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Everyday Mobility: the Normalization of China-Japan Migratory Flows and their 'Everyday Practice'

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Abstract: Chinese migrants now constitute the largest group of registered 'foreigners' in Japan, with over 600,000 documented in 2006. This is the result of an intersection between the Chinese government's drive for educational and economic success, and Japan's flexible student visa labour system. It is the product of a 'normalization' of mobility amongst young mobile Chinese. Based on 20 months fieldwork in Tokyo, Japan, I explore the ways in which the decision to move is experienced as mundane, and how it is negotiated as a form of 'everyday practice.' Through this lens, this article posits multiple relationships between mobility, its limits and how this relates to mobile people's sense of place in the world.

Keywords: *Japan, China, young mobility, everyday practice.*

Contemporary movements between China and Japan defy simple classification. Like other forms of mobility, the boundaries between categories of movement such as tourist, student and migrant are blurred. Moreover, the visas which define people's movements between China and Japan do not necessarily encompass what they actually do. Tourist, student and work-related visas act merely as channels for a range of aspirations that do not necessarily fit the visa category

selected. Furthermore, the restrictive limitations imposed on Chinese tourist visas mean that many Chinese people with 'touristic' aspirations choose other visas which afford greater mobility. As such, mobility is the primary marker of these people rather than classificatory terms such as migrant, tourist, student or labourer.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how the experiences of young mobile Chinese in Japan collapse simplistic distinctions of necessity and

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desire for movement, and to show how this experience of mobility is akin to other mundane realities for many. Mobility involves complex relations between the hopes an individual's families have for them and the hopes they have for themselves. Rather than the common assumption that mobility is a sign of flexibility or success, this paper interprets mobility as the result of both successes and failures. It involves tactical and strategic reactions to the options available and the forces which create these limitations. In this sense, mobility is best interpreted as a continuation of 'everyday practice' in China rather than something exceptional or successful (De Certeau 1984).

Young mobile Chinese in Japan narrate their mobility as 'everyday' and mundane; as a practical choice made within a range of options which are created by wider institutional forms in both countries. This can be seen as 'normalization,' where the institutional and discursive encouragement of migration between China and Japan becomes internalized as a 'normative' act for many mobile Chinese, despite overseas movements being only available to a small proportion of China's population. This paper argues that an 'everyday practice' approach to mobility allows us to acknowledge the ways Chinese mobile subjects are formed by these institutional forces, without dismissing individuals' own sense of the practicality in their movements.

Young mobile Chinese in Japan are subject to many obstacles in securing visas, passports and access to mobile lifestyles. However, the precarity of their situation is not limited to

securing mobility, but also in trying to limit mobility. Once, mobile, young Chinese in Japan often find the everyday realities of a mobile life disorienting and difficult. They are unable to remain indefinitely in Japan, but also find it difficult to return to China. In particular, the difficult choices presented by a mobile life were described as less an issue of choice than as a general experience of 'floating.' This draws attention to what Franke Pieke calls the 'mundane realities of life beyond what is immediately policy relevant' (Pieke 2007: 82) and shows how, through the lens of 'everyday practice,' mobility itself can become an obstacle for mobile Chinese youths.

From China to Japan

After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 a period of rapid economic growth and social change emerged in China. Since this period of 'open' policies (CHN: *gaige kaifang*)¹, there has been a large emphasis on growth in China. This period saw the transformation of a once solely state run economy into a hybrid market economy, and an opening of diplomatic and migratory relations with countries shut off from the PRC during Mao's rule, such as Japan. These changes were particularly notable in the 14 prescribed 'special economic zones' (SEZs) along China's eastern coastal cities, but have also spread generally throughout the urban centres of China.

This new emphasis on economic growth was accompanied by educational reforms. Studying overseas became popular and prestigious after June 1978, when Deng Xiaoping

instructed education departments to expand the scale of people travelling overseas for studies. Since then China has become the world's largest exporter of international students. In 2006 there were 343,126 recorded Chinese international students, constituting 14% of the total international student population and amounting to three times the total of the second largest exporter, India (UNESCO 2006). This drive for international study has become a major means for legal overseas travel from China. Of the total number of Chinese students travelling, 89,000 Chinese students went to the USA and 79,000 to Japan. However, due to special vocational (15,000 students) and pre-university language student (30,000 students) visa arrangements between China and Japan, Japan arguably constitutes the largest recipient of educationally-channelled Chinese migrants. For example, Liu-Farrer has calculated the total of educationally channelled Chinese migrants in Japan to be 120,176 for 2006 (UNESCO 2006; Liu-Farrer 2007; Liu-Farrer 2011).

Educational travel is one of the most reliable means for young Chinese citizens to travel overseas. Legal overseas migration has been encouraged by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the reform era as part of the developmental imaginaries of the nation (Nyiri 2001; Xiang 2003; Fong 2004; Fong 2007; Xiang 2007; Nyiri 2010; Fong 2011). In particular, overseas study has featured prominently in this promotion, as the CCP attempts to create broad international networks of economic and cultural development (Nyiri 2001). A particularly indicative example of

this is found in a 1992 State Council report on the principles of overseas study policy. These principles were to 'support study abroad, promote return, [uphold] freedom of movement,' and to 'promote overseas individuals to serve the country,' with 'serve the country' (CHN: *wei guo fuwu*) becoming the standard slogan for overseas students (Nyiri 2001; Cheng 2003).

