Received: 6 September 2021 | Accepted: 25 March 2022

DOI: 10.1002/psp.2571

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

Chinese students at U.K. universities: Transnational education mobilities as a stepping-stone to adulthood

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Funding information
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Abstract

This article explores transnational Chinese students' education migration to the United Kingdom through a lifecourse perspective. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 43 transnational Chinese graduates from U.K. universities, I found that participants regarded their transnational education migration as a stepping-stone to adulthood. Influenced by the mobilities paradigm, this paper elaborates on the transitions to adulthood experienced by transnational Chinese students. The findings illustrate how transnational education mobilities transform social networks, in which transnational Chinese students rehearse their role as an adult in everyday social interactions, and how the intersection of Confucian collectivism and students' class background influences their experiences and understandings of transitions to adulthood. Therefore, this paper advances existing scholarship on transnational Chinese students by proposing a lifecourse perspective and exemplifies the complexities of mobile youth's lifecourse transitions by emphasising the cultural and social construction of transnational Chinese students' adulthood.

KEYWORDS
adulthood transition, transnational Chinese students, transnational education mobilities

1 | INTRODUCTION: TRANSNATIONAL CHINESE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

In 2020, around 139,130 Chinese students left China to pursue education at U.K. universities (Universities UK, 2021). As the largest group of transnational students studying in the United Kingdom, Chinese students have drawn great research attention. Most scholarship analyses transnational Chinese students' migration either as 'strategic plans' to secure employment opportunities and future economic gains, (e.g., to gain university credentials and embodied competencies), or as nonstrategic distinctive experiences for 'positional advantage' (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Ma & Pan, 2015; Xiang & Shen, 2009; Zong & Lu, 2017; Zweig & Yang, 2014). Existing scholarly accounts further stress the political, social and cultural aspects of students' migration by illustrating how it involves postcolonial discourses (Beech, 2014; Fong, 2011), government policies (Wang, 2021), middle-class habitus (Zhang & Xu, 2020), and Chinese family culture (Tu, 2018a, 2019). This study contributes to existing scholarship by attending to the adulthood transitions of transnational Chinese students studying in U.K. universities.

Recent scholarship draws increasing research attention to the adulthood transitions experienced by students in migration (Robertson et al., 2018). Investigating student migration through a lifecourse perspective, scholars illustrate how mobile youth experience their educational migration as 'a rite of passage' to adulthood

(Harris et al., 2020, p. 9). As argued by Madge et al. (2015, p. 685), 'student mobility for international study should not simply be thought of as a movement occurring at a discrete point in time, but as an ongoing process inherent to ever-changing mobile lives'. When students move across different locations to study, they experience separation from old social relations and unification with new ones. For example, disconnecting from familial social and cultural contexts and integrating into new social relations are processes that bring about situated experiences of taking adventures, overcoming uncertainties, experimenting, finding oneself, and then becoming an independent adult (Michail & Christou, 2016; O'Reilly, 2006). Moreover, researchers critically point out how this normative understanding of mobile transitions is socially structured by youth's class positions, governments' migration policies, and discourses such as cosmopolitanism and individualism (Holdsworth, 2009; Kim, 2013; Thomson & Taylor, 2005; Tse & Waters, 2013). Focusing on the social construction of mobile transitions, researchers thus elaborate on the complexities and unevenness of transnational students' life transitions (Cairns, 2014; Collins & Shubin, 2017; Martin, 2018).

But to date, far too little literature has situated the discussion of Chinese students' transnational mobilities in their lifecourse. Although Xu (2021) explores the transnational Chinese students' life events, her article mainly focuses on the interplay between students' (im)mobilities and their study-to-work transitions. This paper advances existing literature by investigating how transnational Chinese students reflect on their studying experiences at U.K. universities through a lifecourse transition perspective. Framed within the paradigm of mobilities, the findings illustrate how transnational Chinese students interpret their U.K. study experience as a stepping-stone to adulthood and how their transitions to adulthood are culturally and socially structured. For Chinese students, U.K. universities are more than a place to study: they are the sites of the creation of social webs where young people rehearse the roles and responsibilities of adulthood in everyday social interactions. Moreover, this paper exemplifies the importance of a cultural lens in the analysis of mobile transitions to adulthood (Arnett, 2007; Jeffrey & McDowell, 2004; Nelson et al., 2013; Punch, 2002; Stockdale et al., 2013). Noticing that Chinese students construct their adulthood in 'interdependencies, mutual support, and responsibility for others' instead of 'separation, self-reliance, and responsibility for the self', a conventional transition model for western mobile youth, I explain how transnational Chinese students' transitions to adulthood are structured by collectivism and group-oriented values (Holdsworth, 2009, p. 1861). Finally, this paper stresses the complexities of Chinese youth's transitions to adulthood by showing how transnational Chinese students' social class influences their transitions to adulthood.

