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## **The Cruel Optimism of Mobility: aspiration and the “good life” among transnational Chinese migrants in Tokyo**

**Jamie Coates**

**Abstract:** Over the past 30 years, moving overseas has been a positively valued aspiration in China. On both a government level, and within popular discourse, migration has been propagated as a means to better citizens, and better nation, resonating with families’ desire for a better life. However, there are consequences for those who move, in terms of belonging and how they imagine their life projects. This paper extends the established scholarship on mobility out of China by comparing the rhetorical construction of mobility with the experiences of Chinese migrants in Japan. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among educationally-channelled Chinese migrants in Tokyo, I show how the imaginaries that shape migrant projects are constituted by conflicting aspirations and desires. The mismatch between daily experiences and discursively informed perceptions of what constitutes a “good life” and “success”, in many senses resemble what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism”. Educationally-channelled migration out of China is posited as a desirable object-idea that is “cruel” because the “cluster of promises” that constitute its “optimism” cannot be reconciled with the mobile lifeworlds of many Chinese transmigrants. Due to the impossibility of simultaneously achieving the promises of success, pleasing one’s family, and attaining a sense of cosmopolitanism, many migrants resign themselves to the

instabilities of mobile life. Their experiences are suggestive of the consequences of a world that increasingly celebrates mobility, with implications for how “being at home in the world” is imagined today. **Keywords:** China, Japan, Mobility, Belonging, Cruel Optimism

Azhou is a paragon of success in many ways. Having come to Japan from Shenyang, Northern China, 13 years ago on a pre-college visa at the age of 20, he now holds permanent Japanese residency and runs two successful businesses near Ikebukuro, a vibrant area in Northwest Tokyo. He owns a home near his workplace, where he lives with his Chinese wife and their first child. Despite all of the positive aspects of his life, Azhou’s successes have led him to doubt the purpose of his decisions, and turned him to more philosophical questions about what constitutes a good life in general. One evening a few days before the birth of his son, I found Azhou watching his friends play billiards in one of the halls in Ikebukuro that Chinese migrants frequent. His wife was in hospital under observation in case she went into labour early, and he had ducked away to spend time with friends before the demands of fatherhood were upon him. Sitting at a bench on the side of the tables, he quietly puffed on a cigarette, watching others go through the motions of setting up, and swiftly finishing, a succession of billiards games. I approached and asked, “Not playing today?” He responded, “Just thinking and watching, just thinking and watching”.

As I joined him in thinking and watching, Azhou's thoughts were obviously elsewhere. After a while, he posited a difficult question: "What is the use of success (*chenggong*)?" All of his "successes", from moving to Japan to running two businesses and getting married, have enabled Azhou to live a reasonably "good life" but at the same time he felt unsettled and discontent. While he had always seen making money and having a family as purposeful enough, he now wondered why these accomplishments left him feeling empty. We had discussed the concept of belonging (*guishugan*) in my previous research with Azhou, and so, deploying the language of the social sciences, he stated that he had thought these accomplishments would have given him a clearer sense of where he belonged, and yet they did not. He continued that he envied those with fervent beliefs, such as Christians, who would have a goal (*mubiao*) no matter where they went in life. In contrast, he stated that he always simply grabbed what came his way. He felt like he was always on the move, and yet wherever he went, he never felt like he had arrived.

Within psychology and its cognate disciplines, it is now generally accepted that humans have a universal need to create a sense of belonging (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Belongingness has been defined as the ability to develop and maintain long term relationships; to feel some connection to a group of people or place. However, as Azhou's associations with the term suggest, the definition of belonging need not be limited to these relationships. The technical term for belonging in Chinese (*guishugan*), much like its English counterpart, is less clearly defined in

everyday use. One can belong (*guishu*) to a place, to a family or group, to an institution or a nation. Belonging is the sense that one fits into some kind of categorical schema, whether social, spatial, or political. Accepting the proposition that belonging is a universal need infers that it is at the core of how people relate to the world. Consequently, the feeling that one does not belong is as much an existential threat as a social one.

To recognise belonging as an existential question, is to acknowledge that it is a “struggle between contending forces and imperatives” (Jackson 2005: xi). It goes beyond a quantifiable number of social relationships and reflects a person’s quest to find their place in the world. Azhou’s questions suggest the at times contradictory nature of belonging. Soon to create new relationships as a father that are likely to affect his sense of place in the world, he turns to another site of potential belonging among his friends to reflect on his life. Leaving his wife in hospital to join his friends while also questioning his place in the world implies that, for some, personal reflections on belonging may flip-flop and circulate between multiple and at times conflicting relationships to social groups, places and ideals.

Anthropologists such as Michael Jackson and Timothy Ingold have connected a phenomenology of how we belong in the world to Heidegger’s discussion of “dwelling” (Ingold 2000; M. Jackson 2013). Heidegger understood existential “being” to be constituted by the processes of “building” and “dwelling” (Heidegger 1975). Ingold extends this concept through a discussion of nomadic peoples’

experiences to argue that “dwelling” does not rely on building in a concrete sense, but rather is premised on an active engagement with the world. People can “dwell” while on the move, suggesting active engagement with the world that is constitutive of an existential sense of belonging. Taking inspiration from Michael Jackson and Ingold, I address belonging and dwelling as a wider existential question of “being at home in the world”.

... we feel at home in the world when what we do has some effect and what we say carries some weight. We feel equal to the world. We have the whole wide world in our hands, though without any sense that we govern or possess it. There is a balance between knowing that we are shaped by a world which seems largely outside our grasp, and knowing that we, nevertheless, in some small measure, shape it. (Jackson 2000: 214)

From an existential perspective, to “be at home in the world” is not only to belong to a place or group, but rather to feel that the processes that constitute “dwelling”, such as one’s decisions, actions, and goals that underpin life projects, share a common logic and affective base with the schemas of belonging that produce one’s lifeworld.

