

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis employs the theory of reflexive individualization to analyze the educational and personal experiences of Chinese students who came to America for higher education. It draws on interviews of sixteen Chinese students who were juniors and seniors at the time the study was conducted. I found that study abroad in America often presented an imaginary utopia of choice and individuality for Chinese students, but the reality of study abroad was more complex than this portrait. My study shows that child-parent relationships are being renegotiated in China, and that these new family dynamics have an effect on the study abroad experiences of Chinese students. Students often praised American higher education for its freedom of choice and opportunities to develop a sense of self, but this newfound freedom sometimes complicated relationships with parents, a situation made even more confusing by the high tuition being financed with parental funds. I also found that study abroad promotes stresses due to a higher level of individualization in American society, such as lack of direction, regret about past decisions, and uncertainty about the future. In addition, this transnational approach to individualization is still largely constrained by nation-state boundaries and policies in the long-term.

**Individualization and Its Effects:  
A Case Study of Chinese Students in the United States**

**Xier Li**

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**Kenneth Tucker, Thesis Advisor**

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## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2014, after approximately twenty hours of travel time, I arrived at Bradley International Airport in Hartford, Connecticut and started my four-year college life in the United States. Students like me, who left China to pursue new education, are flooding schools all over the globe. According to data from the Ministry of Education, forty years after China's Reform and Opening-Up policy was launched in 1978, the total number of Chinese people who have received educations abroad has reached 5,194,900. In 2017 alone, the number exceeded 600,000 (Ministry of Education 2018). Data from the Institute of International Education (2016) show that over 328,000 students from China are studying in the United States, most of whom are in college. Other popular destinations of Chinese students include countries of the former British Empire and the developed European countries.

The study abroad fervor is conditioned upon the post-Mao reform policies implemented in 1978 and the rise of the middle class in China due to rapid economic growth. Embracing a market economy, China has risen to the world's second largest economy. Though it has slowed in recent years, the growth rate once reached an average of 10% annually, and almost half of the 1.3 billion population have been lifted out of poverty (Bajpai 2017). China has surpassed the U.S. economy in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP). According to research done by the consulting firm McKinsey &

Company, more than 75 percent of China's urban consumers will earn \$9,000 to \$34,000 a year in 2022 (Barton, Chen, and Jin 2013). Although the term Chinese middle class is still a controversial one, it is undisputed that a considerable number of Chinese people have become affluent. Corresponding with the growing family wealth is a broadening social and cultural vision. The middle class acquires increasingly cosmopolitan values, mirrors Western lifestyles, and understands the importance of globalization and cooperation in this era (Li 2010, 8).

Traditionally, students would study abroad for an education at or beyond the graduate level, but nowadays more families can afford study abroad and have started to send their children out at an earlier age (Liu 2016). What awaits these ambitious and young Chinese students in the developed countries is not only an exciting and fascinating student life, but also stress and even mental health issues. Mental pressure and suicides among Chinese students have caught the media's attention (Gao 2017; Chang 2017; Wang 2016). According to research done at Yale University, 54% of the 130 Chinese students surveyed reported symptoms of depression, and 29% reported symptoms of anxiety (Han et al. 2013), which are startling numbers compared to 25% of Chinese students in mainland Chinese universities who reported symptoms of depression (Xue 2017).

Can the stress be attributed to study abroad? And how has study abroad led to immense stress in Chinese students? This research looks at sixteen Chinese students who are now studying in American universities and employs the theory of reflexive individualization to explain the stress they are experiencing. The thesis is divided into

three sections. First, drawing from interviews and previous studies, I contend that the main reasons why students decided to study abroad are that they are attracted not only by the better education and work opportunities in the U.S. but also by the freedom that one can enjoy in American society. By forcing students to take care of their own lives and making decisions on their own, study abroad has accelerated individualization for these students. Noticeably, the family has played a critical role in the decision-making stage of study abroad by providing and sponsoring study abroad as an alternative to Chinese educational system. In the second section, I focus on transformations in family relationships and argue that while changes in the children's values and personalities have generated conflicts after students have studied abroad, family bonds are becoming stronger, based on a more equal standing of the parents and the child. In the final chapter, I examine all sources of stress based on the interviews. I argue that individualization can largely explain Chinese students' stressful life in America by causing the feelings of, for example, lack of direction and uncertainty about the future. However, other stressors, such as the fear of disappointing parents and the cultural barriers, are also important.

The study employs semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. I had prepared in advance questions such as "why and how did you decide to study abroad" and "what did you expect from American colleges when you first came," and based on their answers, I asked further questions. The interviews were conducted as mealtime conversations or via online chat in Mandarin Chinese, lasted between 20 minutes to an hour, and were recorded with participants' consent. The interviewees were

informed that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions. All audio data were transcribed and translated into English. All names that appear in the text are pseudonyms in order to protect participants' identities.

I interviewed 16 students from China, including 7 male students and 9 female students, who are currently studying in American universities and colleges. They are my schoolmates from the middle school and high school that I attended in China and the college that I attend in the United States. All of them are seniors or juniors, so they have experienced the transition from Chinese to American education, and they are able to make reflective comparisons. Some of them attended high school in the United States. Their majors cover various areas including the social sciences, engineering, the arts, and the humanities. Almost all of the participants have paid the full amount of tuition for their undergraduate education, which is around 40,000 dollars to 70,000 dollars per year, and most of them are wealthy enough not to do work-study in school. By this standard I sometimes refer to them as middle class, though the term is debated (Li 2010) and implies meanings beyond high income. And as a reference, the middle school and high school I attended are among the best and the most competitive in Guangzhou, the third most developed city in China. The participants were chosen based on their availability to me, and I have followed the suggestions of theirs while looking for more participants. I have purposefully invited students both from liberal arts colleges and universities to get more diverse sources of information for my study. I acknowledge that my subjectivity will influence how I conduct the research and interpret the data, and I strive to present the



participants' own understanding and interpretation of their experiences.

The research points out four limitations of the theory of reflexive individualization:

1. While Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens (2003) indicate that individualization happens simultaneously with globalization and modernization, they focus on it as a development that occurs within the nation-state. However, in my study, the high level of individualization becomes a value and a practice in developed countries that attracts Chinese families, despite the fact that China has not institutionalized many individual rights. Individualization is a means of satisfying the individual's demand for rights and identities unavailable in China through transnational migration to a more individualized society. In other words, individualization, as a practice, has been voluntarily chosen as a better option by many Chinese middle-class families.

2. As many scholars have argued, the family remains an important social institution that shapes the individual's identity, thought, and actions in China. Students have been emancipated from the traditional hierarchical family system dictated by Confucianism and developed more democratic parent-child relationships. Parents are more willing to adjust to students' newly acquired identities, values, and personalities. The parent-child emotional bond remains strong after students come to a freer society that allows more autonomy. The possibility for a well-rounded individualism relies on physical migration from China to the more individualized America, which takes monetary and emotional sponsorship from the parents. As a result, the child as the recipient of the

benefits of study abroad feels compelled to repay the parents and maintain an intimate relationship with them.

3. The theory also does not adequately address transnational cultural differences and immigration restrictions, as individualization has been studied primarily within single societies. Although some students are determined to emancipate themselves from traditional Chinese social practices, their social experiences are largely constrained by cultural differences, if not racial discrimination. The cultural lifestyles in China have become indispensable elements of the individual's identities, which is difficult to change just by a switch of mindset or an attempt to integrate into American culture. Moreover, the strict immigration policies and expensive social services in America render the approach to realize individualization by transnational migration difficult in the long-term. The cosmopolitan individual has not been completely set free from the boundaries of the nation-state.

4. Finally, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens (2003) expect that beyond political democracy, cultural democracy develops, in which active and reflexive individuals internalize democratic values and question the dishonesty and corruption involved in politics. Instead of participating in traditional political parties, they are more interested in problems related to their daily life: human rights, family policy, sexual freedom, etc., thus forming a strong civil society balancing the market and the state. While in China a political democracy does not exist, from the increasingly equal parent-child relationship one might see cultural democracy emerging. It is possible that, contrary

to the European experience, a mature cultural democracy will lead to political democracy in China.

This research could be helpful for American educational institutions that accept Chinese students. As study abroad continues to accelerate, more, and younger, students will come to the United States to receive their education. The characteristics and concerns of Chinese students presented in this study can be taken into consideration if professors would like to better integrate Chinese students in class, and if administrators would like to improve the quality of campus life for Chinese students. Counselling service can be tailored to alleviate these specific stresses of Chinese students.

Scholars who want to study the influence of transnational education might be interested in this study as well. In most of the cases, it is evident that education and social experiences in America change students' values and personalities, and these changes spill over to their families. Whether these influences will initiate further social and cultural change remains a question. Study abroad also provides unique opportunities for students to reexamine their relations with Chinese society and establish new connections with American culture.

Lastly, the research might be of use for policy makers in China and the United States. Globalization is an irreversible trend, and the competition for talent will determine a country's global status. While the Chinese government is determined to allow more students to study abroad, it should acknowledge the difficulties that Chinese students are facing when they are away from home and they are returning to China. Further, the

American government, by putting new restrictions on immigration and making it difficult for international students to stay and their families to visit, will eventually undermine students' desire to come to America.

There are many limitations of this study. First, the sample cannot represent all Chinese students studying in America or other foreign countries. The students interviewed are all my friends and schoolmates, which means that they have backgrounds, experiences, and ideas similar to mine, though I deliberately chose those who are not close friends of mine. And since they are from wealthy families, there is no socioeconomic diversity in this study, and I cannot verify if some of the conclusions I make in this paper apply exclusively to middle class families. Neither did I clearly define the criterion for middle class families. Second, I was not able to conduct participant observation of parent-child interaction or interviews with these students' parents to get a more comprehensive understanding of their relationship. It might have been difficult for the students to disclose private matters such as mental health and conflicts within the family, and relying solely on their own accounts might lead to inaccurate description. Lastly, I did not compare the experiences of these students with experiences of Chinese students studying at Chinese universities and American students studying at American universities, so I cannot know if study abroad has triggered all the changes happened to the students I interviewed.

## CHAPTER 1. The Theory of Reflexive Individualization

Reflexive individualization refers to a gradual, yet fundamental change of the relations between the individual and society. Based on observations in Germany and other Western European societies, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) summarize its two major meanings. One is the transformation of existing social forms and institutions, such as family, gender, class, and religion. These institutions used to provide a blueprint of one's biography, outlining one's life course. The economic and cultural institutions of the welfare state encouraged a typical biography of work, marriage, and family. As modernity progresses, these social forms are losing their constraining power. For example, marriage was an essential part of one's life, whereas nowadays people are encouraged to decide on their own terms when, why, and for how long a marriage should take place, or even whether to marry at all.

The other meaning of reflexive individualization is the collapse of the fixed image that communist states once depicted for their citizens. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) quote Friedrich Schorlemmer's speech in 1993 commenting on the downfall of communism in East Germany,

Human beings, understood as ceaselessly active communal creatures, were fed on the safe goal of communism, which was guaranteed by scientific laws. People were not allowed to decide anything because there was nothing left to decide, because history had already decided everything "up there." ...Now, in freedom, they may and must decide for themselves; all the existing institutions have

collapsed, all the old certainties are gone (37)

In the communist approach to development, the country was subject to state-planning. In order to achieve the goals set by the state, individuals must act in accordance with the tasks they had been assigned. The fall of the Berlin Wall metaphorically demonstrated that the responsibility for social reproduction shifted from the state to the individual.