In her research amongst students in the reform era, Vanessa Fong has argued that images of China's place in the world are embedded in a broader notion of 'modernising' China that is subject to the perceived need for China to modernise (Fong 2004; Fong 2007; Fong 2011). The students Fong interviewed often voiced disappointment with the rate of progress in China, and the perceived inferiority of Chinese standards of living. Hence, they felt it necessary to go overseas to develop themselves. At the same time, they framed this desire in terms of filial duty to the nation by cultivating themselves overseas and returning at a later date.

By the 1990s, China's new emphasis on overseas study and migration coincided with Japan's own social developments. Japan's ageing population, labour shortage, and the hesitation of the domestic population to engage in certain kinds of employment, created a new labour market for temporary migration (Liu-Farrer 2007). These developments were the catalyst for several migratory flows into Japan. For example, Brazilian citizens with Japanese ancestry were granted a special visa entitlement to work and live in Japan (Roth 2002). Similarly, young Southeast Asian women were attracted to Japan via

entertainment visas and trainee visas. Entertainment visas were promoted as a cultural exchange visa, although they were predominantly used within Japan's adult entertainment industry (Hisada 1992; Douglass and Roberts 2000). Trainee visas were designed as a form of 'on the job training' but have been widely criticised as an exploitative and short sighted scheme to bring cheap labour into the care industry (Terasawa 2000).

According to my own research, as well as that of other scholars, young mobile Chinese predominantly come to Japan on educational visas (Tajima 2003; Liu-Farrer 2011). The relative ease in attaining one of the several types of student visas and the part-time work arrangements permitted under the various educational visa categories has ensured that student visas have become a proxy channel for labour migration. Liu-Farrer has noted that the possible combination of work and education via student visas in Japan has ensured that a variety of different aspirations for social mobility and economic success flow through similar migratory channels.

My own research mirrors much of the current sociological research in regards to educational visas and mobility (Cheng 2001; Tajima 2003; Liu-Farrer 2007; Pieke 2007; Liu-Farrer 2011; Liu-Farrer 2012; Cheng 2003). The differences between the educational and economic aspirations of mobile Chinese are not as distinct as one might assume. Educational and economic migration is inseparable in the context of moving to Japan, with mobile aspirations and plans shifting depending on opportunities and experience. Many language

students originally intending to enter a university in Japan opt to work instead and, vice versa, those originally trying to earn money end up attempting some form of education due to the advantages it brings. Moreover, the possibility of becoming more cosmopolitan through 'touristic' experiences abroad also play a role in young mobile Chinese lives in Japan. In this way, mobile Chinese people living in Japan rarely fit a simple classificatory migration model. This is due to the high living costs associated with living in Japan and the desire for mobile life trajectories.

Studying mobile people: method and positionality

My research is based on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Ikebukuro, Tokyo. Ikebukuro is situated on the northwestern corner of Tokyo's central ring line. It is the major transfer hub for the residential areas surrounding Tokyo (such as Saitama) and has become a popular entertainment area for businessmen and various youth sub-cultures, such as 'rotten girls' (Galbraith 2011). Due to its low rents, vibrant entertainment area and central location it is a convenient space to live cheaply whilst still being able to find work and study. Consequently, Ikebukuro has also become a popular destination for recently-arrived Chinese nationals in Japan, often referred to as 'Chinese Newcomers' by scholars such as Junko Tajima (Tajima 2003). Over the past twenty years, this area has attracted a significant number of Chinese small business owners, which has also increased Ikebukuro's appeal to many new arrivals. The growing number of

Chinese in Ikebukuro has culminated in over 200 Chinese-owned businesses on the western side of Ikebukuro train station and is now seen to be a thriving hub of Chinese sociality.

My reaction to my interlocutors is related to my own experience as a mobile subject and surprise at the increasing number of Chinese people in Japan. I entered university as a China studies undergraduate and consequently spent several years living in both Beijing and Taiwan. Whilst living there, I came to make several Japanese friends; when I went to visit a friend in Tokyo, I came across the prevalence of Chinese students at Japanese universities. It was 2004, and a series of violent anti-Japan protests had ignited earlier that year in Beijing, sparked by several events during the Asian Cup, a region-wide football championship. My experiences living in China gave me a strong sense of the prevalence of anti-Japan sentiments in China. I was thus surprised to find Chinese students to be the largest group of international students in Japan. I tried to find out more about this group, but at that time there was little ethnographic scholarship on Chinese people in Japan.

It was only later, when I found funding to conduct fieldwork in Japan as part of my PhD, that I was able to pursue my initial interest in this topic. I was perhaps naively too focused on the question ‘Why are Chinese people moving to Japan?’ when I first started my research. I was attracted to an area of Tokyo known as Ikebukuro after several failed attempts to follow the busy networks of Chinese students who, although friendly, lived a busy life which moved between purposeful

isolation, several part-time jobs and study. Their busy lives left me with a rich sense of the everyday nature of mobility for young Chinese people from major urban centers along China’s east coast. It also revealed the limitations of participant observation in such hectic mobile lives. Young mobile Chinese living in Tokyo juggle hectic schedules between study and work, needing to attend classes to fulfill their visa requirements while earning money to cover their living costs. This leaves little time for social interaction with classmates and co-workers, let alone a nosy anthropologist. What is more, even when invited into people’s lives, my fieldwork mainly involved short interviews with young mobile Chinese in their dorm rooms. I was not allowed to follow them to work, lest I cause trouble with their employers, and my efforts to follow them in other parts of their lives meant I was always focusing on one interlocutor at the expense of another. All of these problems gave me the feeling that my fieldwork was increasingly becoming centered on my relationship with several of my interlocutors, and was vastly altering the schedules of the young mobile Chinese I knew.