Hearing repeated conversations like Azhou’s I often ask, “What shapes migrants’ sense of ‘being at home in the world’? And what role do notions of success and mobility play in shaping the potential for this kind of belonging?” The psychologist Greg A. Madison has argued that questions of belonging in a mobile world are increasingly posited at an individual existential level (Madison 2009). Subject to mobile imaginaries related to tourism, media, and adventure, it is difficult

to generate a sense of belonging while staying in one place today. A mobile world constantly makes promises of other places and other lifestyles as well as economic advantages that foster a “good life” (Benson and Osbaldiston 2014). And so, discourses of mobility increasingly shape one’s capacity to view one’s place in the world as “good”.

These vicissitudes are an important part of how we understand Chinese mobility today. As Julie Chu has noted, the tensions between mobility and immobility are an important element of everyday life within China (Chu 2010). Borrowing from semiotics, Chu argues that mobility, as a quality that signifies, is central to normative expectations and values in contemporary China. Focusing on Fuzhounese villagers who have both left to migrate and been left behind, Chu shows how the politics of embodying mobility in everyday life is an important part of the ways Fuzhounese people signify that they are “going somewhere”. This “politics of destination” as Chu calls it, is cosmological as much as migratory, and is embodied in the commodities and religious practices of both those who desire not to be left behind and those on the move. Chu’s interlocutors’ obsession with (im)mobility are concerned with being seen as modern and successful. In ways reminiscent of Jackson’s discussion of life projects and lifeworlds, the mobile worlds Fuzhounese villagers occupy connect to their concerns with how being mobile attributes value to their life projects. To be modern is to be mobile, and the vagaries of performing mobility, through migration and material objects, is an important part of “being at home in the world” in China today.

Mobility discourses are situated in webs of “different, sometimes contradictory meanings underlying our most fundamental beliefs about progress, freedom, individuation, and power” (Berland 2005:696). As in my discussion with Azhou and the testimonies of Chu’s interlocutors, these meanings are linked through the language of “success” and the central role that mobility plays in everyday discourse. Among Chinese people today social mobility and belonging increasingly intersect with the experiences and goals of geographic mobility. Within this paper my aim is to explore the tensions between mobility as a positively valued discourse that shapes cultural schemas for understanding the “good life,” and the vicissitudes of mobile life. Focusing on the case of Chinese migrants in Japan, I explore how this tension affects their capacity to develop a sense of “being at home in the world”.

### **The Cruel Optimism of Mobility**

Azhou’s tale reflects the tales of many migrants born in the 1980s who have moved from China to Japan. These young Chinese migrants describe their lives as transient and at times disappointing, despite their many personal stories of economic success. They are in many ways exemplars of the dreams envisioned by many Chinese people hoping to move overseas (Fong 2006); first moving for study before establishing a business or finding work in an overseas company. Moreover, they fulfil the goals of the Chinese government while pursuing their own, creating transnational business networks through study and work (Xiang 2003; Nyiri 2010; Liu-Farrer 2011; Liu-Farrer 2014).

Narratives of educational mobility play a central role in the Chinese national imaginary, advocating for a stronger sense of China's place in the world.

Many of the national heroes of Chinese modernity studied overseas prior to 1949. These include figures such as Lu Xun who studied in Japan and Zhou Enlai who studied in Japan and France. Moreover, in the reform era, many of the failures of the Maoist period were attributed, on both a governmental and popular level, to failures within the People's Republic of China's (PRC) education policy. Consequently, as part of reform policy since the 1980s the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has actively promoted overseas study. For example, a 1992 State Council report stated the principles of overseas study policy to be "support study abroad, promote return, [uphold] freedom of movement," and "promote overseas individuals to serve the country" (Nyiri 2001: 637). Many of these narratives have affected young people's perceptions of overseas study, and the position of China in the world (Fong 2004; Fong 2011). Posited as a critical "culturally intimate" take on China's development, studying overseas has become both a form of "filial nationalism" (2004) and a means to obtain "political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security" (2011:142). The nexus of educational and migration related discourses in China today posit migration as a positively valued dream among many young Chinese people and constitutes another example of the "politics of destination" in China today.

Education and migration exist as rhetorical objects as much as lived experiences. Their interconnected nature posits them as an important part of contemporary regimes of mobility in China that shape ideals around what constitutes a “good life” as well as what it means to be a “modern Chinese subject” (Chu 2011; Nyiri 2010). However, what are the experiential consequences of the positive valuing of educational migration? I argue that the mismatch between positively valued discourses of educational migration and the experiences of Chinese migrants in Japan can at times function as a form of “cruel optimism”. Lauren Berlant coined the term “cruel optimism” to describe how the rhetorical construction of objects of desire are framed in such a way that the realisation of said desire is compromised (Berlant 2011). Berlant explores how it is that many within the Anglophone world remain attached to notions of the “good life”, such as personal wealth, thinness, and companionate love, despite the conditions for these desires becoming increasingly unattainable for the majority. Optimism, according to Berlant, is constituted by “clusters of promises” reified as “object-ideas” of desire within discourse (23-24). What is cruel about these “object-ideas” is the way their constitutive promises are contradictory to the point where they inhibit the possibility of the desired “object-idea”. In using the term “cruel optimism” Berlant does not suggest a state of suffering so much as the paradoxical nature of contemporary attachments and desires.

