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Youth, Mobility, and the Emotional Burdens of *youxue* (Travel and Study): A Case Study of Chinese Students in Italy

Shanshan Lan* 

ABSTRACT

Based on fieldwork in China and Italy, this article examines the affective dimension of middle-class Chinese students' *youxue* (travel and study) practices in Italy. With the liberalization of state policy in China's self-funded study abroad market and the proliferation of educational intermediaries, *youxue* has become a special type of educational consumption that caters to the middle-class Chinese family's desire for transnational mobility and cosmopolitan life styles. The blurring of the line between travel and study points to the open-ended and multi-linear nature of transnational student mobility. However, due to the limitations and pitfalls in international education policies in both the sending and the receiving countries, Chinese students' *youxue* experiences in Italy are marked by notable contradictions between mobility and immobility, hopes and frustrations, self-appreciation and self-reproach.

INTRODUCTION

I met Brian in summer 2017, when he was working as a volunteer tutor for Chinese students at University X. Originally from Nanjing city in East China, Brian came to study in Italy in 2008 as an eighteen-year-old high school graduate. Since his score in the *Gaokao* (National College Entrance Exam) was not high enough for him to be admitted to an elite university in China, Brian decided to follow the popular trend of *youxue* (travel and study). Helped by a study abroad agent in Nanjing and financial aid from his parents, Brian managed to enrol in University X, a reputable university in Northern Italy. With much hesitation, Brian confessed to me that it took him eight years to learn to speak Italian fluently. A few days later, Brian made another confession: he never graduated from University X. He said, "I am still working on my thesis, but I sometimes tell Chinese students here that I graduated because I do not want them to doubt my ability as a tutor". While promising to keep the secret, I was deeply troubled by the many contradictions in his overseas educational experiences. Why is it so easy for Brian to enrol in an elite university in Italy but not in China? Why did it take so long for him to learn to speak Italian fluently? How to explain the deep sense of shame he felt for not being able to graduate on time?

Brian is only one among many young Chinese students who study abroad at an early age. With the marketization of higher education in China and the liberalization of state policy concerning the

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self-funded study abroad market, student migration from China has developed new trends in terms of the diversification of student backgrounds, motivations for studying abroad, and choice of destination countries. The rise of the *youxue* phenomenon in the late 2000s is one example: the Chinese word *xue* means study, but the word *you* has multiple meanings, such as travel, tourism, wandering, play, and fun. To expand their consumer market, commercialized intermediaries often trace the origin of *youxue* back to ancient China, when Confucius travelled with his students to surrounding countries for the purpose of building their knowledge and character. While upholding the combination of knowledge formation and character training in the Confucius model, the contemporary concept of *youxue* also highlights the experimental and experiential dimensions of overseas education. There are generally three types of *youxue* activities in the Chinese context: short-term study tour or summer camps for children or adolescents (sometimes accompanied by parents); touring elite overseas university campuses by pre-college youth and their parents; and short or long-term study abroad projects for the purpose of obtaining language certificates, course credits, overseas degrees, and cross-cultural experiences.

This research focuses on the *youxue* practices of Chinese students who study abroad with the purpose of obtaining a Bachelor's or Master's degree. I chose this group due to excessive media reports of failure stories among them. Some were reported as getting involved in criminal activities in the host countries; others had to return home due to difficulties of adjusting to a new educational system (Luo, 2013; Mott, 2018). In 2014, it was reported that 8000 Chinese students were expelled from U.S. universities due to low grades, academic dishonesty, and breaking rules (Zuo, 2015). In 2017, three cases of suicides among Chinese students (one undergraduate, two doctoral candidates) were reported in U.S. universities (Chang, 2017). While such dramatic examples run the risk of pathologizing overseas Chinese students in popular media, few efforts have been made to explore the structural reasons that mediate the emotional wellbeing of these youth. This article contributes to literature on student migration and neoliberal affects by making a connection between the *youxue* phenomenon and neoliberal transformations in Chinese society. I argue that Chinese students' feelings of disappointment, frustration, shame, and hope are symptomatic of structural problems embedded in the marketization of international education and the neoliberal transformation in China's higher educational system.