Both meanings suggest that, seemingly, it is no longer required that individuals follow the rules and regulations of the social life that they were born into, and thus they have more autonomy over how they want to live their lives. Indeed, before the contemporary era, either god, nature, or the social system provided a set of self-evident assumptions and legitimations of social action. Individuals followed these sets of “routines and institutions” and did “what everyone else [did]” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 45). However, as societies continue to develop and modernize, economic and social life have become more individualized. While various occupations are seemingly now equally available to everyone, the reality is that people are increasingly responsible for making their own lives, with few material or social supports to guide them. In addition, options for outfits, residence, political and religious beliefs, any aspect of one’s life have ballooned.

Globalization can partially account for these social changes. Although it is usually understood as the condition and consequence of capitalism’s need for a world market, globalization cannot be reduced to an economic activity. While neoliberal economic policies have undoubtedly promoted individualization, upgraded transportation

and the advanced technology of media expose people to diverse societies and cultural ideas, which in turn undermines the traditions with which they have lived. Giddens (2003, 42) claims that the tradition, whether as a religious belief or cultural practice, no longer possesses the taken-for-granted coercive power it once did. Challenged by a massive market of ideas, people must justify and critically evaluate a tradition in order to continue to believe it. Otherwise, they innovate and adopt adventitious elements that serve their own will and lives. Reflexivity, which refers to the ability to critically reflect on the social environment and direct one's own life, has replaced tradition in guiding the individual. The individual constantly creates and recreates self-identities, as new information and ideas become available.

The nature of individualization is contested (Howard 2007). Neoliberalism is a dominant ideology that has guided individuals' experience of the world since the end of the welfare state. Neoliberalism contends that the free market and free trade can best facilitate individual's well-being. The state and other social institutions should not intervene beyond securing private property rights and the proper functioning of markets (Harvey 2005, 2). Within the logic of neoliberalism, individuals are rational and interested in material gain and economic success. While neoliberalism sees market and freedom as the priority, the "entrepreneurial self" it promotes often disciplines the individual to master necessary skills for success and market themselves to become a desirable individual in a globalized economy (Howard 2007, 5). However, not all human actions can be explained by an economic approach. Sociology is based on the idea that

individuals are motivated by values, beliefs, and collective interests that cannot be reduced to economic self-interest. Even individualism has different dimensions beyond its neoliberal variant. Tucker (2017), for example, discusses the aesthetic and expressive dimensions of individualism in the United States. Here, individuals cry for equality and the authenticity of the self. They cannot be reduced to human capital for wealth accumulation, as many of the identities created by people are imaginative, playful, and individualistic rather than useful for economic production.

Nonetheless, the autonomy over one's life is not obtained without costs. The freedom is double-edged in that the individual is forced to live their own independent life. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, 8) call a typical biography in an individualized society the "do-it-yourself" biography. And it could fail. Every routine and norm that seemed natural and effortless in the past has now to be adopted and managed by individuals. Individuals constantly choose, decide, and try out what they want to do for their lives. They cannot rest or idly let things flow if they want to live and thrive in this society. An experimental and restless lifestyle thus results.

Moreover, before contemporary modernity the dangers impinging on one's life path were foreseeable because a large number of people had lived in the same way, but now individuals, each designing their own biography, have to familiarize themselves with available resources, calculate potential risks and consequences, and perceive and adjust to change, which is not an easy task to accomplish. Giddens (2003, 20) writes that the idea of perceiving and calculating risk in one's life did not exist until the sixteenth and



seventeenth centuries when the Western adventurers set off to explore the world. These explorations involved assessing the possibility that something unpleasant would happen when one engaged in activities unknown to past experience. While unwelcome events such as bad harvest or flood, which Giddens (2003, 26) calls external risks, had largely shaped people's lives, they were explained as bad fortune or the will of god. As science and technology continues to advance, people possess the means and knowledge to calculate the benefits and costs of actions they take and achieve a degree of control over their lives, although they have to live with the new manufactured risks that are produced by human activities, such as global warming and the possibility of nuclear attack. But with more control in hand, failures are blamed on individual incompetence rather than the fate or unreasonable traditions. The tolerance of frustration and the ability to reflect, reorganize, and reattempt one's path of action become essential survival skills. It also helps to explain the high rate of mental health issue in modern society, for there is no escape from the rapidly changing and stressful environment.

Another confusion that results from individualization is the constant questioning of who I am and what I want to do. Before contemporary modernity, many people perceived and established their sense of self from group identities. Emancipation from rigid social rules means the loss of clear, unquestioned role models, and a lack of guidance that individuals can refer to when making decisions. Therefore, paradoxically, individuals do not drift randomly outside of the old bonds of family, religion, and class.

Rather, they must live their lives by conforming to the newly emerging guidelines and rules laid by the state, the market system, the educational system, etc. In order to succeed, they must take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the society and voluntarily shape themselves according to what is considered desirable in their own preferred fields. Yet there is an institutional lag here, as institutions often do not always conform to the desires and possibilities of the new individualization. Individuals, while trying to construct unique biographies, end up becoming dependent on these social institutions that themselves are changing in a way that encourages and supports individualization.

Lastly, individualization may result in deepening democracy. Though rising disillusionment of democracy can be observed from many mature democratic countries, their citizens are actually more interested in politics, albeit not in the traditional, parliamentary way. Many self-organized volunteer groups have emerged, whereby voices of different individuals who hold the same interests can be raised. Beyond political and social democracy is cultural democracy, which means that equality, shared emotions, and intimacy become principles of social relations (Giddens 2003, 63). As no coercive power is exerted on individuals to form or sustain any kind of relationship, all individuals can become stakeholders in a relationship. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, 317) put it concisely, “We are living under the preconditions of internalized democracy: the belief in equality in relationships, in dialogue not violence or the imposition of authority as the main element for reaching agreement.”

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) claim that the Western world is now undergoing a second modernity which is distinguished from the first modernity before WWII. The first modernity emphasized a logic of order, sharp boundaries and distinctions, while the second modernity, responding to the unexpected consequences of the first modernity, such as totalitarian war and environmental degradation, reveals ambiguity, uncertainty, and individualization. And they also state that not only countries in the West but countries that have been exposed to Western lifestyles to any extent will experience individualization. China, opening its door to the rest of the world in the economic reform in 1978, has been fundamentally affected by global capital and cultures. But because of its uniqueness compared to European societies, the path to individualization in China is different from that of the West.

### **Individualization in China**

Individualization became conspicuous in China during the Mao era, as Yunxiang Yan argues (2010b). The revolution emancipated Chinese people from the control of kinship and family, though they were still nearly immobile living in collectives and defined by their class, occupation, and residency. The economic reforms in the late 1970s turned the path of the country towards a market economy and economic privatization. Land reform enabled peasants to work as individual laborers; personal identification cards were issued to grant mobility to individuals; urban residents grasped the

opportunities to establish businesses in the private sectors. Industrialization and the influx of foreign commodities and cultures diversified individuals' options for goods and lifestyles.

Despite the similarities to the European experience of individualization, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2010) recognize that the Chinese modernity is distinct and so is its path to individualization. They point out that in European societies, civil, political, and social basic rights were fought for and won through political struggles during the first modernity. These rights are now institutionally secured for all citizens. By contrast, in China, basic rights are still not guaranteed. The state liberalized the economy in the 1970s, emancipated labor, commodities, capital, and the market from socialist control, but the reforms also dissolved the social safety net. Accordingly, the individual must take the initiative to earn a living without their basic rights being guaranteed. For example, the unequal development in the country has concentrated opportunities in urban areas, which has attracted millions of migrant workers to leave home with the prospect of improving their lives. However, the "Triple Withouts" migrant workers in Beijing, who have no reliable sources of income, no home, and no job, if found out, will be sent back to their registered residence (Osno 2014, see Chapter 3). Non-residents in urban areas enjoy limited rights to health care, education, and other essential social services. Moreover, liberation is confined to the economic and social arena and is not an indication of increased democratization or political participation. The individual's rights and possibilities for migration are sanctioned by the state in so far as they contribute to

economic growth without questioning the party's monopolized grip on society.

Yan (2010a) further elaborates the differences between the European and Chinese paths to modernity. In Western European societies, individuals break away from groups to form unique identities and lifestyles, which is termed "life politics" by Giddens (1991, see Chapter 7), whereas in China, "emancipatory politics," is demonstrated by individuals striving to improve living standards and their social status by detaching from groups. The absence of cultural democracy in China also is a major difference between China and the European experience. Moreover, the minimal support and protection provided by the Chinese state has resulted in the individual's reliance on their family and networks, or *guanxi* in Chinese, for security, but the family is overburdened by those demands. In addition, the underdevelopment of individualism has led to decline of social trust and relentless competition in China. Individualism was once demonized as the evil spirit of capitalism and reduced to utilitarianism, selfishness, and hedonism by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s earlier propaganda, which later recognized individual incentives as the economic growth generator. But the meaning of individualism has never been fully introduced to the Chinese public. Finally, individualization in China is largely managed by the state, which provides economic and political incentives to encourage individuals to act in ways favored by the state and within the boundaries drawn by the state. The state also manages political participation by tolerating the growth of certain groups of people, such as college students and private entrepreneurs, while suppressing others.

Some of these differences seem so fundamental that they have raised doubts about the existence of individualization in China. Barbalet (2016) investigates the changes in Chinese social relations and found that the individual-family relation was undermined to some degree during the Maoist era, when the state wanted to replace individuals' loyalty to family with collectivism. But even then, the family remained central in shaping one's life, as benefits flowed through cadres' or officials' families while punishments were enforced against the family for individual transgressions. Within the family, while new laws have given women more individual rights, such as the right to divorce and the right to choose their own partners, family obligations to care for parents are still powerful. Furthermore, after the economic reforms, family connections are used by individuals to look for jobs. Migrant workers send remittances back to their home, which benefits the whole family. These transfers are more important in poverty reduction and the narrowing of the income gap between rural and urban areas than are state programs. Barbalet concludes that market reforms only enable the state to further monitor, regulate and plan in the private sector, instead of setting individuals free from communist central planning.

## CHAPTER 2. Education: Rigid China vs. Free America

Following the establishment of a new China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took over the task of education from private family tutors (Baker 1979, 195). Under the socialist system, the party-state monopolized all aspects involved in education: financing, allocating educational resources, recruiting teachers, designing curriculum, etc. The educational model was adopted from the Soviet Union, including its curricular emphasis on the teaching of Marxism (Kwong 2016). The principle of education was political in nature and effect. The purpose of basic universal education was to ensure that all people understood the party-state's policy statements and political discourse. Only in universities, which were elitist in nature, were technology and science for socialist modernization emphasized, and the idea of education for social mobility was condemned as selfish and bourgeois (Ngok 2007).

However, centralized planning and political fervor were only effective for a short period of time and failed to bring China any further along on the path to modernization. People's faith in the CCP and socialism dwindled rapidly because of the economic stagnation and chaos generated by the Cultural Revolution, which eventually forced the political leaders to turn to another approach (Shirk 1993). Adopting a market economy in 1978, the party-state granted freedom to and provided incentives for local governments and private forces to provide more and better educational services to individuals. The

right to fund, establish, and operate educational institutions was decentralized, thus creating a market of educational resources for individual students to choose from.

Decentralization and the marketization of educational resources have aggravated educational inequality, as good schools, teachers, and study materials are concentrated in urban areas. Within cities, a few “key schools”, which are at the top of the education hierarchy, enjoy most privileges and become the dream schools of many who long for success (Ngok 2007).

On the other hand, freedom and mobility gradually became available to individuals because of de-collectivization. One’s life was no longer directed by the collective, be it the commune or the work unit, and one had to be responsible for his or her own fate. As a result, a change of mindset occurred: education should serve personal advancement and fulfilment in the market-oriented economy. Thus, it is a commodity that the consumer should pay for (Kwong 2016). Crabb (2010) examines Chinese educational reforms since the 1970s and argues that urban middle-class families’ educational choices are part of the de-politicized consumerist dynamic, in which personal autonomy motivated by competition, meritocracy, and self-determination coincided with the state agenda. Middle-class parents are rich enough to provide the best resources for their children, and especially under the one-child policy, the family strives to ensure that the child receives the best education to uphold social mobility and their middle-class lifestyle. As the party-state’s legitimacy depends on social stability and economic growth, the interests and choices of the middle-class are closely related to the interests of the



party-state.