While Berlant speaks explicitly to the problematic nature of promises associated with the “American dream” under neoliberal restructuring, China’s

obsession with mobility as a signifier of the “good life” under rapid economic development can be critiqued in similar ways. Such trends are particularly pertinent to those who have moved overseas in pursuit of educational attainment and wealth due to the expectation that these forms of “success” will also bolster one’s sense of “being at home in the world”. To be considered “modern” and “successful” acts as a form of “being at home in the world” because it positions subjects within cultural schemas of emplacement that have a sense of destination. Within contemporary Chinese rhetoric one not only belongs to a family or group, but also to the world, to the nation and to an era. Moreover, one’s actions are seen as a direct reflection of this belonging. And so, positively valued mobility is framed as a “cluster of promises” that not only connote economic and social “success” but also other forms of belonging encapsulated in visions of the “good life”. The ideals that inform these modes of belonging include being a good son or daughter, being patriotic, as well as at times contradictory desires for both cosmopolitanism and local belonging.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork among Chinese migrants in Ikebukuro, my research to date has explored how the experiences of Chinese people in Japan relate to these wider theoretical questions. My research was conducted over two periods of intensive fieldwork from 2009 to 2011 and 2014 to 2016. Through my research I found that young Chinese in Japan are torn between two national institutional frameworks, cosmopolitan and parochial desires, and feel the tensions between individual success and personal familial commitments (Coates 2013; Fong 2011; Liu-Farrer 2011 and 2014). Consequently, their sense of belonging is rarely

attached to a specific place, but rather shaped by projects of education, employment, and social mobility. These projects relate to each other in conflicting ways at times, with implications for Chinese migrants' sense of "being at home in the world".

The value attributed to moving overseas has a historical and life course dimension. In the 1980s and 1990s, studying overseas was seen as a means to success among urbanites within major Chinese cities with the trend continuing to newly developed inland parts of China in the early 2000s. Today it is understood that one is just as likely to become rich in China as elsewhere, and so the positive value attributed to studying overseas has become as much about attaining cultural skills as economic gain. Due to the relatively recent trend of Chinese migration to Japan, a significant proportion of migrants are yet to reach certain life stages. Those who came in the early 1990s face the difficulties of raising the first generation of new overseas Chinese (*xinhuaqiao*) in Japan. Many of their children are now approaching adulthood and the social relationships they maintain in China have created chains of migration among friends' children in the mainland.

Within this paper I do not focus on this group. I explore the later wave of migrants born since the 1980s who are mostly childless and unmarried, although some of them, such as Azhou, are currently taking the first steps into parenthood. Due to the two periods of fieldwork I conducted I have been able to study the motivations of young new arrivals over a period of time, and also follow a particular group as they enter a new lifestage. The people I conducted my fieldwork with were

a unique slice of contemporary Chinese migration to Japan. As the first generation to grow up entirely in China's reform era, they were subjected to discourses that considered the value of China's population in terms of the global economy. Valued in terms of how they fared in a globally competitive market, these young Chinese also framed their sense of "being at home in the world" in terms of economic and educational success. In this sense, to belong was to be envisioned as a "modern Chinese subject" in the eyes of many young Chinese people.

Among my interlocutors who have remained in Japan over my two periods of fieldwork, tensions between the competing promises of mobility have become apparent. I have found this often results in a cynical attitude towards mobile life. Migration scholars have noted that transnational lifestyles often leave migrants positioned between the many frameworks that produce belonging (Huang, Yeoh, and Lam 2008) which can be interpreted as a form of liminality (Turner 1967; Van Gennep 1925). Socially located between family and friends spread across the globe, their lives are betwixt and between. The "cruel optimism" of mobility is a useful addition to the discussion of liminality because it connects subjects' desires and attachments to their liminal position and questions the rhetorical means through which these desires are produced. Transnational migration can be experienced as both affliction and blessing when Chinese migrants in Japan achieve some of their mobile dreams only to find their achievements beget other unattainable desires. They end up caught between differing conceptions of economic success in Japan and economic success in China; between building a life in Japan and returning to China;

between the subjectivities they have become accustomed to in Japan and those they nostalgically long for at home.

### **The Promises of Moving to Japan**

Since the opening reforms of the early eighties, mobility has been at the centre of discussions around the “modern” in the PRC, whether reconnecting previous flows of Chinese migrants within Southeast Asia (Ong 1999), encouraging new entrepreneurial investment (Nyiri 2010), or promoting overseas study as patriotic and filial (Fong 2004). Inversely, the inability to move is a great source of anxiety for some, as Chu has shown in her work on those “stuck in place” in rural southern China (2010). Within this section I explore the discursive origins of the optimism that surrounds educational migration to Japan and compare it to the motivations of young migrants and their parents. I show how government discourses surrounding mobility; families’ desires for social mobility; popular cultural representations of mobile lives and destinations; and the ways these meanings affect individual perceptions of their life project, form the “cluster of promises” of the “cruel optimism” of mobility.

The popularity of moving overseas is encapsulated in the term, “leaving country fever” (*chuguore*), which has multiple layers of political and popular meaning. The term “fever” (*re*) had particular importance during the Maoist era, and is associated with being demonstrably enthusiastic (*relie*). In the reform era, “fever”

is used to describe any type of “craze” that attracts a lot of followers such as “investing in the stock market (*gupiaore*), going to the disco (*disikere*), or learning English (*xueyingyure*)” (Palmer 2007:150). “Leaving country fever” has resulted in the rapid growth of migrant groups in some unexpected places. Japan is one such place.

Despite the historical and continuing animosities between China and Japan, Chinese nationals have become the largest group of non-Japanese living in Japan. What is more, this growth is recent and can be attributed to factors surrounding the popularization of overseas migration in China’s reform era. From 44,000 mostly ‘old overseas Chinese’ (*laohuaqiao*) in 1984, the registered Chinese population in Japan has grown exponentially. Following 2010 there was a temporary dip in the official Chinese population in Japan, however this was partly because Taiwanese nationals were recorded separately from 2012, and partly because of political and environmental circumstances that triggered a short decline in migration to China. 2010 to 2014 saw panics following the 2011 Fukushima crisis; deteriorating relations between China and Japan due to the Senkaku/Diaoyu island dispute; and a weakening yen. Despite these circumstances, the registered Chinese population with ‘resident status’ (*zairyū shikaku*) grew to over 730,000 by the end of 2017 (MOJ 2018). These figures are calculated by nationality rather than ethnicity and they are a conservative estimate of Japan’s Chinese population. <sup>1</sup>

The growth of the Chinese population in Japan has been significantly influenced by educationally channelled migration (Liu-Farrer 2011). China has become the world's largest exporter of international students and overseas study is seen as increasingly synonymous with the term "leaving country fever". As a popular website for Chinese students in the UK reported in 2013, due to the popularity of overseas study, China's "leaving country fever" is "roasting without a decline in temperature" (*gaoshao butui*) (UKER.net 2013). In 2010 there were 847,259 recorded Chinese international students, constituting three times more than the second largest exporter, India (UNESCO 2018). Year to year, Japan has usually been the third or fourth most popular destination for tertiary education, with the US ranked first, Australia second, and Japan, Canada, and the UK competing for the other top positions.