Data for this research were gathered through fieldwork in China's Guangzhou and Jinan cities in summer 2015, and two universities in Northern Italy in summer 2017. In both China and Italy, I first used my personal network to identify key respondents, then followed the snowball sampling method to recruit research subjects. The China data consist of thirty-four open-ended interviews with Chinese parents, private educational intermediaries, and students who plan to study abroad. The interview questions focus on the pre-migration decision-making. I also conducted participant observation by attending educational fairs and promotional events organized by private educational brokers in Guangzhou and Jinan. The Italian data include thirty-nine semi-structured interviews with Chinese Bachelor's and Master's students, teaching and support staff for international students at University X, and staff from an Italian non-profit organization in charge of the recruitment of students from China. The interview questions focus on post-migration challenges faced by Chinese students. In addition, I did participant observation during a one-day orientation programme organized for new Chinese students by the international office at University X. Among the thirty-two students I interviewed in Italy, fifteen were undergraduates, seven were Master's students, and the remaining ten were still attending language schools. Their average time of studying in Italy was two and a half years. Many students describe their families as *xiaokang* (moderately well off), which means they belong to the middle stratum of Chinese society. Their age ranges from 18 to 27 years old. In terms of place of origin, the majority of my student interlocutors come from second- or third-tier cities in coastal China. In terms of academic discipline, only one female student majors in civil engineering. All the other student respondents major in the Arts and Humanities. All personal names in this article are pseudonyms.

YOUTH, MOBILITY, AND NEOLIBERAL AFFECTS

Existing literature on transnational student/youth mobility is marked by a binary opposition. On the one hand, student/youth mobility from Asia to the West is usually represented as motivated by a certain degree of instrumentalism, i.e. accumulating transnational educational capital (Waters, 2005; Xiang and Shen, 2009); obtaining developed world citizenship or permanent residence (Baas, 2010; Fong, 2011), transitioning into semi-skilled and skilled labour migrants in the host country (Liu-Farrer, 2009; Robertson, 2013). On the other hand, student/youth mobility from the West to other parts of the world is often framed in non-instrumental terms such as searching for fun and happiness (Waters et al, 2011), accumulating overseas experiences (Conradson and Latham, 2007), and developing new identities (King, 2011). Recently, there is also an emerging group of literature that tries to problematize the binary. Sooudi (2014) studies Japanese youth migration to New York City as a strategy of self-searching and self-reinvention. Robertson et al. (2018) develop a “mobile transitions” framework to examine “the varied, multiple or fragmented migration routes and statuses that increasingly typify young people’s transnational movements today” (206).

Taking inspiration from this third group of literature, this research attempts to add a much-needed class analysis to transnational student mobility from China (Yang, 2018). Specifically, it contemplates how the rise of China’s economy has produced new patterns of student mobility that have not been discussed by existing literature. First of all, developed world citizenship or permanent residence is no longer desirable for many middle-class Chinese students, who usually plan to return to China for job opportunities (Zweig et al., 2004). Second, with the increasing number of overseas returnees, the symbolic and market value of a western degree has been declining and can no longer guarantee a well-paid job in China (Zweig, 2006). Finally, with the increasing popularity of the *youxue* phenomenon, studying abroad has become a special type of educational consumption for middle-class Chinese families, who desire both overseas degrees and cosmopolitan experiences. The rise of China’s middle class is hotly debated in academic literature, mainly due to the multiple criteria in defining the middle class (Cheng, 2010). In her study of private home ownership in Kunming city, Li Zhang (2008) examines the formation of a new middle-class subjectivity in urban China through everyday consumption practices. This study treats the *youxue* practices in China as a special type of educational consumption that is marked by class distinctions. The blurring of the line between travel and study caters to middle-class Chinese family’s growing needs of overseas education and cosmopolitan life styles. However, it also obscures the risks and challenges associated with educational migration.

Existing literature on emotions and migration mainly focus on affective labour in transnational families and care work (Huang and Yoeh, 2005; Baldassar, 2007; McKay, 2007), relatively little has been written on the emotional wellbeing of student migrants. One notable exception is Robertson and Runganaikaloo’s (2014) research on feelings of anxiety and precariousness among Indian students in Australia who face increasing legal obstacles in obtaining permanent residence. This research finds that a large part of Chinese students’ emotional stress results from their struggles to keep a balance between the educational dimension and the consumption dimension of their *youxue* experiences in Italy. Svašek defines emotions as “dynamic processes through which individuals experience and interpret the changing world, position themselves vis-à-vis others, and shape their subjectivities” (2010:868). Baldassar and Boccagni (2015) note that the emotions of migrants are often socially and culturally (re)constructed. Building on these scholarly works, this article argues that emotions are not merely sensory reactions to external stimuli. Instead, they constitute the lived experiences of Chinese students’ *youxue* practices in Italy and help shape their decision-making about study, work, travel, and return at different stages of their educational migration.