Among all educational choices, study abroad is the costliest yet increasingly popular one. Fong (2011) looks at students who went abroad for education in the 2000s from Dalian, a coastal city in Northern China. She is surprised that 20 percent of the students she surveyed have study abroad experiences, for which some even borrowed money from relatives. The Chinese students whom she interviewed hoped that “by going abroad, they would transform themselves from citizens of the developing world into citizens of the developed world” (23). The “developed countries” is an imagined community, which is not defined clearly but is constructed as a “paradise” better than Chinese society. The global neoliberal system ostensibly offers individuals opportunities that transcend national territory and has motivated individuals to pursue education, a career, and a better life overseas.

However, while educational choice should not be seen as purely an economic behavior by individual families, neither should it be reduced to part of the political agenda of the party-state. In this section, I argue that beyond the common neoliberal narrative, studying abroad, which is made possible by economic reforms and the shift of state orientation to the development of science and technology, is an option adopted by middle-class youth in urban China, to develop their individual identities outside their academic abilities and their productive potential valued by the state. It has also formed a trend which influences middle class individuals who want to maintain their status. The consequence of study abroad is an accelerated individualization that gives students

unprecedented autonomy.

### **Motivations to Study Abroad**

In 1986, the Compulsory Education Law was enacted to require all school-aged children to receive nine years of basic education for free (Yan 2013). In order to catch up with the developed countries in the shortest amount of time, the best educational recourses are allocated to serve the most competent students. The emphasis on efficiency results in a highly meritocratic primary education. The two major tasks of elementary schools in China are “to prepare academically talented students for further education, and to prepare the rest for life as competent, dedicated workers” (Ranson 1988, 751). Secondary education serves the same purpose: to prepare students for elite high-education or vocational work. Success in academic subjects is the only way to move up to higher-level education and more prestigious careers. Otherwise students go to narrow technological training and vocational schools, which also provide an escape from the countryside (Ranson 1988). In addition, the deep-rooted Confucian educational tradition that emphasizes effort, merit, and centralized exams (Guo-Brennan 2016; Zhou and Wang 2016), though disrupted during the Mao-era, continues to influence the Chinese educational system.

Directed by such tenets, it is predictable that grades in school are prioritized.

When asked about the main reasons for coming abroad, many of my interviewees

denounced Chinese educational system as boring and repetitive. Indeed, according to my own experience, doing homework and practicing for exams are the major, if not only, activities in students' life in China. In urban areas, it is common for forty to sixty students to be in one class unit in middle school or high school. Students go to school five days a week, and some high schools require students to attend on Saturday or even Sunday. Required subjects included Chinese, Math, and English, and students could choose from Politics, History, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology according to different curricula set up by regional Education Bureaus. Although subjects such as Music and Arts are also available as part of the Quality Education Campaign launched in 1993 by the state<sup>1</sup>, these classes only occupy around five percent or less of class time, and they are not even guaranteed and are often replaced by academic classes during exam periods. To maintain high scores for students and a good reputation for the school, rigid regulations that control students in all aspects of life are usually implemented. Liang Mo, who transferred from one of the best high schools in Beijing to a high school in the US, and is now studying economics in her third year in college, told me the reasons why she had decided to leave Beijing:

My high school is a very traditional school that really emphasizes *Gaokao* (the annual college entrance exam in China), although it is called a foreign language school. Its *Gaokao* scores are always good as well. It is a school famous for its

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<sup>1</sup> Education for Quality, or *Suzhi Jiaoyu*, was launched to promote creativity and entrepreneurship in students and supplement the academic education in schools with moral and physical education. Quality refers to "the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct" (Jacka, 2009). But Kipnis (2011) found that these terms are so broad and vague that they render impossible the same understanding of the policies and practices implemented to socialize students in all Chinese schools.

scores and does not develop other facets of students' characters. And the school is feudal-minded. All girls must wear short hair. Military-style management. No cellphones. No extracurricular books. Accelerated curriculum – I got my high school diploma when I finished my second year and passed all exams – so that the last year in high school you can focus on practicing for *Gaokao* (Liang Mo, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 27, 2018).

Such a description of school life nearly echoed the time during the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when no individuality was allowed, and all households had to cultivate the same types of crops regardless of the strength of each family. Under such continuous and intense pressure, Chen Hao, a male student who is now a junior student in college studying economics, revealed his desire to escape, “I wanted to go to another environment. It wasn't quite meaningful to study in China. It was really boring. I wanted to go abroad and see if it would be more interesting. And my parents really wanted me to go abroad... Chinese schools only want me to memorize stuff for exams.”

When students start to question the meaning of studying, which comprises a major part of their daily life, they are, in fact, questioning who they should be and how their lives should be lived. While education is supposed to be a means of pursuing a better life in the future, it seems that the competition among schools and among individuals has made students study solely for the grades' own sake. Students become products of the education industry, and they are machines of accelerating modernization and economic growth. Just as Marx had analyzed workers in factories (Tucker 1978, 70), the students have experienced alienation that makes them foreigners in their own lives.

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to think that Chinese students have benignly turned into machines that perform repetitive study tasks. Other factors also motivate students to study abroad. For example, Liang Mo told me that the other reason why she came abroad was that, despite some attempts, her demands for organizing student activities in school were not wholeheartedly responded to by the school administration:

I have never been tractable since I was young. I have always been the class leader, and there weren't any student committee or organizations in my high school. So I founded many organizations like the student council, the Model Union, and the student committee. I really focused on student activities. At first I went to the school officers to look for resources. They were willing to help me within their capabilities. But later I found that they didn't really care. They only cared about scores. In China I couldn't transfer to another school because I was already in my second year. And the school's scores were good, why would one want to transfer? Therefore, at that time I had been thinking about another way out. I didn't want to limit myself with a score. At that time that platform was not enough for me anymore (Liang Mo, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 27, 2018).

These words show that while the educational system wants to define individuals by their grades, students themselves have realized that they are more than their academic scores. They have started to develop different definitions of themselves, but the exploration of identity outside of grades is restricted in Chinese schools. Students' sense of self has diverged from the student identity set by the highly restrictive educational system designed to maximize efficiency for academic success.

In addition to the desire to explore one's identity, mental stress also drive students and their families to get away from the Chinese educational system, which is demonstrated by Song Rui's and Cheng Yin's traumatic experiences. Song Rui studied at

one of the six top high schools in her city, but her parents were not satisfied with her scores at *Zhongkao*, the annual high school entrance exam. She described the painful memory on the day the scores were released:

When the *Zhongkao* scores came out, my mom was cutting vegetables in the kitchen. I told my mom that the scores were out. My mom asked me what I got. I said, 717. My mom – the knife stopped there – asked, “What is the minimum passing score?” I said, 725. I still remember this. During that time, I really thought of jumping from that building. ... That’s why I didn’t hesitate when I decided to leave for a summer camp in the U.S. And I was also really afraid that same thing would happen again for *Gaokao* (Song Rui, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 23, 2018).

The unexpectedly low scores, her mother’s reaction, and the fear of failing to get into the best university at *Gaokao* urged Song Rui to choose an international high school to prepare for higher education abroad. Cheng Yin, on the contrary, performed “too well” at *Zhongkao* and was admitted to the best class in her school which she thought that she did not deserve. She struggled to catch up with her peers and suffered from intense mental stress which eventually led to her decision to leave:

I heard that students who had the worst scores in this class would be kicked out. I just performed too well at *Zhongkao*, but in fact I wasn’t good enough for the best class in the best school of this city. I thought I was among the ones who would be kicked out. The consequence was that I was tremendously stressed mentally. In Chinese schools there were so many students and class materials. And the teachers didn’t quite care about you but only those who could go to Tsinghua or Peking University. People like me were miserable. I was stressed and very unhappy. ... Later, my dad saw that my health was deteriorating, and he thought that studying should not be like this. So, he persuaded me to go abroad, and then I transferred to the AP class (Cheng Yin, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 29, 2018).

Stress caused by grades and exams force students and parents to rethink the meaning of

study and life. The exploitation of human capital has exceeded some students' mental ability to take stress. While people might say that it is the individual's fault for their inability to work under stressful conditions, this rhetoric assists the goals of the state of at the expense of individual welfare. When Cheng Yin's health is deteriorating due to mental stress and the physical labor of studying, her body is protesting against the system that is turning her into study machines. While these two accounts are relatively extreme cases, and other students in my study did not reveal such strong, negative sentiment toward studying in China, they signal the possibility of future patterns of stress in response to the educational system.

In comparison to the intensive training in high school, education in Chinese universities are accused of being too relaxed and corrupt (Hsiung 2013). Students often see *Gaokao* as the final destination – once reached, students no longer have to push themselves to study. They often make an analogy between strings that have been stretched for too long and are now broken. Because building world-class higher educational institutions is among the great goals of modernization in China, professors are usually too preoccupied with their own research to care for their students. Yang Jing's parents are faculty members in a university, and her parents did not recommend going to a Chinese university. She said, "My parents think that the atmosphere in Chinese universities is not good. Professors do not focus on teaching, and students are just idling. In high school we were just practicing for exams every day without knowing why. The entrance exam only asks for scores, but it does not help with your life."

One might ask that if the educational system has been meritocratic and competitive, why did not earlier generations experience the same sense of alienation and stress? One of the reasons is that the competition has been exacerbated by the educational reform in 1999, in which the state decided to expand undergraduate enrollment by almost 50% in order to boost the technical workforce. This also resulted in an overall increase of enrollment in all subjects. However, the job market in China has not transformed correspondingly and provides mostly low-skilled openings that do not require a college degree. Yet the number of college graduates has been growing, reaching 8 million in 2017 (Stapleton 2017). The unemployment problem first occurred in 2003 when those who entered college in 1999 graduated, and the unemployment rate had increased over time until 2009, when 32% of the 6.1 million graduates were not able to secure a job upon graduation (Zhao and Huang 2010). The expansion of universities slowed after 2006, and the employment rate gradually rose and has fluctuated around 91 percent in recent years (Statista 2016). But with a closer look into the data one can see that many of the graduates have ended up in part-time, low paying jobs, especially those in the humanities and arts (Stapleton 2017). The rare chance to find a satisfactory job worsens the already fierce competition for the limited high-quality education in China. Over-enrollment in college partly explains the decrease of teaching quality which both parents and students in my study scorn. Later sections will also show that some of the parents felt the same kind of boredom studying when they were young, but they were not offered alternatives to the path set by their schools and family.



Against this backdrop of intense competition, alienating study, unbearable stress, and disillusion with higher education in China, these students and families are in need of a new system that supports more individuality. Study abroad provides an available option. Self-sponsored study abroad was sanctioned during the 1980s, when Deng Xiaoping decided that more students should go abroad so that returning students can contribute the skills and knowledge they learned in developed countries to Chinese modernization (Chen 2007). Since then, the fervor of study abroad has never cooled. Currently, almost 90 percent of the study abroad population is self-sponsored (Ministry of Education 2018). By opening the door to study abroad, the party-state grants individuals a high degree of global mobility. Besides, the middle-class families, who have “got rich first” riding the current of economic reforms and growing together with the GDP, make study abroad possible for their children with their economic capital accumulated throughout the years.