Several small businesses in Ikebukuro had petitioned the local government to have the northern gate area of the station re-labeled ‘Tokyo Chinatown’ (For a detailed account see Yamashita 2010). Disappointed by my inability to follow young mobile Chinese across Tokyo, I decided to pick a particular space from which to try and document their lives. I lived in an illegal Chinese dormitory, spent hours in small businesses such as hair salons and restaurants, and finally

established a network of interlocutors that started to create an ethnographic picture.

All together, I had regular contact with over 250 interlocutors and conducted repeated unstructured interviews with a core group of 30 interviewees. All of my interlocutors were between the age of 18 and 35 and came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. They had all lived in Japan for less than 10 years, and came from major urban centres, mostly from Northeast China. Although my interlocutors shared their family backgrounds with me, many were hard to verify and often my interviewees said they did not know the incomes of their families. For my interlocutors who were children of small enterprise businesses (CHN: *getihu*) in Dalian or Shenyang a parents income could fluctuate dramatically, from as little as 1000 RMB (roughly 160 USD) to 10000 RMB (1600 USD) a month, depending on their parents sales. In the case of those whose parents had government positions, their parent's meagre incomes (1500-2000RMB/ month) were offset by the accommodation provided through their parent's employment unit, as well as a range of commercial activities undertaken to supplement their incomes. For example, one of my interlocutor's parents, who worked within a local government unit, also imported small shipments of iPad covers to sell to market stall owners. My remaining interlocutors were reticent to discuss their parents' incomes, often using simple terms designed to deflect my questions (such as 'wealthy' or 'still able to eat'). My general observation was also that students' determination

to self-support while living in Japan (even though it was often impossible) meant that their economic background bore only some influence on their lifestyles in Japan. Young mobile Chinese living in Ikebukuro were rarely from elite backgrounds but at the same time they were not from China's poorer western regions. Japan is easy to reach from China, with the cheapest option being an overnight ferry from Tianjin or Qingdao at roughly 1600-2000 RMB (200-300 USD). It also provides the most flexible work-study visa arrangements. Consequently, my interlocutors came from varied strata of socially mobile Chinese urbanites who although not necessarily wealthy, could pursue their ambitions and those of their family. Within this paper I will use small ethnographic vignettes and interview excerpts to highlight the experiences of these young people living in Ikebukuro.

The normality of studying overseas

Xiaochen and I sat in the kitchen together on small makeshift plastic stools, sharing a pack of cigarettes from China, which she'd tricked her father into sending over to Japan as a gift for her friends. They were in fact for her.

This kitchen was the common space I shared with 9 Chinese students in a small dormitory in Ikebukuro. The dormitory was a cramped space on the fifth floor of an office block that was intended for small businesses rather than residential living. Each room was barely a metre wide and close to 3 metres deep, and although they were advertised as private

quarters, gaps in construction and paper thin walls made it private in name alone. Nonetheless, it was not much worse than other forms of student living common in Tokyo, and it was located only five minutes' walk from the heart of the major station in the north-west of Tokyo, Ikebukuro. Xiaochen, like me, had been introduced to it through an informal contact.

Xiaochen and I slowly enjoyed the aroma of Panda brand cigarettes, discussing the nostalgia that the thick, strong and un-contaminated flavour of Chinese cigarettes brought. Xiaochen commented that though Chinese cigarettes are strong, they're more natural, unlike the chemically stripped and weaker cigarettes popular in Japan. As we discussed this nostalgia however, Xiaochen paused and said:

'You know, I don't really know how I ended up like this.'

I responded, 'Addicted to cigarettes?'

'No. In Japan... I'd never really thought much about it, yet here I am.' I quickly asked her to hold that thought and took out an audio recorder, saying 'That's really interesting, is it ok if we talk about it and I record it for my research?' She nodded.

I asked, 'What do you mean when you say, 'you never thought much about it'?''

'Well, I'd often gone to help friends buy things before leaving the country and I'd always thought it was strange actually. Everyone seemed to be doing it but I was pretty happy at home. So I'd never thought that one day I could be like them and go overseas.'

'Why's that?'

'I had no interest, no 'motivation' (JPN: yaruki)'

'So tell me the story of how you got here.'

'The year before last I finished high school. At that time I'd intended to attempt the entrance examinations at the local technical college (CHN: dazhuan), but my grades weren't that good. I talked to one of the lecturers there and he said that there are more and more people with diplomas (CHN: wenping) now, and that even though they have them they can't find work. So I started to think that maybe I should just work, that diplomas have no use in the end. My mother said to me that they still wanted me to study, and suggested I go to Japan instead. So that year I started at a language school in Fuzhou. Around July...'

'Why do you think they chose Japan?'

'It's closer, the visa's easier and they'd seen a few people go there before, I guess'

'And why'd you agree?'

'Hmm, I thought that Japan is still a place for Asians (CHN: yazhouren), that it'd be easier than English because of the writing system, and it just didn't seem as far away.'

'So what else did you do then?'

'Well I studied there for half a year and organised the formalities (CHN: banle shouxu).'

'What did you have to do?'