Lisa Rofel (2007) notes that the rise of neoliberal capitalism in post-socialist China not only normalizes social inequalities but also gives rise to the “desiring subject” who embraces either

possessive individualism or acquisitive consumption. The emergence of the *youxue* phenomenon corresponds with the neoliberal transformation in Chinese society due to the liberalization of state policy and growing consumerism in China's self-funded study-abroad market. Scholars such as Cairns (2013) and Pimlott-Wilson (2017) have examined the affective dimension of neoliberal governance and how it impacts the lived experiences of youth in Canada and the U.K. While the operation of neoliberalism in China is characterized by the interplay of state authorities in combination with a multitude of self-interested actions (Ong and Zhang, 2008), the emotional burdens associated with Chinese youth's *youxue* practices are nevertheless heavily mediated by neoliberal values such as self-responsibility and self-management.

THE MANUFACTURE OF DESIRE

Scholars have noted that international student mobility is not a matter of personal choice but is mediated by multiple social actors (Findley et al., 2017; Moskal, 2017; Al-Haque, 2018). Accordingly, Chinese students' decision to travel and study abroad are also heavily mediated by the intersections between state policy, commercialized educational brokerage, and personal desire for transnational mobility and cosmopolitan life styles. The marketization of China's higher educational system started in 1997, when colleges and universities started charging tuition fees. The percentage of state funding dropped from 95.9 percent in 1978 to 47.9 percent in 2000 (Zhan and Zhong, 2004). Meanwhile, China's higher education enrolment increased by almost 800 percent from 1990 to 2005 (Lin and Sun, 2010). One consequence of this higher education expansion is the inflation of college degrees and rising importance of university ranking. To achieve the goal of building several world-class universities in China, the state has been allocating disproportionately large amounts of funding to a limited number of public universities (Mohrman, 2013). China's stratified educational system has increased students' pressure to score higher in the *Gaokao*. Students who fail the exam or who fail to enter an elite Chinese university often have to make alternative plans for overseas education.

The uneven distribution of educational resources in China, coupled with the expansion of the new middle class in Chinese society, had created a huge demand in the self-funded study abroad market. According to Mr. Li, a private agent in Guangzhou, the relaxation of visa policies in major destination countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia in the late 2000s had facilitated the rapid increase of private intermediary services. Since 2013, the state has been relaxing its control of the self-funded study abroad market. Instead of emphasizing the qualifications of private intermediary agencies, the focus has shifted to market competition and protection of consumer rights. State deregulation culminated in January 2017, when private educational intermediaries were exempted from the accreditation requirement officially implemented in 1999. Deregulation in the self-funded study abroad market has promoted the commodification of overseas education and the rise of consumerism in the field of transnational education. In the name of promoting free choices and consumer rights, the state has transferred the risks of studying abroad to private educational intermediaries and individual Chinese families (Lan, 2019).

With the proliferation of intermediary agencies in different Chinese cities, parents and students are given the false hope that they can freely choose study abroad destinations. However, the state's promotion of educational consumption actually functions to obscure social stratification in Chinese society. Scholars have noted that student migration from China has been guided by perceptions of a global educational hierarchy, with universities in native English-speaking countries at the top (Hansen and Thøgersen, 2015). For families who cannot afford the expensive study abroad packages to English-speaking countries, the *youxue* option becomes particularly appealing, partly due to the aggressive marketing strategies of educational intermediaries. Mr. Li explained to me, "Some

parents asked me whether studying abroad is worthwhile since their kids' grades are not good and the overseas university they attend is not famous. I told them it was all for the experience, the experience that may benefit your whole life. Through studying abroad, youth can obtain foreign language proficiency, cross-cultural experiences, and communication skills, which may be tremendously helpful in future career development." Mr. Li's future-oriented marketing strategy privileges the rewards of studying abroad while simultaneously downplays potential risks and challenges. It also marks a shift from obtaining quality education to the accumulation of overseas experiences in some private agents' promotion of the *youxue* practice.