Globalization plays a key role in promoting study abroad. At the state level, modernization involves not only foreign capital and market, but also the input of foreign educated human capital who carry the advanced technical knowledge, science, and management methods that cannot be transferred to another location (Giddens 1993, 292). At the individual level, the global media that depict an exciting and desirable living environment in developed countries make student and parents realize that life could be more than studying in school in China. In fact, all participants in my study revealed that they had a positive image of education in developed countries before they came abroad, contrasting with their imagination or experiences with Chinese education. For example,

“higher academic standards” was a common answer when they were asked why they came abroad. Lin Jie, a male student who is studying Physics and Finance in his senior year, gave a well-organized answer when asked why foreign universities were better, “American education is more developed and advanced. Professors are friendly. They encourage students to answer questions, and they are of high quality. And class selection is free, in China you will have to stick with the major you chose at the beginning even if you don’t like it later. And there are many org activities.”

Information about American universities come to Chinese students in different forms. For example, the China Education Expo offers the largest official platform for students and parents to speak directly with representatives from international universities. Besides, education agencies that assist students with college applications provide basic information about foreign universities. The internet is another major source of information. Official websites of universities construct an overall image of school culture, while online forums and bbs that discuss college preparations exams and application are more accessible platforms. Shared experiences, thoughts, and photos on Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter) and Wechat (an app combining Facebook and Facebook Messenger) by alums or current students provide an insider perspective and more personal accounts about life in their universities or colleges. Although not many students are able to participate in school tours before they decide to accept an offer, they can still have a relatively comprehensive knowledge of the school if they wish to do so. Wang Lin provided an animated account of how she was attracted by the college she now attends,

“Two alums of my high school who were then studying at this college came back to present on their college life. And the Admissions Officer was there as well. They gave me a really good impression. You know, when I saw that the alums had grown so well in this school, of course I wanted to come as well.”

To meet the demand of these middle-class families who can afford foreign education, schools like Wang Lin’s high school that provide foreign curricula or aim at preparing for college entrance exams in other countries’ education systems are not uncommon. Wang Lin had never thought of studying abroad when she was in middle school. When she entered high school, a key moment came when she had to make a decision whether to stay or go abroad:

In high school they were devoted to promoting the Harvard girl or Yale girl. Two students from my school were admitted to Yale that year. ...In our school there was not such a concept as *Gaokao*. Either you were recommended for immediate admission to Chinese universities or you came abroad. The people who chose *Gaokao* were those who had really strong determination, like you wanted to get the highest scores in the city. I didn’t think that. There were only ten-ish people who went for *Gaokao*. For me, *Gaokao* was no longer a thing. It’s an option to take when I had no other options (Wang Lin, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 23, 2018).

Wang Lin’s words demonstrate the trend of study abroad in China. In fact, many of the interviewees stated that their decision to go abroad was influenced by acquaintances who had been abroad. Zhang Wu is a senior male student double-majoring in computer science and Math. He recalled that many of his classmates in high school decided to study abroad for college. Cao Yue, who is studying Finance and Accounting in her senior year, said that many of her parents’ colleagues’ children had gone abroad. Song Rui

revealed that all of the children in her generation in the family had had some sort of study abroad or working abroad experiences, and too it seemed natural for her to go along the path. Having children who have studied abroad thus has become a social reality and status marker for middle class families in China. Even if one intentionally chooses to not go abroad despite owning enough capital and resources to do so, they will be often dismissed as not having such capital or such appreciation for foreign cultures. Two of the participants openly revealed their contempt for those who stayed in China. Chang, male, a senior studying economics, believed that students at home were narrow-minded:

There is a difference between those who came and those who didn't. Their mentalities are different. Because when you see and experience more, your vision and mind become flexible. Those who stay at Chinese universities might be narrow. Take a diligent student at a Chinese university as an example, they might only think about how to get a decent job. But if you are abroad you might have more thoughts. Like our friend Qi, she can take a gap year and do something she likes (Chen, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, October 10, 2018).

Then I asked him whether he meant that there was more freedom abroad. He answered, "Kind of. There are tons of options of ideas and it's up to you whether you want to take actions or not. But if you go to a university at home you don't even have these ideas."

Another student, Song Rui, also claimed that the life of those who stayed in China was unthinkable for her:

It frightens me to even think about going to college at home. Because I've seen how my friends who stayed are living their lives. I don't think they have much freedom, for example, of choices of classes. ...All of them go along the same path: dating, living in a dorm, watching TV dramas, playing video games, and when they look for internships they go to large companies. Like they know what they are doing. But in fact, many of them are anxious. They don't know anything

about themselves (Song Rui, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 23, 2018).

These perceived differences between study abroad students and non-study-abroad students, whether true or not, form new status boundaries based on one's understanding of oneself. These two accounts show that some students believe that staying in China for higher education does not provide a chance for them to get to know themselves. In other words, students who remain in China are living their lives by numbly following others whose lives seem conventional or dull. By contrast, students who have chosen to come abroad possess the consciousness to take control over their lives, and the free environment abroad enables them to put their innovative ideas into practice. Although being able to study abroad takes more than one's willingness to explore oneself, students have rephrased the interpretation of the decision so that study abroad sounds like an individual choice of identity rather than a privilege that consumes the economic and cultural capital of one's family.

### **Consequence of Study Abroad: Accelerated Individualization**

If the economic reforms in 1978 had triggered individualization in China by emancipating individuals from established political identities and forcing individuals to serve their own economic future, then the study abroad fervor has further accelerated individualization in this group of students. Away from the rigid Chinese education system

and from family, participants in my study have come to the U.S. for unprecedented autonomy and opportunities. Two of the main reasons they chose to come to the United States are flexible curricula and better career prospects. Yang Jing was excited when recalling her first encounter with American education, “Finally! Finally I can learn something I’m interested in! It’s really free abroad. You can take whatever classes you like to take.” I asked her why her “like” was so important for her decisions. She seemed perplexed by my question and answered, “Doesn’t everybody think like that? Whether you like it or not is the most important.” Li Wei came to college as a physics major, which was chosen aligned with what he excelled at in high school. After coming to college in the United States, he found, “Many of my American peers had not decided their majors. So, I also wanted to decide on my own what I wanted to do.” He is now studying optical engineering in his senior year. These accounts show that students are practicing to some degree of an experimental lifestyle (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 73) by which they constantly try out new ideas to look for the identities and career prospects that fit them best.

Also, more pragmatic reasons, such as abundant research opportunities and outstanding professors, drive the students to come to the United States. Ma Yu was one of the best students in high school and is now studying at an Ivy League college. He could have gone to any of the top universities in China, but he was determined to come to the US, “Here people’s horizons are broader. The things you are exposed to are better. My professors are the best research team in this field. And the people I know from here are all

working at really good companies.” The decision to come to the U.S. for higher education is a consequence of calculations of future gains and growth, as well as the desire for autonomy to pursue what one desires.

Whether for the exploration of one’s passion or better future prospects, it is undeniable that the students have dis-embedded from the Chinese education system and gained more autonomy and responsibility over their study. Moreover, the freedom in American schools fosters the skills and mindset that these Chinese students need to become an individual capable of living on one’s own. Chang suggested that in transitioning from a life in China to America, one has to learn to be more independent and proactive in establishing one’s life:

You have more experiences here. ...After all, here you have to rely on yourself or people around you. In China the things you need and things you need to do are much fewer, because people are helping you. If you go to a university in China, your life path has been paved because you have to rely on your “guanxi.” ... In China you don’t get enough exercise. Going abroad really exercises people. In China all you have to do is to behave yourself. Abroad you not only have to behave yourself, you have to consider a lot of things, because no one can help you here. You have to build up something, like your networks. In China if you want to build your networks is still much easier (Chen, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, October 10, 2018).

Chen’s comments are sociological ones. He sees the limitations of individualization in China, as social connections continue to restrict an individual’s agency. By coming to America, one is embracing freedom but also forcing oneself to relinquish the assistance that one can gain in China. Although Chang repetitively emphasizes the importance of networks both in China and America, he sees networks in America as a means of living a

successful life. Networks are built up of his own accord, while networks in China coerce him to rely on them. Speaking from another prospective, Wang Lin talked about the anxiety and uncertainty that the life in a more individualized America had brought her:

If I have gone to school in China, for a thousand or some hundred yuan, at a local school...I could still realize what kind of person I am, and I could still improve myself. But never rapidly like now. I think a year (here) I have grown equals two or three years (back home). This is a very cruel environment that makes you realize the enormous amount of cost and how much your gain is in comparison, which is also the responsibility you bear. You have taken out the family's "root money." If I hadn't studied abroad, with this money I could have lived my life very well. ...Now if you don't earn some money you should feel guilty for your parents. Although my parents do not say things like this, but I think strongly about it. That's why I'm anxious, but the anxiety makes you grow as well (Wang Lin, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 23, 2018).

Wang Lin admitted that study abroad has made possible her exploration of self-identity and betterment of her own life at a greater rate but at great monetary cost. In fact, her mentality is very common among the students I have interviewed. As discussed in the next section, the ability of the student to become an autonomous individual is closely tied with the parents' monetary and moral support.

## **Conclusion**

This section has shown that education, as a social institution in China, discourages different forms of individuality and trains students to define themselves solely in terms of academic success. Its rigidity creates problems, as the rise of individual



consciousness and mental stress compel students and their families to look for a new outlet. At the same time, modernization requires an educated workforce that masters advanced technology and skills from developed countries, and study abroad was thus encouraged by the state. Marketization of education also encourages schools to invest in foreign curricula that caters to educational institutions abroad.

While it is possible that educational institutions will undergo reforms that foster more possibilities of individual development to recover the loss of middle-class students due to the study abroad fervor, it is unlikely that such change will happen in the short-term. Study abroad is conditioned by the substantial capital accumulated by the middle class and the state's aspiration for economic prosperity and technological development. While individual households are motivated by their own needs to send the child abroad, they are actually paying for the unequal distribution of the very limited educational resources: the state has concentrated experienced teachers and high-quality resources in a small number of schools, resulting in competition so relentless that students spend almost all of their time studying. Since individuals can utilize family resources to realize individualization by migrating, the state no longer has the incentive to solve these structural problems that lead to the lack of individualization in Chinese education. By voluntarily giving up a supposed advantaged position in the system and removing children who are unable to take the stress, middle-class families who have sent their children abroad have moderated the competition and eased the tension resulted from scant educational resources, while responding to the state's need for high-skilled human

capital trained in developed countries.

Once they have gone abroad, students can enjoy the freedom provided by the more individualized society in America. However, as shown in the last section, Chinese education, which has occupied at least ten years of the students' life, continues to affect their thoughts and actions even after they are physically detached from the system.

### **CHAPTER 3. Family: Democracy, Reciprocity, and New Identities**

It is evident from the interviews that parents have been critical figures in the whole study abroad process, and family is an unavoidable topic even when students are distant from home. This generation of young people shared unprecedented freedom financially, materially, and spiritually, which their predecessors could not enjoy, thanks to the CCP's revolutionary family policies and the opening-up policies. Parents are practicing western child-rearing methods that their ancestors could have never expected, which is bringing more challenges and conflicts into the household. Changes in the family demonstrated individualization in Chinese society. And as study abroad has accelerated individualization, it triggered unanticipated transformation in family-child relationships.

The structure of the family and meaning of family relationships in China have experienced fundamental changes. Through the nineteenth century, Confucianism had dictated the principles of human relationships, which were carefully categorized into the following five: ruler/minister, father/son, elder brother/younger brother, husband/wife, friend/friend. Each member of the family and society performed the duty inherent in his or her position and obeyed the superior so that no conflicts would ensue. Ideally, an extended family of up to five generations would live together, and the family was the basic unit of the society. The state came second to family in one's priorities, and laws

were designed to punish the transgression of the proper order in the family. The individual was born to continue the family, which would maintain control of the individual from birth to death (Baker 1979, 1-21).