There are a large variety of visas to Japan that can be grouped under the category of education-related visas, including "exchange student visas" (*ryūgaku*) and several technical and cultural visas available to post-graduate students. As Liu-Farrer has explained, the educational visa system in Japan acted as a form of proxy labour migration (2011). Immigration has been a heated political issue since Japan's economy slowed in the early 1990s. Under Prime Minister Nakasone, the rhetoric of "internationalisation" (*kokusaika*) was introduced into Japanese politics in the 1980s, and a new drive to attract international students was promoted as a cornerstone of this policy. At the same time, with signs of a decline in birth-rates and an ageing population, fears of labour shortages also entered policy debates.

Long term immigration policies were generally seen as too contentious in Japan because it was not imagined as an immigrant country (Roberts 2018). Consequently, a variety of work allowances were introduced into non-permanent visa categories that allowed for increases in temporary labour. Educational visas allowed students to work long hours legally, and the tendency to employ students for more hours than their legal entitlement was generally tolerated. Many young Chinese have moved to Japan on student visas while working long hours and engaging in various activities that blur the lines between educational and labour migration. The intersections between these political and economic developments in Japan, and the promotion of educational mobility in China can be seen as a significant influence on the rise of Chinese migration to Japan.

When visas available to Japan are collated, Japan stands as one of the largest recipients of educationally channelled Chinese migrants today (MOJ 2018). At the end of 2018, educational visas constituted roughly 20% of total registered Chinese visas. Tokyo holds the largest concentration of Chinese migrants, making up one third of the Chinese population in Japan. However, even this significant figure masks the importance and magnitude of educationally channelled migration. Among the registered Chinese population, the number of permanent residents has doubled over the past 10 years, with 248,873 permanent residents as of the end of 2017. The tendency to remain, noted in extant scholarship in Chinese migration to Japan (Tajima 2003), alongside observations in my own research, suggests that a significant proportion of permanent residents were formerly students. The majority

of my interlocutors, aged between 18 and 35, were either on education-related visas or had originally come to Japan on education-related visas before finding work sponsorship or starting a business. Consequently, although only a portion of Chinese nationals in Japan are on student visas at a given time, student visas represent a common experience for many Chinese migrants.

The “fever” of moving overseas for study is experienced, imagined, and enacted in a wide variety of ways. One significant influence is the ways parents act as a channel for the governmental promotion of educational desire (Kipnis 2011) and its relationship to mobility. Several scholars have shown that although Chinese students face various barriers in attaining education and employment, educational migration has served as a vibrant site of social mobility for many, fulfilling the aspirations of households as much as individuals (Fong 2004; Liu-Farrer 2014). One parent who came to visit his son in Japan described sending his son as a form of “investment” (*touzi*). Having built a small private business in Liaoning, in northern China, he sent his son to Liaoning’s sister-city in Tochigi prefecture in hope of promoting trade between his business and that region. His son’s mobility was envisioned as part of the family’s quest for social mobility, evidenced in his father’s emphasis on learning in Japan as a means to consolidating trade-ties and becoming wealthy. Another parent emphasized the experience her son needed in order to live a “good life” (*haoshenghuo*). Citing her fears that life in China as a single child would not help him mature (*chengshou*), she stated that an independent life in Japan, as a clean, “civilized” (*wenming*) and technologically advanced country, was the best

environment within which he could develop. Indeed, with fears of social instability and pollution, she expressed interest in moving her whole family to Japan once her son was established.

Students I spoke to reflected on their desire to please their parents in describing their motivations, albeit with greater emphasis on the practicalities of studying overseas. For example, some students opted to side-step the highly competitive entrance exam system in China (*gaokao*) by giving themselves an additional two years of study on the “pre-college” visa in Japan before applying for one of Japan’s less competitive universities. For those born in the 1980s that moved to Japan in the early 2000s, concerns about the poor quality of education in China were a major motivating factor. A woman in her early 30s from Tianjin described her motivations behind moving to Japan ten years earlier in the following way:

I wanted to go for the best. Get out of China and go to a developed country to learn more. I was sure that the education wasn’t very good in China then. Now of course things have changed, but at that time I thought, “I should go for the best in Asia!”

The younger generation of students born in the 1990s have voiced similar opinions about Japan’s status in East Asia, but they placed greater emphasis on specific industries or programmes available in Japan. As this pool of students continues to grow within my field site, I have noted the greater influence of the image of Japan as a hub for cultural industries in East Asia. This shift in attitudes among new arrivals

over my two periods of fieldwork suggests the increasing influence of popular culture on mobile aspirations and choice of destination (Iwabuchi 2010; Otmazgin 2013). Younger students are more likely to be interested in Japanese popular culture, as well as holding aspirations to enter programmes that relate to these industries. As Jinjin, a woman in her 20s who enrolled in an animation training programme described:

Japan is a world leader in animation and is more influential in China than Disney and such. When I was in high school I loved animation and comic books, but my parents thought it was a waste of time to only study these things. Coming to Japan means that I have other marketable skills [Japanese language-ability] while I can do something I enjoy.