My interlocutors' narratives of their desire for studying abroad generally focus on two themes. First, *youxue* is considered part of the solution to the lack of quality educational resources in China. Students who scored low in the *Gaokao* and failed to get admitted to an elite university in China often regarded *youxue* as a second chance to receive quality higher education. To overcome their sense of failure associated with *Gaokao*, some students tended to romanticize the idea of *youxue* and hope to have a new start through changing their studying environment. In addition to obtaining an overseas degree, many of my respondents also mentioned their hope to see the world, to broaden their horizon, and to have new experiences. The romanticism associated with *youxue* was often expressed in the desire for self-transformation. Lily, a twenty-two-year-old student from Wuhan, who was bored by her life in China, said to me, "When you go abroad, there is at least the possibility for you to change, to follow a different development trajectory." While such future-oriented aspirations had kept many of my respondents optimistic about the prospect of overseas education, few of them had anticipated the difficulties they would encounter in Italy.

Compared to major English-speaking countries such as the US, UK, Australia and Canada, Italy is not the first choice for many of my student respondents. However, due to state-initiated transnational student mobility programmes such as the Marco Polo Project and the Turandot Project, there has been a significant increase of Chinese students on Italian university campuses during the past decade. The Marco Polo Project was launched in 2004 with the goal of promoting educational, cultural, and trade exchanges between China and Italy. Chinese students can pre-enrol in an Italian university without demonstrating any knowledge of the Italian language. Every year Italian universities set an admission quota for Marco Polo students so that they do not have to compete with students from other countries. While the Marco Polo Project mainly targets students in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the Turandot Project, which was launched in 2009, focuses on students who wish to major in Arts, Music, Dance, and Design.

According to information provided by various study abroad intermediaries in China, there are four major advantages for studying in Italy. First is the relatively low cost. Since public universities in Italy do not charge tuition fees, Chinese students only need to cover their living expenses during study abroad period. Second, the admission requirement for Marco Polo and Turandot students is quite lenient. The language exemption policy has significantly lowered the admission criteria for Chinese students, considering that students who study in major English-speaking countries have to spend years preparing for English proficiency tests such as TOFEL and IELTS. Chinese students who have a minimum score of 380/750 in *Gaokao* are eligible to apply for pre-enrolment in Italian universities. Thirdly, the visa application procedure is fairly simple. No bank statement and language certificate are needed, and no interview is required for Marco Polo and Turandot students. Since student migration from China is heavily influenced by visa policies in destination countries, Marco Polo and Turandot projects opened an official pathway for Chinese students to study in Italy. Last but not least, studying in Italy represents a less-trodden path which may offer better career opportunities due to increasing cultural and trade exchanges between China and Italy.

Despite the advantages listed above, there are also hidden problems in the Marco Polo and Turandot programmes. Because of the lenient admission criteria, Chinese students who chose to study in Italy are usually not the most academically competitive ones among their cohorts. While the language exemption policy eased the burden in pre-migration decision-making, it actually

increased the burden for language learning in the post-migration stage. The strategic emphasis on the rewarding aspects of *youxue* by educational intermediaries and the relatively easy procedure of studying in Italy have facilitated casual and hasty decisions among some Chinese students, who were little prepared to handle the challenges of studying and living in an unfamiliar educational and social environment.

“I FEEL LIKE AN IDIOT IN CLASS”

This section discusses the emotional challenges faced by Chinese students due to the difficulties of mastering the Italian language. After their arrival in Italy, Chinese students have to take a language course of at least ten months and obtain a B1 certificate before formally enrolling in an academic programme. A B1 certificate, however, is no guarantee of a smooth transition to university-level education. John, a twenty-four-year-old undergraduate who majors in cultural heritage, was shocked that he could not understand a single word the professor said during his first class. He said, “I felt like an idiot in class and my mind was not working at all. So I gradually lost interest in attending classes”. Like John, many Chinese students experienced frustration with their study due to language problems. Not being able to understand class lectures has seriously jeopardized some students’ confidence and created feelings of anxiety over the possibility of failure or delay in graduation. Liu (2013) notes that Chinese students in the U.K. encounter a speaking block, i.e. difficulty in expressing their ideas in English during the initial stage of their study abroad. The speaking block syndrome also applies to Chinese students in Italy. Brian told me that he experienced an initial period of serious depression due to the language barrier. For two or three months he just stayed in his apartment, playing with his phone and computer. He was scared of attending classes and interacting with anyone. Based on Brian’s informal estimate, about 30 percent of the Chinese students on his campus chose to return to China without finishing their study, due to language problems.¹