Not until the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century, when the society was influenced by Christianity from the West, did an alternative model of the family arise, based on gender equality and individual rights. However, this alternative did not take root in society, and it was the Communist Party coming to power in 1949 that brought an end to the traditional family system. Chinese culture, especially Confucianism, was considered the biggest challenge to the construction of modern China, as loyalty to the family conflicted with the tenets of communism. Therefore, in order to eliminate connections with the feudal past, the Chinese Communist Party published new laws to promote their revolutionary social program and cultural change in Chinese society. The Marriage Law implemented in 1950 bestowed equal rights on husband and wife to possess, manage, and inherit family property. It also stressed parents' obligation to nurture and educate their children as well as children's obligation to support the aged. The Land Reform Law assigned land to individuals instead of households, giving each individual, including women and children, equal importance and responsibility in the family. When living as an individual became possible and easier, the stem family, which only consisted of the couple and their children, and sometimes the grandparents, increasingly became the norm (Baker 1979, 175-213).

In 1979, the one-child policy started. In her book *Only Hope*, Fong (2004)

presents comprehensive accounts of the experiences of the first singleton generation in Dalian. She adopts the cultural model of modernization and Immanuel Wallerstein's analysis of the "capitalist world system" to explain the families' internalization of First World life standards and lifestyles. In a world divided into core, semi-peripheral and peripheral societies, the marginalized societies not only are exploited materially and economically by the core, their people are also socialized to believe in and desire to attain the standards of "prestige, pleasure, security, affluence, and good health" (15) set by the core nations. To reach these goals and march into the core world, the CCP considers a low fertility rate as one of the means, as developed countries usually have low fertility rates, which also correlate with a high degree of participation in a modern economy. The one-child policy forces the family to invest all of its capital and resources in the singleton, so that the next generation can enjoy, or believe that they deserve, the best education, high-paying jobs, and high-quality goods that are only available in the First World. This generation of "high-quality" and ambitious people makes China competitive in the capitalist world system.

However, the policy also has resulted in unexpected side-effects. Because the family is expected to care for the aged, parents have to make sure that the singleton gets the best education and a well-paid job to support them when they are elderly. The same high expectations for singletons from all families in a society short of educational resources and well-paid jobs has created intense competition in the educational system and job market, which also resulted in enormous pressure on the singleton, as mentioned

in the previous section. On the other hand, the investment in education also represents parents' unconditional love. Some parents say that they can even sacrifice their lives for the singleton. It is common for the singleton to reciprocate parents' love and aspire to provide luxurious life for their parents in the future, whereas some singletons understand how important they are for their parents economically and emotionally and rebel against their parents' wishes (Fong 2004).

Based on the surveys and interviews of the same participants in the above study, Kim, Brown and Fong (2017) found out that these first-generation singletons have imagined a childrearing method distinct from their parents'. Using Kusserow's (2004) framework, Kim, Brown and Fong argued that this generation is in favor of "soft projective individualism" in their children, which emphasizes a child's happiness and health as well as high achievements. The singletons will prefer more relaxing regulation and open communication with their own children, instead of the rigid and strict control exerted on them by their parents to secure academic achievement. They believe that this "foreign" method of childrearing is the right way to succeed in this era characterized by globalization and individualism. Kim, Brown and Fong explain that the high expectations for more freedom for children stem from the idea that the job market and educational opportunities will keep expanding in the future as they did during the reform era, and thus the sacrifice of personal freedom for grades is no longer necessary for success.

Intergenerational contract and the meaning of filial piety have also been renegotiated and reinterpreted. Croll (2006) examines studies that focus on Asia and

found a common pattern of change and continuation in parent-child relationship. The traditional intergenerational contract, directed by Confucianism, required children to subordinate their desires to the will and welfare of the elder generation. Globalization and modernization have threatened this idea, and parents have been adopting different strategies to secure resources, security, and care for themselves, such as increasing spending on children in the expectation of reciprocity, extending support to children's adulthood, and supporting sons and daughters equally. Children have replaced filial piety with filial care, which justifies their care for the parents on the basis of appreciation and affection instead of submission to parental authority.

Qi's research (2014) yields a similar outcome, showing that children and parents are now interdependent: children remain dependent on parents for different forms of financial or household support, while parents have to rely on adult children when they get old. Parents expect not only material support but also expressions of gratitude and emotional commitment. She states that "the sense of obligation to return their parents' love and 'sacrifice' is so deeply imprinted that it becomes part of [the children's] mentality" (152). Li et al. (2012) found that reciprocal filial piety has a positive influence on family functioning, while traditional authoritarian filial piety has a negative influence. They propose a possible explanation for this result: children in China are encouraged in schools to develop Western values and abilities that are required for a competitive society, such as the expression of personal opinions, autonomy and self-direction. However, this explanation is not verified in their study and seems precarious to me. In my own

experiences in Chinese schools, although students are expected to answer questions in class, they are not encouraged to propose ideas that diverge from the right answers.

Wang's research (2011) on Chinese students in British universities addresses one of the questions that I ask in my study: the role of parents' investment in children's education. She concludes that these Chinese students are caught between their parents' aspirations and their own, concerning being judged "not filial" enough or not adequately excellent by their parents, their community, and the society, while their parents, who have lived through the hardship of the Cultural Revolution, are determined to send their children abroad to secure a stable and well-paid career. Both parties are experiencing enormous pressure yet not able to resolve these tensions through mutual understanding and communication.

Compared to the traditional society, where the family had total control over the individual's life and identity, modern China allows more freedom for the individual to exercise their free will, although one cannot completely break away from the family. The traditional authority of the family can no longer exercise its coercive power based on customary social rules. Giddens (2003) claims that relationships built upon emotional intimacy and communication of parties of equal standings will become the new norm. As marriage is now mostly based on romantic love, emotional intimacy becomes a more important or powerful binder for relationships than economic reasons, parent's authority, or pressure from the society. This is called a democracy of emotions, and Giddens deems it as important as public democracy in improving our lives.



This section has presented a detailed description of how “soft individualism”, the loose child-bearing approach that the first-generation singletons has imagined for their children in Kim, Brown and Fong’s study (2017), is cultivated in the singletons by their parents. Filial care instead of filial piety has become a firm belief held by most of the interviewees in my study. Similar to Fong’s conclusion (2006), the participants and their families have internalized the life standards of the First World, and both have expressed high expectations about educational achievement and their careers. However, unlike the interviewees in Wang’s study (2011), most of the participants in my study have more freedom to pursue their own aspirations without concerns about parents’ intervention. Their strong individual will even force their parents to learn to accept the idea that one’s life can be more than a practical and stable career.

### **Democratic Child-Rearing**

Most of the interviewees have experienced a relaxing environment at home when they were growing up, and they stated that even now their parents do not have any specific expectations for them. Zhang Wu described the child-rearing approach in his family succinctly as “free-range.” He claimed that his parents had “no intervention at all” in his life when he was back in China. Another student, Chen Hao, laughed when he gave me the answer, “Maybe just don’t do drugs. Not anything specifically. ...Maybe going to a grad school? My mom might think that. My dad doesn’t care. They rarely control me

since I was young. No expectations about my career or study.” Liang Mo provided an example to demonstrate the freedom she had at home:

In my family, my dad is always busy. My mom is that kind of cool mom. She has her own life. I remember that when I was in sixth grade, I was going to sign up for an English class. I went to the organization first, told them what I wanted to take, and then I brought my mom there and she paid for me. Things like this I did all by myself. But on some key issues, like this school did not offer scholarships, or that school’s tuition...sometimes there are disagreements, but later they will still listen to me (Liang Mo, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 27, 2018).

Indeed, Liang Mo seems to enjoy her family status superior to her parents’. She came to the United States in her third year in high school, which was initiated by her instead of advised by her parents. Some negotiations revolving around whether to go abroad at such an early stage of life went on in her family:

At that time they were concerned. ...Indeed, it was a lot of money. And this kid, it’s like you let her go on an adventure on her own. ...There were many problems following. After all, nowadays so many people have studied abroad, the competition, is it worthwhile and good for the kid? So they had considered a lot, and they had had more long-term plans (for the money). But at that time my resolution was not to be shaken. They persuaded me a lot, like guidance. They put the pros and cons of study abroad on the table and let me choose... (Liang Mo, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 27, 2018).

In Song Rui’s family, her parents have a similar care-free and democratic attitude towards her life, despite the episode at the kitchen about her *Zhongkao* scores. “My family has been like this since I was young: what to do, what I choose, my mom usually does not care. ...At that time, attending which school, which place in the states, they let me make the decisions.” Then I asked her, when she was making decisions, if she

would take her parents' feeling or concerns into account. She answered:

No...the education that my family has given me is that if my parents don't agree with me on something, one reason will be that I'm not well prepared. The other will be that my arguments are not well supported enough to convince them. On the other hand, if I can't convince them, I can't convince myself either. They won't disagree if both requirements are met (Song Rui, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 23, 2018).

In both families, by not "caring about" their singleton, the parents have consciously trained the singleton to make decisions independently. Indeed, parents of most of my interviewees allow more autonomy of the child instead of dictating their lives.

Disagreements are not resolved by forcing the parents' will and authority on the singleton, but by rational reasoning and calculation in which both parties participate. This is not to say that they are involved in the decision-making process on an absolute equal basis – after all, parents control the material support – but giving the child a chance to be heard and argue is already a departure from the traditional parent-child relationship. Nonetheless, none of the students in my study stated that they have had any serious transgressions that might not be tolerated by their parents. Decisions on issues such as which school to attend or whether to start a new hobby or not do not diverge from parents' general expectations for the singleton, some of which might even correspond with parents' aspirations to raise a child who succeeds in a globalized world financially, culturally, and socially.

Parents' engagement in children's lives becomes even more attenuated when the children have come abroad. I asked if their parents had had any expectations before they

came to college. Li Wei's answer was a "No", and he talked about having more freedom in college, "When I was young they would keep an eye on me when I did homework. Now no longer. ...I decided my major all by myself." Chang offered a similar account, "They don't have any thoughts. They require me to be safe, first of all, and then to have decent grades. Not anything else, to be honest. When I was in my first and second year they advised me more. ...Now they don't say anything." The physical separation and transition to adulthood might explain the increased degree of freedom they have abroad. Many of the participants' revealed that they were not in frequent contact with their parents, which rendered a direct supervision over their conducts impossible.

Only one interviewee in my study grew up under a highly restrictive environment. Tang Meng, studying economics at a liberal arts college, is trying to mend the antagonistic relationship with her parents:

My parents did the college research. ...At that time I did not think about my parents' influences on this issue. I was influenced by the culture and the environment and took their intervention for granted. Not until I came (to the states) did I realize that other kinds of parenting can exist. I can decide my own things. My mom used to fight with me a lot, for GPA. They invested in my study and they needed to see the outcome. Now they can't get to the professors in college. In middle school they used to call my teachers. From my eighth grade on I have been extremely afraid of checking my grades. I haven't checked my grades for last semester yet. In college I can exercise my independence and self-reliance, can detach from my family of origin, but the traces their education left on me are evident. They have always wanted me to go abroad. They were born farmers and had no chance to go abroad in the past (Tang Meng, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 25, 2018).

Her words demonstrate the influence of exposure to other cultures on the individual due to globalization. By discovering parenting styles in other cultures that allow the children

to have more freedom, Tang Meng is able to reflect on her own experience and doubt the legitimacy of her parents' traditional, authoritarian control. She recognizes that she possesses the individual's right to make decisions for her life and has emancipated herself from the mindset that identifies her as her parents' child rather than an independent individual. Her will to regain control over her life clashed with the traditional family values that her parents clung to:

Some thoughts are against filial piety for them, like, they have raised me, how dare I go against them? But I'll tell them if they are wrong. I want us to be on the same page. I don't want to have nothing to talk about in the future. Then we will start fighting, "Did I send you out just to have you fought with me?" But they are changing, and I'm changing as well. In my second year and third year when I was first exposed to (the diversity abroad), I was really radical. After seeing more, I found that there is not absolute right or wrong. I started to try to conciliate with my parents and communicate with them. ... They used to say things like "I spent so much sending you out!" but now they have realized the miserable lives of those who have returned from abroad<sup>2</sup>. They said that they were willing to raise me and hoped that I could go back, as they just wanted me to experience the outside world and now I've got the international background (Tang Meng, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 25, 2018).

