more heterogeneous varying from home cities and education during social and economic transformations in China. Young women from large cities and/or with higher education are reported to prefer late marriage and childbirth (Cai and Wang, 2014). But also some surveys show that increasing young women advocate life success is produced by a good marriage over a career, and thus they value marrying at an early age as essential as marrying with preferable husbands (Attané, 2012; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Wu (26, female, Urban and Economic Geography, working in the Netherlands) illustrates her observations of Chinese international students' average stance on the issue of marriage age.

> I feel that women who study abroad are generally not so anxious about their marriage. (…) Most of the girls I know came here for much desire to better themselves, that is, in the academic field and to advance their careers forward. So other aspects of life are second to none for them. But Chinese parents usually put too much pressure on their marriage. So many of them, including me, tend to stay and convince parents we can advance career and marriage at the same time.

Wu's remark, in line with most informants, reveals the majority of Chinese female international students start detaching from stereotyped female life paths. She also touches on how female use the geographical distance, as a bounty of staying abroad, to buffer pressures to tie the knot from parents and peers. Echoing the 'zone of suspension' concept proposed by Martin (2018), continuing overseas life can somehow relieve intergenerational tensions on marriage and create a space for graduates to advance career and encourage romantic relationships taking place in a natural pace and process.

Building on this concept, an interview with a mother Wang (female, 51, High School Teacher), whose daughter is about to graduate from a Master programme and has a preference to stay in the EU, details how the geographical distance dilutes her authority.

> *Her father and I are worried about her marriage. But now she is abroad; we can't reach out to her world. Children studying in China may be more relaxed, have more networks and easy to find their partners. And as parents, it is more convenient to arrange some blind dates or something else. At least many relatives and we can hustle her to find a boyfriend, and I can help her check the man. But now, although she said she could look for a job while looking for someone, I don't think she's working hard to find someone.*

The mother admits that 'my professional knowledge is not capable of advising her daughter on her career, but advising her on marriage and childbirth is necessary to fulfil the obligations as a mother'. However, living apart diminishes her power to guide the daughter with standardised gender expectations by means of her social networks and social events such as matchmaking corners in parks. What she could do is only less effective oral preaching and pressuring. That is the reason that Chinese international students feel more unfettered by catching the marriage age staying abroad than being physically close to parents. Beyond that, graduates could also negotiate the marriage-relevant timings and obligations with parents and society while delaying marriage. Sometimes, they take remaining abroad as a shortcut to escape the head-on clash with external pressures and disadvantages they think unacceptable caused by Chinese marriage. Contrast to most studies explaining Chinese female students are disadvantageous in the traditional gender configuration; nowadays, Chen (26, male, Climate Physics) declares suffering from unequal deprivations in marriage. He is resentful to the unspoken social contract in Chinese marriage that men should prepare an increasingly unaffordable house and try to bypass that by staying in the Netherlands.

> *In China, men usually get more expectations which are far beyond our abilities and what jobs give to us. So at last, it becomes a burden of my parents. They have to afford an expensive house. An equal society should treat everyone equally. And marriage should be based on love instead of a deal. Sometimes, I reckon some parents in China are selling their daughter instead of letting her happy.*

He criticises this current social norm for betraying the essence of marriage and pressuring his parents. As such, he attaches more values to the settings of Dutch society which are less demanding on

marriage, in his knowledge. In his plan, he does get himself out of this arduous situation by staying abroad without necessarily delaying marriage or scuffling with China's public marriage culture.

<u>International Factors: Contrasts of gender ideologies and practices in China and the Netherlands</u>

Students' attitudes are, in fact, always in a transformation because of exposure to foreign settings. The overseas education motivates students to experience western social rules and thoughts, and then compare them to Chinese social and institutional norms. These dissimilarities in national contexts, including contrasts of gender expectations and prejudices, inspire a continuous adjustment of the study-to-work transition.

Jin (30, female, Urban Geography) will accomplish her transition in Norway after obtaining a PhD degree. Her interview finished in her period of hesitation before the finish of PhD. She elaborates how gender notions in Chinese and Dutch society deviate her from her initial goal.