Chinese students’ difficulties in learning Italian can be attributed to several factors. First of all, since English is often the only foreign language taught in Chinese high schools and universities, my student respondents had minimum exposure to Italian before studying abroad. Some did attend short-term language training courses in China, but these was not enough to handle university-level education. Second, due to the language exemption policy of the Marco Polo and Turandot programs, Chinese students often underestimate the challenges of learning a new language. Most of my student interlocutors reported that their time in the language school was a relatively relaxed period since all the classmates were from China and they only had classes in the morning. Without the dense social network and pressure from family and friends in China, some students started to enjoy their new-found freedom by experimenting with new life styles and leisure activities, instead of focusing on language learning. Last but not least, the proliferation of private language schools in Italy (some have business relations with educational agents in China) led to the commodification of B1 certificate. Charles, a volunteer tutor at University X, observed that some private language schools lower the standard for international students in order to make profits. Since the quality of teaching varies from school to school, students who obtained B1 from different language schools may have very different levels of proficiency in Italian.

In some cases, the language barrier also impacts Chinese students’ decision to switch majors. Scholars have noted multiple factors that mediate Chinese students’ choice of majors for studying abroad: expected economic return, future employment prospects, personal interest, and level of difficulty to pass (Liu et al., 2013; Wu, 2014). However, the influence of study-abroad agents is seldom discussed. Instead of focusing on students’ personal interest, agents often recommend so-called popular majors such as wine-brewing, cultural heritage, stage design, and so on. Due to their lack of knowledge of the Italian educational system in the pre-enrolment period in China, quite a

number of my student respondents experienced confusion when choosing a major. Ning, a 24-year-old senior at University Y told me, "I thought wine brewing was like wine tasting, but when I got here, I found that it is one of the most difficult majors in my university". Xiu, a twenty-five-year-old female student at University X, explained to me that she first chose to major in anthropology based on her personal interest. However, she had great difficulty understanding class lectures. She then tried to switch to linguistics, but failed the entrance exam. She eventually settled on statistics due to its lower requirement of Italian language proficiency. Xiu's story of changing majors reflects a shift from personal interest to a more instrumental attitude towards study among some Chinese students, due to the many challenges in mastering the Italian language.

Language barrier also leads to social isolation of Chinese students on campus. Carnine (2016) finds that a certain degree of proficiency in French is essential for Chinese students in France to make friends with locals. Most of my student respondents do not feel confident about their Italian and thus feel timid interacting with local students. They prefer hanging out with other Chinese students or international students from other countries (c.f. Gomes, 2015). Inadequate support for international students constitutes another problem. Due to the limited dorm spaces on campus, most Chinese students prefer to find housing in the local Chinese community. Such arrangements often decrease their chances of interaction with Italian students and increase their social isolation. John shared with me a common strategy many Chinese students resort to in order to pass exams, that is, by reading books recommended by professors rather than attending classes. John confessed to me that during his four years at University X, he only attended 50 percent of the classes, mainly because of language barrier. Since reading is a highly individualized behaviour, studying alone in one's room can be a rather lonely and boring experience. Although getting out of one's comfort zone is not easy, I did encounter several students who made conscious efforts to hang out with Italians in order to improve their language proficiency, for example, living with Italian roommates, or working part-time for Italian employers. Such students generally have a much higher proficiency in Italian than those who only hang out with Chinese students.