This was one of the very few instances that "filial piety" was mentioned in the interviews.

From Tang Meng's perspective, filial piety can no longer define and regulate the relationship between her parents and her. Rather, it has become a one-way value that her parents try to project onto her. For Tang Meng, the key to maintain the relationship is to

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<sup>2</sup> As more students have returned to China with advanced education received overseas, they are losing their aura in the Chinese job market. Employers started to critically look at a foreign degree instead of blindly offering jobs to those who returned from abroad. Problems such as lack of social connections, lack of work experience, high expectation of salary level, etc. prevent returnees from getting satisfactory jobs. Many of them face unemployment or get lower pay than classmates and friends who are not educated abroad.

keep both parties “on the same page” and to have some common topics that they can “talk about”, which shows the importance of equality and communication for her. Not only are the definitions of parent-child relationships different, but also the perceptions of the purpose of studying abroad. Tang has been proud that she learned how to think independently and argue convincingly, while her parents consider the investment in tuition must yield a high educational achievement which is a prerequisite for a high-income career. Tang Meng’s individualism is a negative consequence unexpected by her parents who only see studying abroad as an economic tool. They have been re-educated by Tang Meng and slowly accepted the fact that Tang Meng, as an individual, can develop in other ways beyond financial return. The intergenerational, and to some extent intercultural, communication successfully defeats the stubborn traditional authoritarianism exercised in Tang Meng’s family, though on-going negotiation and conflicts can be expected.

Cheng Yin’s family has experienced a similar transition. She discovered her passion for Chinese literature at an early age, but her parents strongly oppose her preference, because they do not see that a career studying literature can earn their daughter a comfortable life:

They are scientists who can’t understand the beauty of literature. And they think that feeding myself is more important. ...Throughout the years I have proven to them that happiness does not originate from one’s salary or an easy job. I just really like the books. No matter what they have hoped for me, fundamentally they just want me to be happy. ...They might have thought that my future is hopeless, but after some time they get used to it. I’m really grateful for their open-mindedness. After I came here, our lives no longer have any similarities.

The things we can talk about are very trivial. I would call home for an hour per day. My mom started to catch up with me by reading what I was studying at school (Cheng Yin, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 29, 2018).

This is another instance of the child enlightening parents with new values and information. As Cheng Yin mentioned, happiness has become the minimum expectation from the parents, according to many of my interviewees. Happiness always competes with the expectation of a decent job or good grades, and it always wins. In fact, few of the parents have explicitly told the interviewees what they expect, if not happiness and good health. Without a specific goal required by their parents, the interviewees have internalized high standards of their own performance. Wang Lin maintains an intimate relationship with her parents. She recalled that her parents had not asked her for anything specific or indispensable:

No expectations. All parents definitely want their kids to be good. Like my dad, he always says that it will be ideal if I can go to Carnegie Mellon. It is from the pragmatic perspective. From the less pragmatic perspective, my dad thinks that it will be okay as long as what I get is worthy of my efforts. They never think that I could be the Harvard Girl Wang Lin. They are too old for that. One thing, just don't ask them to find me a job if I go back. Don't use their *guanxi*. ...I don't know if all parents are like this. All the specific requirements will change. My dad is like, he's a middle-age now, and becoming practical. Just don't disappoint yourself – this might be the broadest requirement. If you go to a bad school, you will disappoint yourself; if you get a job that doesn't earn you money, if you choose a major you don't like, spend so much time on it and learn nothing, you will disappoint yourself. It is really broad (Wang Lin, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 23, 2018).

Although Wang Lin's parents hope that she could study at Carnegie Mellon for graduate school, they do not require her to do so. Instead, they use the language of "don't

disappoint yourself” to ensure that the singleton goes in a direction that corresponds with their hope. By emphasizing the singleton’s agency in her own life, Wang Lin’s parents have planted self-discipline in her. It is worth pointing out that Wang Lin’s parents are not willing to use their *guanxi* to help her get a job. As mentioned earlier, using family connections for job hunting is a very common practice in China (Barbalet 2016, 14). But Wang Lin’s parents’ rejection of this common practice shows that they agree with the superiority of an independent individual over one who has to rely on others, and they hope that their daughter can become self-sufficient.

Another account from Wu Wen shows similar concerns, “Maybe they used to have some expectations. But now they are mature. They don’t ask for much. Just to be happy. They think that you will be alright. This is actually tacit pressure.” Both Wang Lin and Wu Wen saw a shift of parental attitudes to being more practical, and they claimed that their parents were too “old” or “mature” to expect anything too ambitious for them. The parents might have been disillusioned about the upward mobility promised by a heavy investment in education. They no longer expect the children to carry the whole family up the social ladder, but they believe that with all the opportunities provided and less hardship experienced than they did when they were young, the singleton must at least be able to take care of themselves. They trust their child’s ability to judge right from wrong, and the judgement would not deviate too much from their own perspective. In other words, they have faith in their past construction of the value system of the singleton. Although not expressed explicitly, the parents’ expectations have



unconsciously shaped the child's life trajectory in the direction that corresponds with the parents' own values, while the child found it tiresome to maintain living standards or lifestyles acceptable as "alright" in their parents' eyes.

While we see some progress on children changing their parents' neoliberal mindset, peer pressure from other middle-class families prevents an individual's distinctive values from being fully appreciated. Song Rui has persuaded her parents to change their perception of the purpose of a college education:

My dad used to expect me to find internships. So I was always looking for internships in my first year. ...But they now have learned the meaning of a liberal arts education. He now doesn't emphasize that I have to learn a skill in college, something that can get me a job. They now expect me to experience the world. Things like learning languages they will definitely support. And then to know more people, to have a fair worldview. Oh, and to find my passion for life (Song Rui, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 23, 2018).

But once in a while her parents still feel anxious about her for not designing an ambitious plan for herself:

My mom sometimes tells me off for changing plans or wasting money in worthless activities. I think this is related to their expectations for me and peer pressure. Pressure from their peers. This is really influential. Every time my dad started to go in that direction, I will ask, 'who did you meet today?' Definitely he had met with someone. His colleagues' kids are either in finance or in accounting, those kids of conformist elites (Song Rui, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 23, 2018).

Interestingly, Song Rui does not think that she is a member of the elite class. She admitted that she might seem like an elite in appearance, but deep in her heart she hates to be "the trendsetter." She is determined to find something she really likes and

something that makes her unique, instead of a random position that earns her big money or power, which is what she imagines the real elites would like.

### **Confrontations Caused by New Values, Identities, and Personalities**

Three female students from liberal arts college have experienced more friction with their parents. The one-child policy has reduced the family's traditional preference for boys in urban areas, and many families in the cities now invest as much in the female singleton as they would in a son, even considering daughters as better care-takers for the aged than sons (Fong 2006). But the traditional gender roles for women are not eliminated as easily. Three of the female students in my study shared with me episodes of conflicts with their families based on their female identity. Tang Meng, though majoring in economics, is an ambitious student who wants to enter the film industry in the United States. She has put a lot of pressure on herself and opposes her parents' wishes for her, "My parents want me to be in academia because it is a more secure field for girls. They set out with kindness, but the problem is that they always want to clear all the blockages on the way until they are satisfied, and then my life will sail smoothly. But it is not possible." Fong et al. (2012) studied urban young mothers and found out that they would like their toddler daughters to have the ability to be independent, self-reliant, and excel in the future, but they are also concerned that being too independent will damage feminine characteristics in their daughters, which will make their lives difficult. In Tang Meng's

case, her parents, believing that ambition and adventurousness do not conform to traditional femininity, see a stable and safe career in academia as the fittest option for her to take if she wants a comfortable life. Tang Meng, who has discovered her independence in college, is determined to define her life by choosing a career that suits her interest.

The second case is the debate between Song Rui and her parents about female rights and gender equality:

...The articles about sexual assault or homosexuality have really worried my mom. ...My dad will ask me interesting questions like, why are you so radical? I said, no I'm not radical. I'm peaceful. When I talk about these topics I don't raise the knife in my hand to kill people. Then he asked, why do you find the society unbearable. ...I said, if you think the society is unbearable, you are a citizen capable of independent thinking, and it is a right thing. He asked me again, then have you thought about this: if you find Chinese society unbearable, what are you going to do after you come back? I said, that is a good question. ...I used to think that my family is open-minded. And my parents are highly educated. I think they are empathetic, kind, and good in nature. But I can see the traces left on them by the environment and education at home. ...I could have just blocked them. But I don't want to do this just for the peace between us on the surface. In the future I will mention them whenever I repost something like that (Song Rui, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 23, 2018).

With recent progress on the condemnation of violence, sexual assaults against women and advocacy for equal rights for all genders around the world, such as the global #MeToo campaign and the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan, mainland China also started to pay more attention to female rights, although feminism is still stigmatized.

Song Rui has acquired a liberal attitude toward these issues, while her parents conform to the traditional male-dominant system. Song Rui values independent, critical thinking as much as her relationship with her parents, and like Tang Meng, she strives to re-educate

her parents on these issues through continuous communication.

The last example is from Liang Mo's family. Last summer she went to a family dinner with some acquaintances of her parents. During the meal someone claimed that it is inappropriate for girls to study abroad because it is too dangerous. Liang Mo found the argument unreasonable and started to debate with a male friend of her age and a male friend of her father's age at the table. She triumphed at the end, since neither of them was able to justify their arguments. Later, the tension between her father and her exploded:

My dad was very unhappy. He said you can't embarrass others like that. He's bringing the Chinese culture in. ...He meant that I let a guy lose face like that. ...I knew he was drunk and didn't say much. But the other day I recalled this and sent him a long message (to point out his fault). He said, was it that awful? He didn't know. I think now he has corrected his views. These things need communication. In China they are like pouncing frogs. If you don't poke them, no one will realize that there is something wrong with their worldviews, the stereotypes. ...I will start with the people around me, to influence them (Liang Mo, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 27, 2018).

Like Song Rui, Liang Mo has learned to bravely express her opinion and argue with well-founded reasons, which is the opposite of what the traditional Chinese culture expects a young female to do on such occasions. To maintain harmony, the young and girls should suppress their will when they conflict with their elders. Moreover, Liang Mo was also protesting the denial of women's rights to study abroad based on the claim that it is good for them to stay near the family for safety and stability. Study abroad has brought changes to Liang Mo's personality and value system, which takes time for her parents to adjust to.

## **Role of Parents' Investment in Education and Strong Belief in Reciprocity**

When asked whether they considered the tuition as a financial investment and whether it has become a source of stress for them, the students showed different interpretations of the parent-child relationship in China. Only a few of them considers repaying their parents financially is their major source of stress. Cheng Yue, even though she considers the tuition as an investment, doesn't care about the rate of return. She said, "It is difficult to measure. If you stay in China the rate might even be higher, but abroad it is another lifestyle which is related to the level of our life. ...Pragmatically they must have expected some return. But emotionally it is for the kid's education. And when you are stressed, you can do anything." On the other hand, students' health and happiness raise parents' concerns, as parental support turns unconditional if the child is so stressed that it becomes life-threatening. The well-being of the child becomes a bargaining chip and keeps the parents' authority in check.

For others, the investment is interpreted as affection and a family obligation that cannot be measured qualitatively, calculated by rational reasoning, or easily paid back.