While there is a trend towards young Chinese specifically choosing Japan, generally speaking, Chinese students described how motivations to leave China preceded their choice of destination. It was the ability to move overseas that first grabbed their interest before they chose Japan as their destination. Even Jinjin, who was explicitly interested in Japan, explained that because her mother had many friends with children overseas, it was never really a question as to whether she would go abroad. “Actually, regardless of whether it was Japan or another country,” she told me, “the plan was, from a young age, to send me overseas. Japan ended up being the closest. And it’s cheaper than America. The fact that I like animation came after this bigger plan”. While Jinjin had personal goals woven into her mother’s plans, many young Chinese did not have specific reasons why they chose Japan, but

said that they thought they should go overseas and Japan was the closest place. To young people who grew up with the possibility of overseas study in the highly competitive reform era, moving overseas as an ideal had become “normal” and was described in mundane ways. In this sense, the question as to why you might study overseas was rarely, “Why?” but rather, “Why not?” I interpret the banality of their migration narratives as a symptom of the normalization of overseas study as a vehicle for economic and cultural success, echoing Julie Chu’s observation that mobility is a quali-sign which “recasts mobility’s relationship to modernity as normative” (2010:14).

Mobility’s normalization does not reflect how statistically common movement is; study overseas is still only the privilege of a minority in China. Rather, normalization refers to the hegemonic normativity of mobility as an ideal. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe define hegemony as when “a *particular* social force assumes the representation of a *totality* that is radically incommensurable with it” (1985:x). Mobility is positively valued to the degree that it is normatively viewed as desirable, even if only possible for some. While for parents, the ability to move is more often posited as a “dream” the hegemonic normativity of mobility ensures that it is also viewed as part of the practical logics of being young in China today. Going to Japan, although desirable in the abstract sense, was the second choice for most, and was narrated as a pragmatic choice by the majority of my interlocutors.

Fong's work on young Chinese students moving overseas has documented how their dream of going to a "developed country" (*fadaguo*), alongside their parents' hopes for their children, have fuelled the "leaving country fever" phenomenon (2011). These countries were referred to as "paradise" (*tiantang*), and although it was considered the less prestigious "silver path" (*yinse*), 42% of her informants had spent at least 6 months in Japan, making it the most common mediator in the mobility goals of the young Chinese Fong interviewed. Many of her interlocutors found themselves in Japan despite dreaming of elsewhere, and would eventually move on to another location even if that too wasn't their first choice.

Xiaoli, the son of a well-connected professor in Nanjing who had studied in Germany before moving to Japan explained to me how the "quality" (*suzhi*) of Chinese migrants in Japan was historically lower than those who went to other places. According to Xiaoli, Japan's lower school fees and cheaper airfares ensured that a lot of "low quality" people were able to come to Japan, and that generally speaking, the children of the newly wealthy families of China (*fu*) would never choose the "silver path". He added that people who had travelled to Japan over 10 years ago were particularly unlikely to have "quality", and that he has met people from a wider range of backgrounds than he did while in Germany. The socioeconomic backgrounds of young migrants in Japan tend to be more varied than America, Australia or Canada. However, Xiaoli's comments also suggest another dynamic that shapes contemporary Chinese mobilities, namely, the way in which

mobility as a quali-sign of the modern Chinese subject is related to the discourse of *suzhi* in China.

Often translated as “human quality” or “value”, no term in English fully encapsulates the meaning of the term *suzhi*. In the late 1970s this term became associated with both cultivated and inherent qualities of embodied human subjects. *Suzhi* took on “sacred overtones” marking a hierarchy of “moral distinction” in a “mission of national importance” to raise the quality of Chinese citizens (Kipnis 2007). By the 1990s, the use of the term *suzhi* spread to all forms of citizen building projects, and forms of distinction between groups in China, as well as distinctions between forms of mobility both in and outside of China. Through the rhetoric of *suzhi* internal touristic mobilities are encouraged as a simultaneously cosmopolitan and patriotic practice, while rural-urban mobilities are hotly debated. For some, rural-urban mobility is the only means to improve the “quality” of rural citizens, while for others these same “low quality” citizens are seen as a threat to the urban centres of China (Jacka 2007; Jacka 2009). Paraphrasing Xiaoli’s argument to some of my other interlocutors, their responses suggested a reflexive link between *suzhi*, mobility and education. One young man humorously declared in a group discussion around the topic, “Of course I’m low quality, if I wasn’t I would have gone to America. Japan is the best option for people like me. A dumbass (*shabi*) like me has to come here first.”

While Japan may be compared to other destinations in joking tones, it is still seen as a place that holds many promises. Social and physical mobility promises a particular kind of modern subjectivity; educational attainment and improving one's *suzhi*; fulfilling one's parents hopes; and more recently, pursuing creative goals. The entangled nature of these various aspirations suggests the ways "success" and mobility constitute the primary means through which Chinese subjects develop a sense of "being at home in the world". However, these aspirations do not always nestle easily together

### **The Tensions of a Transnational Lifestyle**

Does the privileged position of mobility within this assemblage of desires and values ensure that it produces a sense of "being at home in the world"? For the young people I have followed over two periods of fieldwork the positive value attached to mobility often means they will not settle for one destination to study and work abroad, but will map out elaborate plans to use each instance of educational and migratory success as a stepping stone to other more ambitious destinations. Chinese migrants are often "tied to family and bound to the labour market" in ways that encourage continued transnational movement (Liu-Farrer 2014). I interpret these ongoing movements and plans as "cruel optimism" because they embody the ways in which the "cluster of promises" associated with mobility are at times irreconcilable. For some, these ongoing mobilities affect their sense of "being at

home in the world” and are reminiscent of what Berlant calls the “impasse” of “cruel optimism”.

The problems associated with migration in and out of China are reflected in metaphors used to describe forms of success or failure. Over the past 30 years, metaphors of mobility such as the terms *haigui* and *haidai* have been particularly influential. The term *haigui* plays with the way the characters for “returning from overseas” are a homonym of the term “sea turtle”. *Haidai* is the antonym-homonym to this term, referring both to “remaining overseas” and “seaweed”. “Sea turtles” are those who, after a period overseas, returned to China to reap the benefits of their overseas experience. In contrast, “seaweed” are those who never returned and never made a success of their time abroad. While these two terms have been part of vernacular discussions of sending, receiving, and return within migration discourse since the 1990s, they were only occasionally used by my interlocutors. My interlocutors emphasised that it was patterns of constant movement, rather than remaining or returning, that commonly represented their experience. This may be due to Japan’s geographic proximity to China, meaning that it is easier to move back and forth, but it also suggests that current Chinese migrant experiences are increasingly constituted by ongoing physical mobility rather than returning or remaining.