> *Though I can fulfil my initial goal of being a lecturer at a Chinese university and everything of that position is satisfactory, I began to feel very hard to say goodbye to the Netherlands. Maybe I will reconsider my choice or come back later. Because 'female PhD' is used as a discriminatory word [in China] referring to a third kind of person other than man and women. Even if this discourse is positively shifting, others still regard my marriage and childbirth as problems since a normal Chinese woman should have done these at my age. I feel so confined. But in this society, the age is not problematic at all, and I can do whatever I want without caring anybody else. So, I'm confused now.*

Her narrative conveys how her awareness of female consciousness awakens and expands during study and residence in the Netherlands and finally becomes an essential factor in her decision. As Jin pointed, 'women PhD' is insultingly perceived as a new category of gender in China as they commonly miss the 'prime marriage age' for accomplishing education and become less preferable to men. As well, their high skills and knowledge often become burdensome to men's superiority in family and society. This disparaging expression circulates over media and becomes implanted in the public mindset in this decade, thus reinforces the discrimination against women PhD and marriage postponement (Gaetano, 2014). Therefore, Jin realises return with high skills is not a once and for all action to win independence and social respect as her initial imagination. Instead, she might get problematised and labelled with unexpected stereotypes after the return. Meanwhile, she enjoys and internalises how female identities are appreciated in the western society through the voice of 'regularly held feminism demonstrations' and 'women in trousers' which are treated as 'abnormal behaviour in her hometown'. This large gap arouses her to balance the benefits of initial dream jobs in her pocket and uncertainties of starting over in unfamiliar foreign markets with her desirable gender configurations. Her confusion implies the mobility intertwines with diverse and sometimes unexpected aspects of life and geographical and temporal circumstances. In such a situation, graduates feel challenging to always manage a rational comparison and decision, thereby 'wandering' back and forth in the crossroad.

14

Another widely mentioned influential element varying in contexts is gender discrimination against females in labour markets. As mentioned earlier, the masculine convention is renovated after the long progress of introducing gender egalitarian in the Chinese labour market (Wu, 2009). When responding to a scenario of story completion in which the character is a 30-year-old unmarried female PhD graduate with an ambition to career development, most informants do not recommend her to return to China, drawing on the experience of theirs and friends in the similar condition. Xu (Male, 26, Business Administration) is one of them and explains his suggestions from an employer's perspective.

> *Sex discrimination exists in the Chinese domestic workplace. Basically, if a single woman is over 30 years old, she will be discriminated, just as I look for a job here without EU citizenship. I had a colleague, an HR in China, told me that unless your resume is exceptionally excellent, one in this situation will be eliminated directly.*

His information manifests the prejudice against female singletons in the Chinese labour market deprives women's competitiveness and thus pushing international graduates to other options. Arriving at the same advice, a female participant Lin (28, female. Transcultural Communication) holds two-year work experience in China confesses that employers often require extra skills and demands from women than men, considering potential less devotion to career, marriage and following maternity leave. Sometimes marital and childbearing status becomes barriers for female graduates to be hired in China. Some female informants were inquired privacy questions concerning marriage and childbirth plan in job interviews. Also, a study finds that young female candidates are even enforced to take a pregnancy test and put in writing that she will not get married and pregnant in certain years (Liu & Peng, 2017). Interestingly, Lin understands employers' wariness of unmarried females. She witnessed that some colleagues were going for maternity leave soon after being employed and would never return. In this period, her company had to provide leaving women with high-income support entirely and to find a replacement worker taking over her jobs. Nevertheless, in the Netherlands, the government relieves that economic pressure of companies and more part-time jobs are there suitable for a woman taking career ambitions and family responsibilities (Plantenga & Remery, 2009). Therefore, career participation and higher positions are more reachable to females in the Netherlands than in China. Then these contrasts make working abroad an approach to reduce anticipated weaknesses in a recruiting process and re-edit the socialised life course routine for most Chinese female graduates. Because employers in China positively shift their attitude somehow and appreciate the quality of reliability in mothers (Cooke & Xiao, 2014). Some young female graduates show more preference to stay abroad where this discrimination is less visible for several years at least. Following this period, they can choose to either continue life and career expectations in perceived less gender-unequal environments or return as advantageous mothers if they marry and have babies abroad. This strategy again proves the study-to-work transition is not always a one-off movement. It could be a process of taking advantages from temporary mobility plans until the controls in the desired destination are lessened or removed.

The acceptance of homosexuality in society is also primarily shared during interviews. Li (27, female, Business Administration) points out her lesbian identity is a significant reason for remaining abroad.

> *The most important factor for staying in NL is that I am a sexual minority, which accounts for 60%-70%. After returning home [in China], I would not dare to hold hands in the street. My friends also advised me not to come back. The environments of society and the workplace still regard me as a 'strange' person. I feel that China's social environment will be very intolerant. I do not know when the policy targeting me will come out and do not know when the knife will cut on my head.*