Chen's words encapsulated many similar thoughts I encountered in the interviews:

...stress from school work and stress from job hunting...If I can't find a job I feel sorry for my parents. They won't tell me off, and they always respect my decisions and think that I can solve all problems... (I: Then where is the stress from?) The expectation. I never think that the tuition is an investment. It should be taken-for-granted that parents give to children, and it is impossible to talk about returns. The stress is emotional, spiritual stress (Chen, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, October 10, 2018).

It is evident that although Chang and many other interviewees who have not been quoted here have recognized that they are individuals who have the right and are capable of making decisions related to their own lives, think and express opinions independently, they have never doubted family interrelationship. The tenet stating that parents are obligated to support children and so do children to parents has been etched in these students' value system, which suggests the vestige of the tradition of filial piety. Liang Mo pointed out the paradox hidden in such mentality:

My dad said don't take (the tuition) as something you have to return, don't think that I'm indebted to him, because they are one-hundred and ten percent nice to me. They will help me with anything I need. But I think the return is absolute. Filial piety is absolute. The pressure is not from them but forced on me by myself. ...I will consider them when I plan my life. ...For example, ten years later they are in their seventies and will need company. I will go home more often or work at a place within five hours flying-time so that I can go home in time if anything happens. ...In China the relationship between parents and kids is unequal and unreasonable. Children can ask the parents for anything, and parents can require the children to do anything. But I think there should be a reason behind all these. But if you really put reasons in my case, that doesn't make sense either, because I just want to show filial piety to them and give them all I have when they need. This is related to my value. ...To the contrary, they tell me not to feel too stressed (Liang Mo, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 27, 2018).

While she used the language of filial piety, the meaning the words have diverged. By declaring that it is her own value that drives her to care for her parents, she stressed the fact that her love for her parents is conscious and voluntary, based on reciprocity rather than compliance with the tradition, which exemplifies the effect of individualization. She believes that the interaction between parents and the child should involve rational

reasoning, but the principle that parents and the child should both support each other remains unchanged.

One of the reasons why the parents are now more concerned about their children's happiness than their achievements is that the socialist economy has backfired. Many parents revealed to the students that it was a shame that they did not have the opportunity to go abroad or choose what they wanted to study when they were young. Cheng Yin's parents, though concerned about Cheng Yin's future, are happy that she has found her passion:

(Laugh) They don't think I can feed myself. They've lost all hope. But they see that I'm happy, and as long as I'm happy, it's fine. They spent their lifetime failing to find something they really like to do: they finished college blindly, were assigned random jobs, didn't like the job and moved to city A to get a new one. They don't hate their jobs, but they just couldn't find a thing that is the most important for life (Cheng Yin, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 29, 2018).

The absence of a social safety net and the state's aspiration to build a strong economy did not allow time for the young to explore their passions. Their only task was to get a well-paid job so that they could continue their lives, secure support for their families, and contribute to economic growth. Now, they certainly have achieved their goals, but the sense of loss is rooted in their minds deeply, exacerbated by the global discourse on individualism. The child becomes the one that carries on their wish to practice individual freedom and live happily. Wang Lin told me that her father has revealed the same mentality:

My dream is a continuation of my dad's. ... This is not something my dad forces

on me. It's like cultivating. ...His dream has come true through me: he has to send me abroad, like I have inherited his dream and I have to carry it forward. He always says that I have really good opportunities, and even though he wanted to go abroad when he was young, there was no way, because of money and life. ...He's the oldest son in the family and he thought he should stay at home to take care of his parents. For that he missed lots of opportunities. So, I think that the reason why my dad has supported me to go abroad is because I should complete what he had once thought of (Wang Lin, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 23, 2018).

As Yan (2003, 178) argues, these practices and their rhetoric might be short-term strategies used by the parents to secure future aged care provided by their children.

However, from my interviews, these middle-class families, who are affluent enough to pay the total amount of tuition without insisting on returns, seem to care less about whether the child can afford support for the aged than whether the child can live a happy and successful life. Yet this emotional debt becomes a burden in Song Rui's case:

I think karma between parents and kids can be said deep or shallow. If you want to measure it with money I think it is totally fine. ...If only the gratitude can be measured by money! ...My mom said she no longer expects me to find a job that can pay the tuition back to her. ...I don't want to rely on them. I really want to work on my own. And I know, and they want me to know, work is not just for money. For this I'm grateful to them (Song Rui, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 23, 2018).

The less her parents care about financial returns, the more the investment is expressed through emotional debt. As emotional debt is not to be easily paid and cleared, the relationship is maintained.

## **Conclusion**



This section has examined the intricate parent-child relationship in China. Changes in the family have moved along the path of individualization, as in modern China children are no longer required to obey their parents unconditionally. Parents of the students in my study even choose a parenting method that supports individualization by granting more freedom to the child and treating the child as a reasonable individual. But by no means is the family collapsing. Parental wealth becomes the foundation of the freedom enjoyed by their child; their middle-class living standards and visions are internalized by the child. Their rather overwhelming support and love for the child, manifested by the enormous investment in study abroad and the willingness to adjust to the child's changing values and personalities, turns into unspoken pressure on the child, who endeavors to gratify the parents by achieving personal success and happiness.

## **CHAPTER 4. Pitfalls and Problems of Transnational Individualization**

This section addresses the difficulties that the students have encountered after they arrived in the United States for high school or college education. In addition to stress from their families, students also experienced a lack of social support, a lack of direction, and the feeling of regret, as a result of migrating to the more individualized American society. Despite having more freedom of choice, subjectively students are constrained by Chinese culture and lifestyle, which makes them unable to fully embrace the freedom offered. Dissatisfied with American life, some of the students preferred to go back to China, whereas others are stuck between the sense of grievance against the constraints in China and the strict immigration policy in the United States.

Tung (2016) does a thorough literature review on undergraduate Chinese students' experiences in the United States, and she summarizes the challenges that Chinese students encounter in American universities. The meritocratic, competitive, and exam-centered Chinese education, the effects of the One-Child Policy, and Chinese culture that emphasizes harmony characterize these students. Language barriers and a lack of a comprehensive understanding of American society and classroom cultures, such as individualism, class participation, taking initiative, prevent students from adjusting smoothly to American college life. Although the article runs the risk of overgeneralization, it provides a sense of the challenges that Chinese students face in the

United States. Gao (2017), writing as a Chinese student who formerly studied at Harvard, claimed that academic pressure, language barriers, and cultural differences are the main sources of stress for Chinese students. Equaling life prospects and self-worth with academic success, Chinese students cannot imagine failing in American college, especially with the enormous investment in tuition by their parents.

Indeed, although many interviewees did not like to be defined by grades when they were back in Chinese schools, academic achievement remains an important part of their identity. When I asked them what expectations they had for themselves when they first came to the U.S., the majority of the interviewees reported having had no expectations or emphasized getting good grades. Chen Hao began his student life in the United States during high school. He asked me in return, “Does going to college count? Something I have to achieve...get a good GPA? I can’t think of anything great.” He then confirmed that he came high school in the United States just for entering college, and his plan after college is to apply for graduate programs. Li Wei reaffirmed his interest in academics, “When I first came I wanted to study well and get good grades for all the classes. Now I have to consider things for employment, to talk to professors and learn what I should do, which track I should take.” Despite all the opportunities to do extracurricular activities and explore outside interests, Chen Hao and Li Wei chose to focus on academic activities. As individualization forces the individual to take the initiative for their own life, navigating the educational system in the United States is much more complicated than in China. In the United States, not only good grades but

also interaction with professors is important if one wants to utilize all available resources to succeed. Chen and Li are only two of the many who reported catching up with class assignments as the urgent stressor at this point, though some of them are juniors who are not facing the direct prospect of job-hunting. Whether the importance attached to academic success should be considered as a residual effect of the Chinese education system remains a question, but these two accounts indicate that for many students, the path from academic to career success still has a dominant status in the discourse of how one should live.

Besides academic achievements, other students had expectations for the social dimensions of study abroad. Escaping from the rigid and homogenous Chinese educational system, many of the interviewees in my study expressed their excitement about meeting the diverse population in America. Experiencing different cultures is also one of the goals that their parents wanted them to achieve. When he came to America for high school, Huang Yao expected to “have some freshness” in the life of a sixteen-year-old, “(Study abroad is) an opportunity to study diverse cultures and make friends with different people. [My parents] provided this better chance for me to explore new stuff. Since I was young I have been interested in new stuff. I wanted to stick to this hobby.”

Despite having had high expectations for social experiences before they came, many students now regretted that they did not take full advantage of the variety of student activities and the opportunity to make friends with different people. I asked Zhang Wu what he had failed to achieve in college, and he answered, “Participating in more

activities. I'm still a homebody...didn't quite like student clubs. I think it's my personality." While Zhang Wu attributed his social inactivity to personality, Sun Li elaborated on the difficulties of making international friends in school:

I think I've achieved all my goals. ...It's just a little different. Like, my friends are all non-Americans? Anyways, I've experienced what I'm supposed to. The culture of after-school life here is different. Their way of socializing is going to home-parties. And I just chose what I felt comfortable with. ...I once tried to make international friends. But it's really energy draining, because of personality differences. And it ate up my leisure time. We just have distinct cultures. Later I think that, just be happy (Sun Li, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, October 10, 2018).

The educational system in the United States that supports individualization provides numerous opportunities for students to explore their identities, but it also requires them to take the initiative to participate. As Tung (2016) has found, the distinction between Chinese collective culture and American individualism is the main impediment for students to become fully immersed in the unknown and adventure of American universities. Although the students have subjectively expected themselves to be set free from the rigid Chinese social environment and see making friends with foreigners as a means of improving one's social status, their agency is restricted by what they considered their "personality" or "culture." Eventually, they are forced to adjust their goals or blame themselves for not taking action to better their lives.

On the other hand, students could also have expected too much diversity in the United States that they were disappointed when they came. Liang Mo recalled that the high school she attended in the United States was more homogenous than she had hoped:

I came to this high school because I went to their reception back then. I met with their faculty and thought that the school was diverse and open-minded. ...After arrival there came cultural shock. ...It's the best high school in the area. People were born there, grow up there, get married, have a family, and die there, very local. It's not diverse at all. At school there were students from China, Japan, some from Europe. Most of them are white immigrants from European countries. It's a small school, 35 students each year. There are like 3 or 4 black students in each class. A pretty homogeneous environment... (Liang Mo, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 27, 2018).

Luckily, the homogeneous environment led to solidarity within the school, and Liang Mo enjoyed a smooth transition to American student life. Compared to the strong sense of collective solidarity in high school where lower-class students would cry when seniors graduate, the college she attended made her feel isolated despite the diversity on campus:

And when I came to this college I didn't feel the sense of community. Even though I do have a bunch of friends to talk with, I still don't have the feeling of a collective. At that time, it's hard for me to get used to it. ...Maybe before I came I had learnt how to get along with others. Now I'm learning how to get along with myself, how to adjust myself when the environment is adverse and make myself better. ...I still want to know more cool people, but I think the college has held me back on this. Although it is very diverse already, but people still just stay within the group. Chinese students with Chinese students, Vietnamese with Vietnamese, the black with the black, the white with the white, gays with gays. ...I thought it should be an integrated place, but it isn't (Liang Mo, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 27, 2018).

Liang Mo has overestimated the mobility and desire for integration of the individual in the United States. She imagined an authentic American campus as a true melting pot of all races and cultural backgrounds, with no barriers among these distinct groups because Americans can respect and communicate with all cultures. She has imagined an ideal world characterized by what Giddens and Beck have described as "cultural democracy" in a highly individualized world. But American society, struggling to empower its citizens

of all racial, religious, and cultural groups with equal rights and respect, has not yet acquired this ideal level of democracy.