'Some things my parents organised, like getting a passport. But I had to do some of the things to apply for the visa. The pre-

college student (CHN: *jiuxue*)
visa is pretty easy though. You get
a year in Japan no questions asked
(CHN: *meiwenti le*.)’

‘You just need a language school?’

‘Yeah, yeah (CHN: *dui dui dui..*)’

Xiaochen described the procedures her parents carried out to get her to Japan with a no-nonsense obviousness, listing the various stages she went through. It is difficult to capture in written form, but what struck me about this conversation with Xiaochen was her disinterested tone. Rather than the result of a particular personal desire, Xiaochen explained her mobility as merely a strategic choice made by her and her family. I would ask her and my other dorm mates whether there had been any other influences that had directed them to Japan. I asked whether they had had dreams of moving to Japan, perhaps influenced by Japanese popular culture flows to China, and was always met with a short ‘no.’ This blunt refusal surprised me to some extent as other students I knew from southeast Asia, Europe and America often cited Japanese pop culture as a major influence in their decision to move to Japan. My interlocutors’ responses suggested to me that they had very little desire to move to Japan in particular, and that the need to move was seen as an ‘everyday’ strategy influenced by the various institutional and familial factors that ‘normalized’ their movements. This ‘normalization’ is understood both in terms of the experience of moving, and in terms of my interlocutors’ reports of how their family and friends felt about it.

My interlocutors’ responses fit into the state-approved discourses in

China which encourage movement overseas (Nyiri, 2001; Nyiri, 2010). These discourses resulted in what was popularly referred to as ‘leaving fever’ (CHN: *chuguore*) (For example see Ong, 1997; Ong, 1999). The term ‘fever’ is commonly used to describe any kind of popular craze in China; for example, David Palmer, in his research on Chinese body cultivation practices known as *Qigong*, has discussed ‘fever’ as a kind of ‘collective effervescence which occurs when official policies and informal signals sent from above correspond with, open space for, and amplify popular desire’ (Palmer, 2007: 278). This ‘leaving fever’ has been accompanied by a rhetorical drive for educational success in China (Kipnis, 2011), which is internalised in parents’ own hopes for their children (Fong 2004; Fong, 2007; Brandstadter and Santos 2009; Fong, 2011; Kipnis, 2011). These various forces contribute to what Pal Nyiri has called a ‘mobility regime’ which insists that ‘it is essential for the modern Chinese subject to be mobile’ (Nyiri, 2010: 164-165). This is not to say that all Chinese subjects are necessarily mobile, but rather it is a popularly held social fact in China that mobility is desirable. Indeed, Julie Y. Chu has shown that the failure to be mobile is a source of anxiety for many of the villagers she researched in Fuzhou, China (Chu, 2010).

My interlocutors’ strategic choice of Japan as destination fits well with current scholarly work on students’ choices when leaving China. In Fong’s research on young Chinese’ aspirations to move overseas, she followed a group of participants whom she had previously interviewed at high school age (Fong, 2011). The

interviewees were originally from the Chinese city Dalian, but had moved to various countries, such as Ireland, Japan, America, Britain and Australia. Despite voicing a desire to go to America or Britain, the majority of Fong's informants ended up spending a significant period of time in either Ireland or Japan. This was due to the flexible visa and work systems in these countries, and in particular, the relative ease of getting a Japanese student visa. Fong shows that although mobile Chinese have preferences for certain countries, the most significant distinction was whether they were considered 'developed.' Fong's informants dreamed of going to a 'developed country' (CHN: *fadaguo*), which was envisioned as a general category in their dream rather than in reference to a specific country. These countries were referred to as a 'paradise' (CHN: *tiantang*), and although it was considered the less prestigious 'silver path' (CHN: *yinse*), 42% of her informants had spent at least 6 months in Japan; making it the most significant mediator in the goals of young Chinese to move overseas.

However, while Fong's students spoke of overseas as a 'paradise,' my own interlocutors spoke of Japan in more sombre tones. In fact, one interlocutor sardonically made a pun on the term 'paradise' by calling Japan a 'consumption paradise' (CHN: *xiaofei tiantang*). They then followed to joke about how this 'paradise' wasn't in the grasp of busy and poor Chinese students. It was, they said, like being invited to a banquet but not allowed to eat. This joke reflects a broader sense I found among young mobile Chinese in Japan that Japan was merely seen

as an optional destination, rather than a 'paradise.' The stories of overseas travel amongst my interlocutors, and the motivations for leaving China were far more practical than aspirational. For Xiaochen, the decision to move to Japan was mainly motivated by her failure to get into a well-respected university, and difficulty in finding work after completing a short diploma in early age child care. The decision was also not fully her own, her parents' hopes for their only child being a larger factor than her own aspirations. As Xiaochen said, she 'didn't know how she ended up' in Japan, her travel being largely influenced and arranged by her family.

Many of my interlocutors told similar stories to Xiaochen's.