In addition to language barrier and social isolation, Chinese students are also under the pressure to finish their study in a legally permitted time frame. According to Italian immigration law, a student visa can only be extended to six years. Chinese students who fail to graduate in six years either have to overstay their student visa and become undocumented, or find an employer willing to sponsor their application for permanent residence. To maintain their resident permit, Chinese students at University X are required to pass one course exam during the first year and two course exams per year after that. Chinese students who received financial aid from the University but who did not perform well academically also face the risk of losing their scholarship. My student respondents are generally highly aware of the temporary nature of their stay abroad. This time constraint is often coupled with feelings of indebtedness towards parents and a strong sense of responsibility to take care of aged parents in the future. For many young students, obtaining an overseas degree becomes an obligation to reciprocate parents' investment in their overseas education. However, due to the many challenges they encountered in academic study, quite a number of Chinese students experience delays in graduation. While the normal requirement for a bachelor's degree in Italy is three years, some Chinese students may take five to six years or even longer to graduate.

BALANCING YOU (TRAVEL) AND XUE (STUDY)

As a special type of educational consumption, the *youxue* practices also reflect Chinese students' desire for international travel and leisure activities, which is often the hallmark of an emerging middle-class culture of consumption and mobility in China as well as globally. This section discusses Chinese students' struggles to balance the study dimension and the consumption dimension of their

youxue experiences in Italy. My student respondents generally demonstrate three models of balancing the relationship between *you* and *xue*. First, the goal of migration/travel is for overseas education. In this model, *xue* is prioritized as the goal while *you* are considered the means to achieve that goal. Second, travel and study may happen simultaneously. In this model *you* and *xue* complement each other and there is no need to prioritize one over the other. Third, travel comes first and study comes second. This model prioritizes *you* over *xue* and attends to the fun and experimental dimension of overseas experiences. It is important to note that the distinctions between these three models are analytical by nature. In reality, one student can engage in all three modes of *youxue* depending on the different stages of migration.

The constant shift between *you* and *xue* becomes an important strategy for Chinese students to cope with the many challenges in their academic and personal life. Hansen (2015) notes that Chinese exchange students in Denmark experienced a changed sense of time in Europe, where the pace of life is much slower than in China and they suddenly have a lot of free time. For Chinese students in Italy, the experiential dimension of their overseas lives is marked by a new sense of freedom due to being away from the discipline and surveillance of parents and kinship networks back home. Martin (2018) finds that educational mobility has created a zone of suspension for some female Chinese students in Melbourne, where they can be removed from social and parental authority in China and develop alternative life styles that may deviate from the normative middle-class Chinese feminine life course. For some of my student respondents, their *youxue* period in Italy also function as a zone of suspension where they can experiment with new hobbies, life styles and romantic relations that may not be socially approved in China. Some started keeping a pet as soon as they arrived in Italy because they were not allowed by their parents to do so in China. Others enjoyed the experience of living alone for the first time in their life (no longer in student dorms or with their parents and other family members). Some preferred extended periods of traveling and sightseeing. Qing, a twenty-one-year-old female undergraduate in cultural heritage, explained to me, "The first and second year I played a lot. The first year I was traveling most of the time, mainly in nearby cities. The second year I went to South Italy and other European cities. I told my parents here it all depends on self-study, so they did not question me a lot when I went back to visit." At the time of my interview with her, Qing told me that she finally realized the importance of obtaining a degree and she therefore spent most of her time reading books and trying to pass exams. Qing's story is a quite common among Chinese students who wish to escape loneliness, boredom, and frustrations with studies through extensive traveling experiences.

In addition to traveling, engaging in part-time jobs is another strategy for Chinese youth to deal with the tensions in their academic and personal life. There are generally three reasons for Chinese students to engage in part-time jobs. The first one is due to boredom, loneliness, curiosity, and desire for new experiences. Since none of my student respondents had experiences working in a restaurant in China, most of them regard part-time employment as a method of character training. For John, working in a Chinese restaurant can help relieve some of the tensions in his study life and keep him motivated to face failures and setbacks. Compared to their counterparts in the U.K. and Australia, who often have to work in Chinese restaurants in order to cover the expensive tuition, most Chinese students in Italy do not have to worry about tuition and living expenses. Instead, the symbolic meaning attached to part-time employment seems to be more important, i.e. most youth wish to transition into adulthood by proving their ability to make money independently. In addition to character training, John and other students also regard part-time jobs as a convenient way to generate pocket money to support travel/leisure activities and to overcome guilty feelings about their parents.