Many Chinese migrants in Japan live as transmigrants and transnational mediators (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc 1995; Liu-Farrer 2012). They live

geographically between two places, maintaining a relatively high level of mobility, and fit into the broader trend of recent Chinese migrants who are positioned in a third space of “non-remaining and non-returning” (Cheng 2003). While transnational approaches have often emphasized the agency of migrants as “flexible citizens” and astronauts (Ong 1997), I would suggest that there are limits to this flexibility. These limits are not merely economic or social however, nor do they signify a lack of agency. Rather, these limits relate to how transnational mobility affects “being at home in the world”. The dream of educational mobility perpetuates movement back and forth, where the ideal of success through movement drives people to constantly live a transient lifestyle in hope of somehow achieving a better life. Caught up in the discourses of mobility and success in China, many of my interlocutors found themselves engaged in ongoing mobile projects with no specific destination in sight.

As a 20-year-old woman named Xiaochen said to me in 2011, “I really don’t know how I ended up here”. She had come to Japan under pressure from her family. Having only made passable grades in high school, she was unable to enter any of the highly competitive universities within China’s major urban centres. Instead, she opted to take a diploma in childcare, but could not find work after graduating. Fearful for her future prospects, her parents did some research and found Japanese study visas to be relatively easy to obtain. So, they arranged for her to move overseas in the hope that she would learn Japanese and improve her skills, attempting to improve her economic prospects through self-development overseas.

Xiaochen experienced this as a disruptive and disorienting move that left her with little sense of agency, she nonetheless took advantage of the opportunity to study while working in a local Chinese restaurant. She also occasionally moonlighted as a lunchbox packer in a small factory in Saitama, taking the last train in the evenings and returning in the mornings. Xiaochen's experiences were similar to others I spoke to who were of the same age, regardless of gender. As a young person facing normative aspirations of mobility, it was difficult to imagine how one's life project might not always be on the move.

Xiaochen has now returned to China, called home after the Fukushima crisis in 2011, and escalating tensions between China and Japan. According to Xiaochen she encouraged these reasons among her family because she was not enjoying her time in Japan. Despite her negative experience, Xiaochen contacted me online in 2015 asking for advice about travelling to an English-speaking country for study. The difficulties of her first move have not discouraged her, and Xiaochen is still determined to fulfil her parents' dream of mobile success. She believes she was too young when she went overseas last time, but after spending time idle (*xian*) in China, she felt like she had failed somehow and that she wanted to try again. When I asked whether she wanted to go overseas, she said no, but justified her decision by referencing how overseas study will allow her to get a better job and make her parents happy. At the time of writing she was making preparations to study in New Zealand.

As shown in my earlier conversation with Azhou, the vicissitudes of a mobile lifestyle are apparent even when migrants meet the social criteria for success. Laoliu, a man in his early thirties who had come from a relatively impoverished area in Northwest China, often talked of how poorly he did in school, but spoke proudly of his successes in Japan. He had come to Japan on a pre-college visa, taking a business degree at Takushoku University and a job as a manager for a well-respected hotel chain. Due to his successes he was able to travel back and forth to China on a regular basis for short trips to visit family. Even though he identified as successful in his work however, he still expressed how difficult he found his mobile lifestyle. Fearing that someday it would be difficult to justify a permanent return home, he worried about his obligation to take care of his parents in the future.

Laoliu's experiences suggest that "success" does not resolve the problems associated with managing a mobile life, as he was caught between multiple temporalities and spaces. With a feeling of obligation to his parents, he was both nostalgic for the care they had given him in the past and cognizant of his future responsibilities to them as an only child. At the same time his nostalgia for home held negative associations of backwardness that did not align with his desire for success. His movements between China and Japan expressed an effort to manage his desire to take care of his parents and maintain his business opportunities in Japan. Laoliu's competing desires reflected that the ways migration is a practice of imagination and hope (Pine 2014), imbuing spaces with pasts, presents and futures (Anderson 2015; Friedman 2015).

Laoliu navigated these temporalities by taking trips back home where he would take hand delivered remittances of cash to his parents and Japanese luxury goods for his friends to sell or gift in China. Much like the material circulations of Julie Chu's interlocutors, Laoliu reinforced the image of positively valued mobility and the social "credit" it brought through commodities. These commodities also embodied the successful future he had built for himself in Japan. Such a performance of success was only possible because of the wealth he had accrued moving to Japan, and it did not align easily with a potential future where he might return and settle in China. Despite a desire to do so, Laoliu cast doubts over the future possibility of supporting his parents financially if he returned to China long term. In 2015 Laoliu decided to take permanent residency in Japan, as it would afford him greater ability to travel. As a permanent resident, he could still travel back to China with relative ease, but could also return to Japan. Laoliu told me that permanent residency made it easier for Chinese citizens to visit other countries, suggesting that although permanent residency may be seen as a sign of settlement, it is often a legal means of greater mobility.

Laoliu's back and forth movements on the surface resemble the flexible citizenship of Aihwa Ong's interlocutors, who strategically negotiated visas and legal citizenship in order to pursue economic, educational, and political opportunities (1997). However, attention to how he describes his mobility suggests the limits of his choices. Laoliu described his past and his plans for the future in schismatic and ever-changing ways; at one point speaking nostalgically of the past only to describe

it as an undesirable source of backwardness, and at other times speaking ambitiously of future goals only to retract them when he was reminded of obligations in China or the limits of his circumstances. He experienced his status as a transmigrant as a repetitive cycle rather than flexibility, performing “success” as a transnational migrant through regular trips home. Yet, these circulations were described as a stressful experience for him. When returning to visit his parents, he said he was reminded of how much he had changed, and how “backwards” (*luohou*) his hometown was. Indeed, on one occasion he said with a slightly embarrassed tone that his father’s *suzhi* was insufficient, his father coming from a farming background. Laoliu’s description of these movements thus left me with the impression that he was divided between multiple temporal and spatial poles that reflected wider ideals within China, such as being successful overseas and being a filial son, but these tensions also disrupted his sense of “being at home in the world”. This position is reminiscent of many migrant experiences, such as Sara Friedman’s informants whose liminal status between China and Taiwan lead them to speak mostly in terms of the present to avoid conflicts between pasts and futures (2015).