Her narrative demonstrates the inclusion of homosexuality in Dutch society catalysed the job-seeking in the Netherlands. Homophobia is prevailing in the contemporary Chinese society due to cultural and political reasons (Hildebrandt, 2011). Some movements protecting sexual minorities against discrimination are hampered by political discourse and censorship, thereby gaining little progress (Shaw and Zhang, 2018). As such, the sense of security to declare as a sexual minority is highly reduced (Xu et al., 2017). Coming to a country with more acceptance of sexual diversity, Li realises these contextual differences in minority rights could lead the mobility choice to divergent life trajectories. Li states once she returns, she predicts herself to conceal her homosexual identity and marry a man to disguise as a 'graceful wife'. The contradictory life strategies across nations denote that what study mobility offers are not only knowledge and career competencies, but also a potential opportunity to practice sexual orientation in another social context. The cases of Jin and Li also underline the difficulties of practising gender identities outside of the social 'norm' such as being too old to become a good wife or mother and being non-heterosexual. Moving to another context where their identities are accepted or appreciated becomes a softer approach to dealing with external pressures, compared to combating against the norms or reluctantly changing themselves.

Conclusion

This research examines how Chinese international graduates deal with the bounty of international education in the Netherlands - diverse mobility pathways after graduation - through a gender lens. Framed with reference to Risman's gender structure, this study decodes how gender associates with post-graduation decision from individual aspirations, inter-relational expectations and international contexts. Data at the individual scale express nuanced gender differences in intentions of the status transition, which is male students are averagely more career-oriented and females spotlight more on life standard and collective interest (e.g. family duties). With the gendered motivations as the first step, various mobility paths are initiated by general contexts across geographies even with no gender-specific variations (e.g. labour norms, contract types, natural environment). At the inter-relational level, the concept of 'tied lives' is tested on Chinese graduated couples in the Netherlands. By a unanimous scenario, women are always adherence to male partners' mobile trajectories with few but increasing floor given. For single graduates, unwanted stresses of marriage and childbirth from parents and

peers are sometimes strategically buffered by remaining abroad. This study also illustrates how international differences in gendered ideologies and regulations in China and the Netherlands sway graduates' mobility decisions. It's noticeable that gender impacts at three levels usually interact with each other in the formation of students' plans. For example, messages in international contexts could shape gendered selves; in turn, selves determine from which angles students read and acquire from the contexts.

Another centre of this study is the life course which endows changing characters to men and women over time. Education is a phase of experiencing gendered life within transnational contexts through everyday practices for students. However, several years of education is usually not long enough to get well cognizant of gender in diverse social spheres of an unfamiliar country. In the upon-education transition, they hence evaluate optional locations with both realistic and imaginative evidence, while some of them would find discrepancies in the next life stage. On the other hand, students have to take multiple identities, not only a man or woman, a workplace freshman, but also such as a child, a homosexual, a husband. In the case of Chinese students, the study-to-work transition temporally overlaps the transition from youthhood to adulthood in which significant events such as marriage and childbirth are supposed to happen, according to Chinese social norms. My analysis shows some graduates take the advantages of remaining abroad to postpone or reconfigure gendered duties regarding these events to reach a preferable position in career development and marital status. These clues suggest the upon-graduation mobility paths do not only focus on instant profits but also a deliberation of designing social roles in the near and future.

Moreover, this research unravels how gender-role ideologies tangle with other social and economic domains, such as family, homosexuality and labour markets in this paper. Researchers have to be mindful of the dynamic nature of gender inlaying in these scopes. Gender changes its meanings across one's life phase. Expectations, duties and controls of gender are various and usually become more complicated while people are ageing and creating more interactions with individuals and institutions. The concerns shift from personal career aspiration to balancing career and family, from individualised choice to making a choice for (future) family, for instance. Gendered expectations and controls in society are also changing. Even in this research period, public policies targeting feminism in employment and discourses to LGBT acceptance witness some adjustments which might also somehow alter soon-to-graduate students' aspirations of mobility. Leung (2014) argues 'gender respects no boundaries'. What domains graduates accentuate and how gender exerts effects in these domains are changeable across time and space. For instance, some male interviewees begin feeling unfairly treated in Chinese social norms as well, which opposites the enduring perception of men always dominating. Elucidating these questions is conducive to understandings of contemporary gender bias and inequality at an international scale.

I would like point out two promising directions for future studies in the end. The first is how disciplines intertwine with gender in shaping mobility aspirations. Disciplines, as one of the most direct factors connecting to job opportunities, also shape gender selves (e.g. being a woman in a male-dominated major) and needs for work-life balance (e.g. jobs in certain industries take too much energy and challenge mothers' life-work balance). This research tries to explore it through the survey, but, unfortunately, the samples of some disciplines are too small to be representative. Another

direction is how the imagination of geographies influences the aspirations and real experience of chosen mobility. In the interviews, I notice informants usually provide more details about China than the Netherlands and other countries. This indicates that students are not always well-informed while making a decision. Then it will be interesting to see how these imaginations are created and whether they find inconsistency with imaginations after and aspire to move again.

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