The therapeutic function of part-time employment among Chinese students in Italy diverges from existing literature which regards international education as an important channel of labour migration. Martin (2017) notes that female Chinese students in Australia often feel trapped in low-wage jobs in the ethnic Chinese restaurant sector due to the lack of localized social capital beyond the

Chinese community. While Chinese students in Italy also have limited job opportunities outside the local Chinese community, their participation in the ethnic economy is not driven by financial necessity, but by the desire for new experiences. Most of my informants are aware of the exploitative nature of jobs in the ethnic sector. Nevertheless, the temporary and informal nature of restaurant work makes it easier for students to manage the pace of work. Unlike the Chinese students studied by Liu-Farrer (2009), who work mainly for Japanese employers and whose part-time job experiences provide them with cultural and linguistic trainings for their later integration into the Japanese corporate sector, Chinese students in Italy mainly work for co-ethnic employers and their part-time working experiences in Chinese restaurants contribute little to career opportunities in either Italy or China. However, part-time employment plays an important role in mediating the tensions between the study dimension and the consumption dimension of my respondents' *youxue* experiences.

While travelling, part-time jobs, and leisure activities can provide temporary escape from the stress in Chinese students' study life, they can also contribute to significant delays in graduation. Accordingly, my student respondents' *youxue* experiences in Italy are often marked by notable contradictions between mobility and immobility, hopes and frustrations, self-appreciation and self-reproaching. Such contradictions give rise to two co-existing narratives. The first focuses on blaming the self for failures and delays in academic studies, and the second focuses on personal growth and transformation. For John, who experienced considerable delays in graduating, there is a pessimistic feeling of being trapped in Italy. He said, "I sometimes regret having studied abroad. This is definitely not my ideal university life. I feel I am getting stuck here, but I need to persevere and get my degree." John confessed to me that he never communicated his problems to his parents due to a deep sense of shame. Instead, he attributed his failure to graduate on time to his lack of self-discipline or hardwork ethics. Like John, many students internalize the neoliberal ideology of self-management and blame themselves for their relatively slow progress in obtaining an overseas degree.

To counterbalance their frustration or disappointment with academic studies, some Chinese youth resort to narratives of self-improvement and self-transformation to demonstrate the positive values of *youxue*. As examples of the transformative dimension of educational migration, my respondents talked about feelings of maturity and independence, the development of a positive life attitude and cosmopolitan values. Xiu remarked, "My life skills improved a lot and I learned to cook for myself every day. I also grew more outgoing. As I speak Italian more often, I get more open-minded and more enthusiastic. I am definitely more outgoing than the time when I was in China. I feel all the hardship I experienced here was worthwhile." King (2011) finds that students in the U.K. use their gap year experiences to make distinctions from their past self and from their peers. The same is true for Chinese students in Italy, whose narratives of self-development are often marked by a notable sense of differentiation from their same-age cohorts in China. Lu, a twenty-one-year-old female student majoring in educational psychology, told me, "My friends in China are still kids. I can no longer communicate well with them because we are interested in different things. They are still confused and do not have a plan for the future. I feel confident that I can depend on myself when I return to China. I am capable of solving problems by myself."

Like the New Zealand youth working and living temporarily in London (Conradson and Latham, 2007), Chinese students in Italy often identify a connection between transnational mobility and the potential of self-fashioning and self-transformation. However, such narratives tend to downplay their privileged class status and the many pitfalls in the *youxue* practices. Like John, most of my respondents prefer to mention only the positive aspects of their *youxue* experiences to their family and friends in China. However, there is a danger in associating the rewarding aspects of *youxue* with transnational mobility experiences in general while attributing some of the problems and negative experiences to individual behaviours. On the one hand, by selectively emphasizing the positive aspects of *youxue*, these Chinese youth unwittingly confirm the promises advocated by commercialized intermediaries and thus help facilitate another wave of *youxue* in China. On the other hand, by