Bridget Anderson has argued that global migration systems generate a significant sense of precarity and unpredictability because of their capacity to render migrant lives as eternally caught within the present (2015). This observation resonates with Chinese discourse on migration.. The transient, ever-changing and unstable qualities of migration have often been described as the “floating life” in popular Chinese culture (Fong 2011: 97-98). The “floating life” was associated with

the wandering musings of figures such as the poet Li Bai, the writer Shen Fu, and even the classic Daoist philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Historically, “floating” was associated with pleasure as much as precarity, and is an influential part of discussions of pleasure versus responsibility throughout East Asia. For example, the pleasure districts of pre-modern Japan were often referred to as the “floating world”. Metaphors of mobility such as “floating”, have served as classically existential symbols for the vicissitudes and pleasures of impermanence and life in general as much as quali-signs of modernity.

Laoliu’s position as eternally present suggests a pattern of “floating” that is reminiscent of what Berlant calls the “impasse” of “cruel optimism” (2011). An impasse is a point that one cannot move forward from, and in Berlant’s interpretation is often associated with moving on the spot or in circles. If Laoliu lives a “floating life”, then it is one of whirlpools and circulation caught between ties to the past and conflicting futures. According to Berlant, the impasse gives one the sense of movement, without ever going anywhere, and a paradoxical sense of simultaneous accomplishment and failure. The impasse as it relates to cruel optimism describes constant effort to obtain the object of desire, while never actually reaching that goal. Laoliu’s transnational movements and “floating life” resembles an “impasse” in that it is repetitive, and covers the same tracks. He never described his circular movements between China and Japan as achieving anything concrete, but rather as a means of navigating several competing hopes and desires. He described his constant movement as “waiting” (*dengzhe*) on one occasion,

implying that mobility can also be experienced as immobility. Much like Friedman's interlocutors he also tended to speak in the present tense (Friedman 2015: 170-174).

Laoliu's would often hope for some form of fate that would decide whether he continued to move in circles, but never made plans to choose between the various poles of movement that positioned him. His constant movements can thus be read as a strategy to juggle the multiple aspirations that come out of mobility and success as projects, as well as the desire to somehow remain connected to family at home. It demonstrates how even when one meets the social criteria of "success", the tensions between multiple promises of mobility cannot always be easily reconciled.

### **The Consequences of Mobile Lives**

Mobility, as a quali-sign connecting "clusters of promises" that are not always achievable, can have a variety of effects on individuals' sense of "being at home in the world". For some it acted as an impasse, while for others it left them disenchanted with their project of moving overseas. These perceptions often motivated them to choose immobility, despite their many successes. Others simply embraced the vicissitudes of the "floating life" focusing on lifestyles that emphasized individuated life projects filled with temporary forms of "play" (*wan*) and "freedom" (*ziyou*). However, these renegotiations also conflicted with their sense of belonging at times, because it drew them away from the obligations that allowed them to feel

emplaced within categories of kin, friendship, or place. Furthermore, it diminished their capacity for “community” in Japan and promoted very low levels of trust.

In both periods of fieldwork, the younger and newer arrivals I met did not show considerable gender differences in relation to their aspirations for “success” and mobility. Women desired to become a “success” as much as men, and as only children from families that could afford to send them overseas, their families appeared to apply the normative dreams of mobility equally across genders. These shared motivations are reflected in Chinese student numbers in Japan, which are relatively equal between genders. However, in terms of “dwelling” and “belonging” for those in their late twenties and early thirties differences existed. Women in their late twenties and early thirties were more likely to have partners, and in particular they were more likely to have Japanese partners. What is more, they were more likely to have worked in a Japanese company for a period of time. They often found themselves more embedded in the Japanese context, and as Liu-Farrer’s research on gender and employment has shown, they faced significant challenges in terms of gendered expectations in Japan (2009).

The fieldsite I conducted most of my research, Ikebukuro, is a major hub for Chinese sociality in Tokyo. It attracts large numbers of young Chinese migrants, who enjoy the variety of Chinese food, Chinese Karaoke and various other Chinese-language services available in the area. While I often met younger men and women in Ikebukuro, I was also able to follow a cohort of men over the age of thirty over the

two periods of fieldwork. This opportunity allowed me to better understand how the “cruel optimism” of mobility relates to the everyday life choices of Chinese men in Japan. Several men I met through Laoliu stated that they refused to return to China until they felt they had earned enough money, with some even stating they were embarrassed to return simply to visit family and friends. They were all in their early 30s and had lived in Japan for over 5 years. Each of their explanations followed a similar pattern. They said that after making such a big investment in them, their friends and family would expect them to return successful, and they had to ensure that that was the case before going back.

This justification for remaining however, did not always indicate that they were poor, but rather that their own benchmark of success was high to the point where they became disenchanted with their own capacity to achieve their goals. While Chu has shown the ways immobility can produce anxiety, these men’s experiences showed how the anxieties of mobility produce immobility. I heard these kinds of narratives from a university graduate who worked as a driver and tour guide, earning a large amount of money in tips from Chinese customers; from a hairdresser who owned his own salon; from a university graduate who had found employment in a Japanese advertising company; and a wealthy exporter of luxury motorcycle parts. When interviewing the tour guide, he connected his sense of loneliness in Japan to his concerns about how successful he was and how much money he earned. Stating that he refused to return until he was satisfied with his

success, he also expressed deep cynicism of anyone else's capacity to help in this project.