Disappointment is not the worst psychological response, however. Cao Yue reported that she had suffered from severe depression when she first came to the university:

I was first influenced by the party culture and later found it uninteresting. ...It's just drinking all the time. I was disappointed. I didn't want to get stuck in the Chinese student circle, but I think Americans are boring. ...In the second semester of my first year I was depressed, feeling that I couldn't find my place in life...hard to adjust to life. ...Sometimes I started to think about deep questions like the meaning of life, those kinds of philosophical and religious questions. ...And the classes I was taking then were elementary, much less intense than in high school. Looking back, I thought that I've spent hundreds of thousands of Yuan coming abroad to learn nothing...very disappointed...and can't relate to anyone socially. At that time my roommate was depressed and she dropped out, and my other friend was dating someone and rarely spent time with me. I was a failure in all aspects. ...Family was not by my side. ...I got no moral support, no outlets, and I didn't want to get my family worried. They couldn't give me any advice anyways. ...It's a vicious cycle (Cao Yue, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, November 13, 2018).

If hanging out with Chinese students is considered what a typical Chinese student would do when studying abroad, by deliberately isolating herself from the Chinese student circle and her own family, Cao Yue has forced herself to integrate into American society as an individual, believing the barriers between cultures can be broken down. She tried, but she failed. The freedom that American students possess in a more individualized society is wasted on drinking, in her view. But Cao Yue does not like to be coerced into this specious freedom of abusing oneself. While failing to integrate socially, academic activities do not meet her expectations as well. In other words, all of the identities that

Cao Yue carried with her to the United States have been denied, which drives her to contemplate what it means to be an individual, if one is not to rely on friends, family, and grades.

Cao Yue has met friends from Church and converted to Christianity. In fact, another student, Cheng Yin, also did the same. In Cheng Yin's words, when she decided to join the Church, "It feels like you are not by yourself anymore and you don't have to do everything on your own." Adopting a religion is not uncommon for one who is experiencing difficulties in life, as religions usually provide guidance about how to think and behave, and religious groups provide physical social support that eliminates loneliness. What is new in these two cases is that joining a Christian church, while it might seem natural in the United States, is not a popular practice in China, especially when one does not have a family connection to Christianity. Because of the freedom to practice religion in the United States, Cao Yue and Cheng Yin have established new identities for themselves outside their family and even Chinese society.

The third common-seen goal of studying abroad is the exploration of self-identity, as mentioned in the education section. Huang Yao, not unlike many other interviewees, expressed the hope to find a "true self." He told me, "At first, I came just to broaden my visions, to see if I can adjust to the new environment, to see clearly what kind of person I am. In different environments you can always see different selves." His answer suggests that he was doubtful about the nature of self that he had shown previously, and he believed that, by exposing himself to an unfamiliar setting with



unknown cultures and challenges, more possibilities of self would spontaneously appear. Another student, Ma Yu, remembered similar confusion about himself before he came to the United States, “I didn’t know what to expect. I didn’t know what I liked and what I could achieve. Now I think I’ve found what I want to do, and I accepted the fact that I can’t plan all the things out.” The denial of past self can be attributed to the monotonous student life in Chinese schools. As students had only experienced limited activities that an individual should be capable of doing, which was studying and practicing for exams, and as they were, to some extent, coerced to enter the educational system, they did not think that their identities developed during the years in China constituted their true selves. When students came to America, they can finally take advantage of the individualistic culture and cultivate new identities for themselves at their discretion, which they would consider “authentic.”

Ma Yu is fortunate to have found his passion for life, because most of the other interviewees failed to find satisfactory answers for their futures. Some do, but then they regret not having found it earlier, demonstrated by Yang Jing’s words, “I don’t know why I chose this major. ...I mean, I like it, but it’s not practical. Other majors have clear directions (for the future), but I still don’t know what I want to do. I should have figured out my career path and my passion for life earlier. And I always regret for not attending an arts school from the beginning.” Yang Jing thought that if she had found their passions and started developing her skills earlier, her life now would be different, and probably better. But Chinese education never gave her the opportunity to find her passion. Wu Wen

has an even vaguer idea about her life, “I don’t know what I should do or if there is anything I have to do. But then you can’t just do nothing. My goal is to have a life with no stress, but I don’t know how I can achieve that.” These feelings are typical reactions to the freedom provided by individualization. Because students have complete autonomy over their choice of majors and careers, it is up to them to balance between preferences, practicality, and feasibility. Yang Jing and Wu Wen indicated that they would rather have a life that they can see clearly what they should do instead of one that emphasizes exploration and experimentation, but there were no longer rules, customs, or authorities to dictate their lives. Forced individualization unavoidably entails the sense of lack of direction, uncertainty, and insecurity.

With all the difficulties, constraints, and concerns mentioned above, regarding the decision of returning to China or not, students’ opinions are bifurcated. Some of them have had enough of American life and would like to go back to China. Sun Li explained her reasons for choosing to go back, “For long-term development I will go back to China. My family and the elderly are at home. And I like the exciting environment. In the states it is like a life in retirement. In China people don’t “play too hard” like the Americans. And in China it is very convenient. In the states I’m like an outsider, just staying here temporarily.” Tung (2016) found out that most Chinese students in the United States are from big cities which millions of people reside and offer a large variety of entertainment, while many American universities are located in small towns or in rural area. Students are used to busy city life and do not appreciate rural life. Indeed, many friends of mine who

are not studying in cosmopolitan cities like New York, some in cities like Boston, would call themselves “villagers” to show contempt for the boredom of the U.S. The different ways of socializing in America also exclude Chinese students. Sun Li does not like American students’ “playing too hard”, which indicates that how American students choose to relax usually goes beyond what Sun Li can accept, similar to Cao Yue’s distaste for college drinking culture. Though the students are not able to explain clearly what exactly a “Chinese lifestyle” means, it surely is a lifestyle that they have grown up with, been used to, and takes little effort to maintain, compared to the one in the United States.

Beyond the preference for more entertainment activities, the reasons underlying the students’ decision to return to China are better life chances and more accessible social services. Lin Jie is concerned about cultural differences and racial discrimination that might dim his future if he chooses to stay, as he said, “In the long term I will definitely go back. The cultural background is more suitable. To communicate with Americans is like forcing yourself into it. It is really energy and time consuming. And the competition is fierce. Also the workplace glass ceiling for Asians. Most people will return to China.”

Chen Hao, instead, prefers the lifestyle in China:

I will choose to go back. If I can get a job here I will try, but in the long term even if I think this place is better, I will still go back, because life is more comfortable. You eat well, sleep well, and live well. (I: What is so bad about America?) First of all, the food is really bad. And don’t you think it is really dangerous? And it is inconvenient, even if I’m in NYC, not so convenient, like you want to see a doctor, not convenient. I’m used to the lifestyle in China. The lifestyle in the US is not so suitable, but I can bear with it. (I: What is a Chinese lifestyle?) Convenient, everything very convenient, and fast. (I: You mean you can do whatever you want?) No, but you can do it in an easy way. Like you can

scan the QR code to pay, can meet with more friends. I'm used to it (Chen Hao, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, October 25, 2018).

Just as the students see studying in America as a means of broadening one's vision, exercising one's independence, learning knowledges and sciences, America is not planning to accommodate these students for long-term development. For example, the difficulty to access health care, which was mentioned by Chen Hao, prevents students from residing in the United States. These students are all among the privileged class in China, which means that they are from cities where social services and resources, such as health care, infrastructure, and work opportunities, are abundantly available, accessible, and affordable for them. This privilege inherent in their middle-class status and urban residency is the "convenience" that the students talked about. More specific examples are the prosperous food delivery and package delivery industries, whose astonishingly heavy workload satisfies urban residents' desire to save time at the expense of welfare of the couriers, who are predominantly migrant workers ("China's Food-Delivery Business Is Booming. So Is Waste" 2017; Clover 2015). Besides, Chinese society suffers fewer security problems such as mass shooting and terrorism than in America. Choosing to stay in America simultaneously means that one chooses to expose oneself to these dangers. This potential risk that such dangers are life-threatening are also covered by the media and transmitted to students' families back in China.

Despite all the inconveniences and difficulties of living in the United States, some interviewees expressed the hope to stay, because of the existing problems in China,

including pollution, censorship, social pressure, political corruption, and a lack of prestigious job opportunities compared to the United States. Cheng Yin is interested in literature related to the Cultural Revolution, a sensitive topic in China, and she realized that the chances to stay in China and continue to pursue her interests were slim, “I might go to a thinktank. I want to teach in school the most...try to stay abroad because in my field it is difficult (to teach) in China. ...I’ll see if I can stay. If I can’t I will have to go back. I will also consider Hong Kong.” In addition, another student, Cao Yue, mentioned that pollution in China has rendered it a less preferable place to live in. Unlike others, Liang Mo was more hesitant about the decision:

Plans can never catch up with changes, especially after Trump was elected. ...I will see how life goes. If (in the future) I think that freedom of speech is really important, then I definitely can’t live in China. But if I can let everything go, just want to pet a dog, watch the leaves fall by the lake and take a walk, if I want a life like this I might still go back. After all that’s where I grew up and where I started my dreams. ...My root is there. ...(But for now) I don’t like stable life. There are too many restrictions in China, family, and life stress, people around you, stereotypes, first of all, your body shape, and women have to get married by thirty-five. You can of course ignore these comments, but in China if you want to be integrated you will have to meet these social expectations. So I don’t like the general environment. I’m curious about everything and the diversity in China doesn’t meet my expectations (Liang Mo, interviewed by author, personal interview, South Hadley, September 27, 2018).

These students would love to embrace the freedom in American society, where the individual can live without overly caring about what others think and live for one’s own passion without worrying about censorship or extreme environmental deterioration.

Unfortunately, this freedom will not be offered to non-Americans for the long-term. The students have bought short-term freedom by paying to study in the United States. After

college, staying in America becomes extremely difficult for international students, which has been worsened by the election of Donald Trump, who is anti-immigrant. The approval percentage of H1B visa, a temporary work visa that takes thousands of dollars in sponsorship, has dropped from an average of 75%-80% from 2007 to 2016 to 59% in 2017, which reveals the tightening adjudication process (Kumar 2018). Transnational individualization is rendered nearly impossible for the long-term by American boundaries and policies.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has discussed the study abroad experiences of sixteen Chinese students in the United States from the perspective of reflexive individualization. Demands for a more individualized education and life are not being met in China, so these students have migrated to the United States with the prospects of more freedom and better opportunities. The parents of these students play an essential role in the child's study abroad experience, as they have been cultivating an independent self in their child, have encouraged the ambitious standards the child should pursue, and, finally, sponsored the study abroad experience in the United States. The students are profoundly affected by individualization in China and in America. Some of the stress they are experiencing directly results from the exposure to a freer society, whereas cultural differences, the unbreakable parent-child bond, and the effects of Chinese education explain other stresses. A higher-degree of individualization than what has been achieved in China is desired for these middle-class families, but the only way to achieve this is to leave China for a more individualized society. Transnational individualization then serves as a means for the party-state of preventing the effects of individualization from destabilizing China, as these middle-class individuals unsatisfied with China have sorted themselves out by consuming their own wealth and resources.

Though some of the students did mention the problems of Chinese politics, such

as authoritarianism and censorship on speech, few of the students mentioned politics during the interviews. I also had not prepared related questions in advance, for I wanted to see what the students consider central to their study abroad experience without my prodding. In Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's discussion of individualism, the decrease of trust in government and the rising number of voluntary organizations are crucial part of the theory, which I am not able to touch upon in this study.

Future research can continue to document parent-child interaction and analyze the mechanism through which the more emotional parent-child relationship is sustained, especially for those families whose child is not able to meet the lowest expectations of the parents. How the students internalize the high standards of success, which has only been briefly explored, would also be an interesting topic to study.



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