'My parents suggested I apply when I finished high school because my sister had moved over here, but I was rejected by the embassy during the interview for my application. I didn't really want to go in all honesty, but when I was rejected, I felt left out and became determined to come here. I applied three more times before I was accepted. By then I was 28.' (32 yr old, male, from Liaoning, Takushita University student)

'Before the moment I sat down on the plane, I'd never thought about coming to Japan. I didn't do well in school, and after spending a year looking for work, my mother said she'd support me. At that time (2002) everyone was leaving the country. I didn't think of where I was going, just that I had nothing to do in China. It was a coincidental opportunity (CHN: *ouran de jihui*).' (27yr old, male, from Harbin, electronics dealer)

Xiaochen and my other interlocutors' comments suggest that the experience of Chinese transnational migration is neither liberating nor oppressive. Key works within literature on Chinese migration have often emphasized transnational mobility as a source of freedom. Aihwa Ong's notion of 'flexible citizenship' for example, celebrated the strategic and flexible way Chinese entrepreneurs move between different economically advantageous countries (Ong, 1998). She describes these 'flexible citizens' as bastions of China's new economic growth, and a model for successful Chinese subjects (Nyiri 2010). However, Barak Kalir is critical of this emphasis on 'fluidity' in much of the literature on transnational mobility (Kalir, 2012). He followed Chinese labourers between Israel and China, noting the ways capital accumulation and state discourses intersect with the everyday imperatives of mobile Chinese people. Further, he noted that although Chinese labourers often benefit from their work in Israel, their successes by no means outshone their peers who never left China. In line with Kalir's observations, my interlocutors' stories demonstrate that the era of the transnational Chinese subject as the epitome of success is in decline. Moving overseas can be a reaction to failure as much as a drive for success. What is more, although Chinese state discourses encourage mobility as a sign of being a good modern Chinese subject, mobility in itself is not experienced as such. My interlocutors described it more as an everyday practice that is experienced as 'normal,' shaped by their families, friends and personal attempts to negotiate failures and successes.

The Everyday Practice of Moving

In many ways there is little new to my findings about the shape and form of young mobile Chinese in Japan. Like other researchers on Chinese migration to Japan, I found their movements to be distinctly transnational, creating links and networks between Japan and China (Tajima, 2003; Liu-Farrer, 2007; Liu-Farrer, 2011). The shape of this transnationalism is not dissimilar to other migratory patterns elsewhere in the world. Peggy Levitt's work on Dominicans in Boston (Levitt, 2001) and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo's work on transnational migration between Mexico and the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001) show similar patterns of movements back and forth between host country and home. These movements create networks between the two spaces which affect migrants' sense of place in the world. They also create networks which facilitate future movements along similar lines. Rather than focus on the shape and form of transnational migration however, I take inspiration from the banal tone of my interlocutors' migration stories. Hence, instead of using migration and transnationalism as the primary lens to interrogate their experiences, I prefer a broader concept of mobility and 'everyday practice' (De Certeau, 1984) which utilises Bourdieu's sense of the semi-conscious and practical strategizing that comes from habituated social life (Bourdieu 1998).

In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau draws attention to 'ways of operating' that are considered 'everyday' (1984: xi). A collection of essays, his work highlights the strategic and tactical

nature of practices such as walking through the city, consumption and telling stories about oneself. From these examples, De Certeau provides several useful tools to explore people's attempts to negotiate wider contexts. De Certeau emphasizes innovation and negotiation, arguing that agents are 'unrecognised producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality' (1984: xvii). People's life trajectories are thus shaped by their cultures, which 'determine the elements used, but not the 'phrasing' produced by the *bricolage* (the artisan-like inventiveness)' found within each step of their lived experiences. He often refers to this process as simply 'making do' (1984: xvii). Each of my interlocutors' stories shared much in common; 90% had initially moved to Japan on a student visa, and parental influence in the decision-making process was very common. On the other hand, each of their stories had a unique 'phrasing' and 'trajectory' which demonstrates the teller's own role in making sense of wider forces.

An Inner-Mongolian couple's tale of how they came to Japan exemplifies the process of 'making do' while engaging with these forces. Despite growing up together as children, the desire to study had drawn them away from each other since they were 17. The wife, Non, had not grown up speaking Mandarin, and had only learnt standardised modern Chinese (CHN: *Putonghua*) when she started her later years in primary school. She said that linguistic difficulties had always made her feel out of place within the urban centres of China, and so, at 17 when an opportunity to study in Japan arose she

took it without thinking. She said that Mongolian is grammatically similar to Japanese, and that she thought that she might fit in more in Japan due to a perceived commonality between Mongolians and Japanese people. Her move as a student would later channel her husband's move to Japan. He described his tale as follows:

'The biggest reason [I came to Japan] is that I met my wife (CHN: *laopo* 'missus') back where we come from. We got along really well after not having seen each other since we were kids and we started to date (CHN: *tanlianai*). However, she was going to go to Japan, and I thought 'Not a problem... it could only be around a year right?' But she didn't come back...after that, she got a job and our lives were stable (CHN: *wending le*)... I know you probably want me to give a really sentimental reason like 'I came here just for her, blah blah' but it really wasn't like that... I really just thought 'try studying abroad' (CHN: *liuxue bei*). See if I can get used to it here, see what it's like you know.'