blaming themselves for the problems they encountered in overseas education, these youth are bearing the emotional burdens of neoliberal transformation in China's higher educational market.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In their study of middle-class British students attending elite universities in the United States, Waters et al. (2011) note that part of the goal of their informants' study abroad experiences is to seek happiness, overseas adventure, and to extend the freedoms associated with youth. To a certain extent, the youth period for the Chinese students in this research has also been significantly prolonged due to their engagements in traveling and part-time working activities, and the extra time they take to obtain an overseas degree. However, there are also important differences between the Chinese case and the British one. Most importantly, student migration from China to Italy has been heavily mediated by policies in both the sending and receiving countries and by commercialized educational intermediaries. The Marco Polo and Turandot programmes represent the Italian state's effort to speed up its pace in the internationalization of higher education and to strengthen its geopolitical interests in China. The extremely lenient admission policy, endorsed by official bi-lateral agreements between the sending and receiving states, not only creates a short cut for Italian universities' recruitment of students from China but also effectively fends off competitions from universities in other European countries. However, the active involvement of both the Italian and Chinese states in transnational student mobility has its drawbacks. According to Matteo, a staff in the international office of University X, due to the politically sensitive nature of the Marco Polo programme, he and his colleagues are cautious not to offer any critique of it for fear of jeopardizing Sino-Italian relations. Although there are plenty of complaints among the teaching staff at University X concerning Chinese students' poor Italian proficiency and inadequate performance in class, there seems to be a lack of communication between top administrative personnel and teaching and support staff who work with Chinese students on daily basis. The politically sensitive nature of the Marco Polo programme ends up doing a disservice to Chinese students, since many of the challenges they face cannot be openly discussed and dealt with by the university authorities.

It is important to note that while the Marco Polo and Turandot programmes are state-initiated pathways for student migration, the operationalization of the study abroad services are generally handled by private educational agents. In other words, the Chinese and Italian states not only function as big brokers of international education but also facilitate the development of agent chains at the local and transnational scales (c.f. Xiang, 2012). Collaboration between state and non-state sectors highlights the neoliberal transformation in the international higher education market; but it also poses limits to the state's power to regulate unethical business practices. Diego, a senior administrator at University X, disclosed to me that in 2016 the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had discovered 400 forgery cases among Chinese students. Examples of fake documents include language certificates, diplomas, transcripts, and other supporting materials. Diego blamed the unethical practices of study-abroad agents for the relatively "low quality" of Chinese students they have recruited. Meanwhile, he considered it difficult to implement structural changes at University X. He said, "Since these students have already been admitted to the university, there is nothing I can do". To a certain extent, the lenient admission policy of Italian universities has become a double-edged sword. While it allows academically less competitive students from China to easily enrol in elite universities in Italy, it does not guarantee a stimulating and nurturing learning environment for these students. While it is easy to blame some Chinese students for their inadequate performance in class, the neoliberal discourse of self-responsibility also obscures important structural constraints faced by them in Italy.

Another difference between the Chinese case and the British case is the intensive emotional turmoil most of my student respondents had to go through, mainly resulting from the tensions between the study dimension and the consumption dimension of their *youxue* experiences in Italy. This research finds a contradiction between Chinese youth's self-narration of personal growth and the reality of their prolonged youth period abroad, which highlights the emotional complications of some Chinese youths' mobile transitions to adulthood through overseas *youxue* practices (Robertson et al., 2018). Regarding their job prospect in China, younger returnees with Bachelor's or Master's degrees from non-traditional study abroad destinations often find themselves falling into the cracks of state policies, which favour overseas returnees with doctoral and post-doctoral qualifications (Zweig, 2006; Xiang, 2011). The structural marginalization of these younger returnees in China's job market is further aggravated by negative media coverage of radical examples of failure, mentioned in the introduction to this article. This research suggests that we need to move beyond the success and failure binary in evaluating the *youxue* experiences of Chinese youth. Instead, we should pay attention to how *youxue* impact youth's mobile transition to adulthood and how this process is filled with feelings of vulnerability, confusion, self-appreciation and self-depreciation. Instead of criticising these youths' problematic behaviours, we need to question the institutional power relations that normalize *youxue* as a pathway for middle-class youths' transition into adulthood. Due to the limitation of the research sample, this article cannot represent the study abroad experiences of all Chinese students in Italy. Future research needs to be conducted on the experiences of returnees and how these *youxue* experiences translate back into life in China.

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NOTE

1. Unfortunately, there is no secondary data available to confirm Brian's estimation. While the Chinese embassy and Uni-Italia, a non-profit educational agency working for the Italian state to recruit students from China, may have statistics regarding the enrollment (and possible dropout) rates of Chinese students in Italian universities, these data are not made public.

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