Overseas. You don't have a single person who's concerned. You could say that overseas its tough (*xinku*), you're alone and you have no money. You just go home alone; when you go home you call your parents [in China] only to realize that you've achieved nothing here [Japan] (*yiwusuocheng*) and have no one to rely on. But I won't give up; I don't want to go back until I can return feeling proud of my accomplishments.

He discussed how jaded he was with the relationships he formed with others in Japan, both Chinese and Japanese. Emphasizing that he would not be successful until he controlled his own business, it appeared that his benchmark of success was to become an independent businessman in control of his own life. His remarks suggested the individuating effects of a mobile life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) as well as how "being at home in the world" is increasingly envisioned as having control over one's successes.

Such sentiments were echoed by Cao who, having lived in Japan for over 15 years, had embraced the "floating life" as a slow process of individualization. In collecting the story of his coming to Japan, I asked him how his experiences had shaped his perceptions of who and what was important in his life. When asked who was important in his life, he said:

When I was a child I would have said my parents, then in my 20s I would have said friends or maybe my girlfriend, now I would say myself, not because the others aren't important, but because I am useless to them if I don't put myself first.

Continuing on this train of thought, he explained that he had married a young woman in China and had a son back in his hometown, but that he would be useless to these people if he returned to China. His sense of obligation kept him abroad, and he believed that the best thing he could do as a father is be a strong individual who provides for them. When I asked whether this affected his sense of where he belongs and what his future plans were, he explained to me that he was unsure if he had a sense of belonging, and would happily move to another country, so long as there was a reasonable chance he could make a success of it. Although he stated that one of the most important goals in his life was to make sure his son has a "good life" he also refused to return to China, stating that he preferred to remain "free". Cao's tale mirrors the effects that migration has on kinship and gender relations. As Hsiu-hua Shen notes, long distance family ties can result in married couples taking a "gendered break" from marriage where they live as "situational singles" (Shen 2005; Shen 2014). For "situationally single" men this both frees them from kinship-based obligations, such as sexual fidelity and care, while also reasserting their patriarchal position as providers of economic wealth. Cao maintained several extra-marital affairs in Japan and rarely returned to see his son or wife. Indeed, he explained that

he did not feel as though he really belonged to them as a family, but still felt a responsibility to materially provide for them.

These narratives reflect the ways in which mobility also acts as a gendered qualification, where success and mobility are attached to an idea of masculine “consumerist cosmopolitanism” (Song and Hird 2013; Song and Lee 2010; Louie 2014). The difficulties in reconciling these various ideals, led some of my interlocutors to embrace immobility while maintaining relationships through mobile commodities. In terms of their local practices of “dwelling” however, they extended this logic to their daily lives. Only coming out for work, and rarely engaging in social activities, isolation was a common complaint among these men (Coates 2015). People like Cao renegotiated these immobilities through embracing the “floating life” as a “situational single” expounding the rhetoric of “freedom” to justify his life of play. From heavy drinking sessions to frequenting various forms of sexual entertainment, Cao embodied a different connotation of the word “float” in Chinese, one which referred to the morally ambiguous and hedonistic world of masculine play in globalizing China today (Osburg 2013). **Conclusion**

Mobility, as a concept, has recently attracted attention within scholarship, with celebrations of the “mobility turn” and “mobility paradigm” often associating movement with freedom (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). Significant reservations about mobility as something positive also exist within scholarship and there is clear evidence of anxiety-inducing mobilities in the general public; from unwanted

refugees to migrants “stealing ‘our’ jobs” (Salazar and Smart 2011). The problematic nature of mobility is perhaps not unique to China, although the particular imaginaries that make it problematic are. What is more, due to the number of Chinese engaging in mobile lifestyles, the imaginaries that shape these desires warrant further attention.

Whether a young person relatively unreflexive about their move overseas, a successful and highly mobile transnational migrant, or a less successful person hesitant to return home until they’ve achieved their goals, my interlocutors expressed that the positive image of moving overseas was more complex than they had originally thought. Their divided subjectivities, and impasse-like aspirations and movements, suggest that the imaginaries associated with mobility as a “quali-sign” of modern subjectivity are conflicted. The affects that tie one to family, home, and nation are not easily reconciled with fantasies of becoming a global, modern subject. Indeed, such attachments can draw one home with a sense of failure only to propel one back overseas in hope of not disappointing those who have supported you.

The back and forth movements and “floating life” of my interlocutors can in many senses be understood as a form of liminality. The liminal position of those who live a mobile life is a well-documented phenomenon in the field of migration studies (Huang, Yeoh, and Lam 2008). Whether stuck between here and there, or socially embedded in “here *and* there”, migrants live in ways positioned between

established or normative social orders (8). This liminal position can afford renegotiations of social life that create an eternal present (Anderson 2015; Friedman 2015), reflecting Ghannam's point that "mobility, a state of in-betweenness, has both spatial and temporal aspects that generate possibilities for the transformation of bodies and identities" (2011:792). A focus on liminality allows us to attend to the social, spatial and temporal conditions of mobile lives, however it is also worth considering the ways in which mobility operates as a form of imagination that potentially inhibits transformation, or at least produces new bodies and identities that may be experienced as problematic (Appadurai 1996). As Noel Salazar states, mobility perspectives are improved by exploring the relationship between "practices of mobility and world-shaping meanings of mobility" (2011). The "cruel optimism" of mobility is a useful conceptual addition to these approaches because it allows us to pay greater attention to the "animating and sustaining fantasies" that link subjects to the rhetorical world-shaping "object-ideas" of mobility (Berlant 2011:261). It recognizes the "object-ideas" of mobility as a pluralistic "cluster of promises" rather than a singular migratory project. What is more, it recognizes the potentially unresolvable existential and affective qualities of a life on the move.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Since 1952, approximately 140,000 Chinese nationals have taken Japanese citizenship, and a small population of undocumented migrants also reside in Japan. Consequently, there are potentially more than 800, 000 people of Chinese background living in Japan today, although figures are difficult to verify as once naturalized Japanese citizens’ ethnicities are not recorded.