I include this couple's tale to show how even when mobile people take the same institutional path (student visas), their trajectories have unique aspects. Unlike Xiaochen's story, the husband within this couple had a 'stable' life in China as a relatively successful small business owner. He did not have prestigious qualifications (he owned a hair salon), nor did he see this as a failing. Further, his parents held little sway over his life. As a young boy he had moved often between distant relatives and felt little bond to his

mother and father. What is more, they rarely intervened in his life decisions. His tale of mobility is an example of how we ‘make do’ with opportunities and imperatives presented to us in the ‘everyday.’ His tale is not merely a romantic story of following his wife. Much like Xiaochen he told this story with a gruff, pragmatic tone, trying to downplay its romantic aspects. This could be interpreted as an attempt to avoid the gender hierarchy inversion that often comes when women migrate first (Sheba 2005). However, I do not feel this entirely explains his tone. After living in Japan for three years he had established a relatively successful hair salon in Ikebukuro which catered to local Chinese-speaking customers. Throughout my fieldwork with him, he never showed a sense of emasculation or resentment about following his wife. He also never mentioned a desire for education or social mobility. Rather, he would imply he was more interested in ‘living well’ (CHN: *guohaorizi*); often using the phrase ‘as long as I’m happy’ (CHN: *kaixin jiu hao le*). These stories and others demonstrate an absence of ambition in decisions to become mobile lacking from current discourses on mobility.

Disjunctures and obstacles in navigating everyday mobility

De Certeau recognises the habituating power of wider forces while showing reservations about researchers’ abilities to accurately account for what these are (Buchanan, 2001: 18). I find this useful when considering the congruence between my interlocutors’ decisions to move to Japan and China’s wider

discourse of the mobile Chinese subject. Focusing on mobility as an ‘everyday practice’ which involves the process of ‘making do’ is hermeneutically useful. It allows us to incorporate the ‘normalization’ of institutional forces in the experience of moving without treating those institutional forces as deterministic. For Xiaochen and many others, their parents’ internalisation of the Chinese government’s encouragement of mobility was a deciding factor in sending them overseas. This created a matter-of-fact reality to the interpretation of moving as desirable, even if taken as a second choice after failures at home. As one of my interlocutors said, the mundane sense of Chinese mobility regimes now means the question is no longer ‘why move?’ but rather ‘why not?’

The concept of ‘making do’ has much in common with Henrik Vigh’s suggested use of the term ‘navigation’ when discussing mobile subjects’ attempts to negotiate a mobile world (Vigh, 2009). In using the term ‘navigation’ (literally *to sail*) Vigh takes inspiration from the fluid metaphors that have proliferated in studies of globalization and transnationalism, while highlighting some of their limitations. Vigh argues that the emphasis on flows and other fluid metaphors has made it difficult to incorporate what people do into the wider forces they contend with. At the same time he notes that metaphors within practice theory, such as Bourdieu’s ‘field’ (1976), often lack a dynamic sense of the interactional movements of people and the contexts which situate them.

‘Navigation... highlights motion within motion; it is the act of moving

in an environment that is wavering and unsettled, and when used to illuminate social life it directs our attention to the fact that we move in social environments of actors and actants, individuals and institutions, that engage and move us as we move along'. (Vign, 2009: 420)

The metaphor of 'navigation' is a useful addition to a broader understanding of mobile people's attempts to 'make do.' It allows us to acknowledge the changing nature of situations people 'make do' in. 'Navigation' also allows for a recognition of difficult situations that may arise unexpectedly, like a storm at sea. Despite the narration of moving to Japan as 'normal,' mobile Chinese in Japan still faced many difficulties. Unexpected circumstances would arise that dramatically changed their imagined trajectory. This could also disrupt their perception of moving as normal and desirable. Chinese newcomers in Tokyo often felt anxiety about their lack of a place in the world. None of my interlocutors aspired to remain in Japan indefinitely, but at the same time those who tried to return to the PRC would soon find themselves drawn back to Japan. They were transnational in terms of embodied mobility, and often moved in coherence with the regimes of mobility between China and Japan. However, their thwarted attempts to make sense of their place in the world often made it difficult for them to imagine future trajectories.

The limits put on movement bear a burden on people trying to move. This was experienced by many of my interlocutors in their efforts to secure passports and in their failures to gain

access to more prestigious destinations abroad. However, once mobile these limitations also become a burden on people's desire to stay in one place. In many senses, once mobile, young Chinese people in Japan are forcefully made transnational; unable to cease the multiple mobilities they negotiate. Caught in the tides that encouraged them to go overseas, they return to China only to find themselves left behind by those that have stayed. Many Chinese people in this situation find it necessary to leave China again, maintaining a mobile and at times precarious life. This conundrum is epitomised in the use of two popular Chinese terms to refer to returnees. Successful returnees are referred to as 'sea turtles' (CHN: *haigui*) which is a homophonic word play on another term that means 'to return from overseas.' This resonates nicely with Vign's 'navigation' as 'sea turtles' can skilfully manoeuvre through rough waters with purpose and ambition. In contrast, a term that refers to the unsuccessful returnees has emerged. 'Seaweed' (CHN: *haidai*), a wordplay on the former metaphor, implies the opposite. Like the green aquatic weed, unsuccessful returnees are seen as being spat back onto shore from the sea.

Many of my interlocutors would make jokes about becoming 'seaweed' if they return to China, feeling unsure about their future prospects. Their futures in Japan were equally uncertain however, as the limitations on Japan's immigration system weighed heavily on their minds. As mentioned above, the Japanese visa system has ensured that Chinese people enter and continue to live in Japan in increasingly

convenient and legal ways. At the same time, migrants on these temporary visas have few symbolic or political rights. Similarly, permanent and long-term resident visa holders have no right to engage in local politics and find it extremely difficult to gain nationality due to Japan's requirement of descent for citizenship (*ius sanguinius*). For most people, this is not a concern, however many of my interlocutors would cite this example as a cynical reason for not staying in Japan longer. Consequently, it is very rare to find a naturalized citizen amongst the Chinese people living in Ikebukuro, even amongst those who have lived there for 25 years. According to my interlocutors' understanding, this is because you must change your name to a Japanese one, give up Chinese citizenship and register permanently with a municipal government in order to gain Japanese citizenship. In actuality these conditions have not been part of the official regulations since 1985, but are maintained as a convention within many of the local government offices that administer the municipal registration system (JPN: *koseki*) (Morris-Suzuki 2002; Morris-Suzuki 2010). In this way, institutional forces or the threat of now-defunct institutional practices can keep a subject mobile past their desire to remain so.

The inability to remain in Japan permanently, and the fear of being 'seaweed' in China, place many mobile Chinese people in a difficult position. They are faced with the socio-economic obstacles of mobility, while also no longer being able to cease being mobile. The uncertainties associated with this kind of lifestyle

were often described as a 'floating' (CHN: *piao*), and also occasionally 'floating/wandering' (CHN: *fuyou*). Vanessa Fong's research on young Chinese abroad has also noted the common use of the term.

'Transnational Chinese students often describe their sojourns in developed countries as conditions of floating (*piao*), a concept associated with instability, transience, uncertainty, and a lack of rootedness.' (Fong, 2011: 98)

In general 'floating' has a negative connotation, constituted by a lack of agency and sense of indeterminacy. The story of 'Laoliu' demonstrates the personal tensions found within negotiations of place, with its associated diasporic imaginaries and life projects. Moreover, it demonstrates how the normalized fantasy of mobility as a means to personal betterment popular in China conflicts with the everyday imperatives of embodied mobility and the life choices presented therein.

I first met Laoliu whilst watching a billiards game with a group of my informants. They held a weekly match on Wednesdays to play for small amounts of money and blow off steam from their otherwise hectic work and study lives. I sat on a couch near the tables discussing my research question with a new friend I had been introduced to when Laoliu approached us. He wore a grey pinstriped suit and had his hair slicked back in a fashion almost reminiscent of pop culture images of Japanese mafia.

He often spoke to me weaving Japanese nouns and adjectives into otherwise Chinese sentence structures, and occasionally using the Chinese pronunciation of a Japanese character

compound. He described Japan as a ‘benri’ (JPN: *convenient*) place where everyone’s ‘suzhi’ (CHN: *quality*) was high. In particular, he talked of how he wanted to learn the Japanese approach to ‘service’ (CHN: *fuwu*) as he thought it was decidedly lacking in Northeast China. Amongst the people I had met so far, he was the most enthusiastic about his life in Japan. He also suggested applying for Japanese citizenship.

Over the course of my fieldwork, Laoliu and I became very close, and I discovered things about his life that brought many nuances to his original performance of affluence and enthusiasm. In contrast to his initial display of certainty about his life project in Japan, perhaps a year after our initial meeting he came to a crossroads that made him question many things. I received a phone call from him at around 2am in the morning. He was tentative and sounded concerned, eventually asking me for advice. He explained to me that his Japanese boss had offered him a significant promotion, but that he didn’t know whether he wanted to take it.

Despite Laoliu’s excitement about Japan, when faced with the actuality of living there for another five years (the contract for the promotion), he became incredibly distressed. He discussed with me at length how he wanted to get married but could never marry a Japanese woman; how he wanted to take care of his family but that they could never come to Japan; how he could make more money elsewhere in China perhaps, but that he didn’t have any connections. Finally he said that ‘most importantly this isn’t my home.’ I asked if he’d like me to meet him and suggested that we call some

of his friends, but he declined. Despite repeated phone calls he remained withdrawn for the next month, until he finally got back in touch and told me he had decided not to take the promotion but remain in his current job, waiting to see if he had a change of heart. He then said he’d just ‘float’ in Japan (CHN: *piao zai riben*).

The distress experienced by Laoliu due to the tensions between his desires to be a successful mobile subject, take care of his family and be in a place he felt he belonged is but one example of the disruptions contemporary regimes of mobility bring for young mobile Chinese. Amongst my interlocutors the sense of being unsure was incredibly common. The tensions between places and life projects created this alienation. Laoliu did not simply wish to belong in Japan, nor did he just wish to return home. The movement between places has left him vulnerable to his sense of simultaneous uncertainty and obligation. In this sense, the normalization of regimes of mobility within and from China has not produced Chinese subjects that perfectly fit into it. Despite the official encouragement of certain kinds of mobility between China and Japan, mobility still presents conflicting imperatives and difficulties for young mobile Chinese people.

Laoliu’s reaction to his uncertainty was not hapless. It demonstrated a distinct sense of navigation; even if only a short term strategy. It was difficult to find out more about Laoliu’s motivations, as he did not want to talk about it. However, his reaction suggests a tactical navigation of the mobile forces and options presented to him. Rather than choose a particular certainty (to take the promotion or

return to China), Laoliu opted to forego any immediate outcomes. He rejected both immobility and mobility, finding a solution more akin to ‘floating’ than voluntary movement. He kept his options open for the foreseeable future by keeping multiple life trajectories and mobilities open.

An everyday practice approach is useful in understanding Laoliu’s attempts to negotiate the limitations of mobility. In discussing everyday practice, De Certeau suggests we distinguish between ‘tactics’ and ‘strategies.’ Strategies are more purposefully political and often refer to attempts to change socio-cultural and spatial orders. In contrast, ‘tactics’ are ways of operating that often undercut wider forces without necessarily changing them. They are what makes up much of everyday practice.

Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many ‘ways of operating’: victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’ (whether the strength be that of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order etc.), clever tricks, maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, poetic as well as warlike (de Certeau 1998)

Vigh also applies De Certeau’s dichotomy of tactics and strategies to his concept of navigation (2009). ‘Coupling the idea of navigation with a conceptual dichotomy from De Certeau (1988), we can say that strategy is the process of demarcating and constituting space and tactics the process of navigating it.’ (Vigh, 2009: 424)

Rather than portraying Laoliu as totally distraught, I would suggest his decision to ‘float’ was a tactical one.

Unable to change the wider regimes that shaped the options presented to him he opted to drop his sails and stop navigating for a while. This suggests the tactical uses of immobility and ‘floating’ in young mobile Chinese attempts to negotiate the disruptions and disjuncture found within wider regimes of mobility.

Conclusion

Reflecting on his research on international Lebanese migrants, Ghassan Hage states, ‘it is a mistake to think that if people move across national borders, this movement is necessarily the most significant and defining element in their lives’ (Hage, 2005: 459). Critical of migration literature’s tendency to overemphasize the importance of ‘imagined communities’ and mobility as the defining aspects of migration, he argues for more careful ethnographic attention to what is symbolically significant in people’s actual lives. To highlight what is significant in peoples’ lives however, we must also take note of the ‘insignificant.’

This paper has taken the banal tone of Chinese migrants’ narratives of mobility in Tokyo as a sign that the act of movement does not stand out as the most exceptional aspect of their lives. Rather, it is a ‘tactic’ that fits into wider regimes of mobility found between China’s drive for educational and economic success, and Japan’s own visa system which acts as a proxy labour migration scheme. The significant elements that motivate young Chinese moving to Japan are not the act of migration itself, but rather a

wide range of everyday imperatives. For many young people like Xiaochen, it was the failure to get into a good university. For others it was the desire to be with loved ones. Finally, some of my interlocutors simply found it hard to justify not moving to Japan when an opportunity arose. These factors are the flux of the 'everyday' which constitute the wider mobilities we navigate. They are perhaps smaller eddies, currents and whirlpools than the wider transnational flows between China and Japan, but on the experiential level, they appeared to be what counted for my interlocutors.

An approach which emphasizes mobility as an 'everyday practice,' with 'navigation' and 'making do' as its focal point, is a useful interpretive tool. It allows us to explore the contours of what Noel B Salazar and Allen Smart call the 'embodied practices of mobility and world-shaping meanings of mobility', which can be interpreted as the imaginaries associated with mobility versus the act of moving (Salazar and Smart 2011: 594). Indeed, Salazar has also noted that imaginaries are a dynamic mobile phenomena in themselves (Salazar 2011). In the context of Chinese migration to Japan, the 'world-shaping meanings of mobility' are produced by a governmental drive for educational and economic success, which are then internalised within parents' hopes and desires for their children and a more general valuing of the self as a 'modern Chinese subject' (Nyiri, 2010). These meanings intersect with the imaginaries which shape the place of foreigners in Japan. Over the past twenty years they have been treated as an instrumental fix to economic problems with very few discourses of multiculturalism forming

around Chinese migrants to create new 'world-making meanings' that place them in Japan long term. In this sense, they are almost forcefully made transnational due to the meanings which situate them.

The embodied practice of moving articulates with these wider meanings in several ways. It demonstrates not only obstacles to movement, but also how individuals struggle to control certain mobilities. For Xiaochen and others, the meanings generated from China's regimes of mobility normalize the experience of moving to Japan. It is experienced as uneventful, and is described as merely a 'tactical' option taken due to other imperatives. It was described by many young Chinese in Japan as only partly their own choice, suggesting the choice between multiple mobilities as an obstacle in itself. As Laoliu's story shows the embodied fact of being mobile means new imaginaries are presented. However, this is not necessarily liberating. For Laoliu, an offer to take a promotion and remain in Japan, triggered several other conflicting hopes and desires he had for the future, some of which longed for a less mobile lifestyle. As in Vigh's argument that the embodied practice of mobility always takes place in a world that is also changing and in motion, Laoliu found himself contending with possible mobilities that disrupted his sense of place in the world. Although he originally felt like a mobile modern Chinese subject, new options revealed his uncertain feelings. Overwhelmed by the options presented to him, he asserted himself through his 'everyday practice'; tactically choosing to be immobile, or at least 'floating' rather than 'navigating'.

Mobility is neither liberating nor oppressive. It is not indicative of subjects situated as victims of global capital nor as free agents. Rather, mobility is a constant feature of our social worlds and is expressed by agents as a part of everyday practice. Although movement overseas is statistically exceptional, it is not experienced as such by young mobile Chinese living in Ikebukuro, Tokyo. Their experiences remind us that it is not their status as migrants or students that merit anthropological attention, but their lives as an example of being human, which mobility is an important part of. The term 'floating' used by young mobile Chinese draws our

attention to the ways in which mobility and fluidity serve as useful metaphors for people in their daily lives. Through the metaphor of 'floating' the transience of the everyday takes on new meanings that are reflected in the fluid metaphors of mobility scholars. However, it is important to distinguish between mobility as an etic theoretical interest, and mobile metaphors used by our interlocutors themselves. For many, the language of mobility is not concerned with the act of moving but the inertia of everyday life. For them, everyday life is already moving, and the imperative to navigate this is what defines their daily practice.

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