2 | CHINESE YOUTH'S TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

In the scholarship on Chinese youth's life transitions, a considerable amount of literature has argued that Chinese cultural norms and socioecological conditions should be taken into account when studying Chinese youth's trajectories to adulthood. Culturally speaking, existing literature has observed that Chinese youth's transitions to adulthood are group-oriented as they develop 'a greater sense of responsibility to the family and the society' than their peers in Western cultures (Nelson & Chen, 2007, p. 89). Nelson and Chen (2007) use Confucian collectivism to explain the cultural construction of Chinese youth's transitions to adulthood. According to Nelson and Chen (2007), as a predominant ideological regulation for social practices in China, Confucian collectivism endorses one's sense of obligation towards others and requires an individual to display behaviours for interpersonal harmony and group solidarity. This group-oriented cultural characteristic influences Chinese youth's transitions to adulthood by emphasising their ability to integrate with others and make achievements for the group (also see Nelson et al., 2004). For example, to be an adult, youth need to learn to contribute to solidarity by suppressing their personal desires and considering others' needs. They also need to control their emotions because expressing sadness or happiness is a self-oriented behaviour that imposes one's personal feelings on others and threatens interpersonal harmony (Badger et al., 2006). Family is central to Chinese youth's transitions to adulthood. To be an adult in one's family, youth need to take familial responsibilities, including financially supporting the family, getting married, giving birth to the third generation, and taking care of ageing parents and grandparents (Nelson et al., 2004).

Researchers also pay attention to how social changes in China may influence the parameters of youth transitions to adulthood. For example, M. Cheng and Berman (2012) notice that there is an increasing focus on the self among Chinese youth. They find that youth regard self-reliance, self-confidence, and abilities to make independent decisions and express personal views as essential qualities for an adult in a competitive society. While acknowledging that Chinese youth become more self-oriented in some cases, Nelson and Chen (2007) argue that youth's focus on self does not contradict the group-oriented values embedded in their transitions to adulthood. Similarly, Yuan and Ngai (2018, p. 140) find that Chinese young people 'constructed a self that was more filial to parents' in their description of their identity as an independent adult in family relations and peer networks.

However, existing literature on Chinese youth's transitions mostly focuses on domestic college students (e.g., Nelson & Chen, 2007; Yuan & Ngai, 2018), and little is known about young people from different social backgrounds, especially those moving transnationally during transitional life stages. Transnational university students and domestic university students may differ in areas such as social class (Waters & Brooks, 2021), governance of youth in different countries (Y. Cheng, 2015), and normative discourses of emerging adulthood in different cultures (Nelson et al., 2013). Therefore, how transnational migration impacts Chinese youth's transitions to adulthood and how transnational Chinese students navigate their transitions while studying abroad are important areas for study. In addition, as discussed in the previous section, over the last few years, there has been a growing literature exploring migration as a significant marker and maker of youth transitions to

adulthood, within western countries in particular (Ní Laoire, 2020; Skrbis et al., 2014). In response, this paper attempts to bring transnational Chinese students studying in U.K. universities into the discussion. In the following section, I will explain how the mobilities paradigm is a useful theoretical framework to examine the association between youth migration and normative understandings of youth' transitions to adulthood.

3 | MOBILITIES AND TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

Scholarship on mobile youth's transitions to adulthood usually draws on the theoretical concept of mobilities (Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007). The mobilities paradigm suggests a network thinking 'rather than a totalising or reductive description of the contemporary world' (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 213). In the mobilities paradigm, movements of people, ideas and objects are embedded in and directed by networks of relations tied to different places (Sheller & Urry, 2006). These networked relations are constituted of socioeconomic institutions, geopolitical discourses and cultural forces that structure social practices (Jones, 2009). Mobilities of embodied social actors, ideas and objects further sustain and reproduce the unbounded networks that stretch beyond different places (Larsen & Urry, 2016). Through the lens of mobilities, existing work criticises an oversimplification of students' migration as depersonalised movements over measurable and geometric spaces, and places students' everyday experiences, interpretations and emotions at the centre of discussion (Collins, 2018; King & Raghuram, 2013; Waters & Leung, 2013, 2020; Waters, 2017). Theorising students as embodied social actors, researchers use the mobilities paradigm to examine the intersection between students' class, gender, political and cultural backgrounds and the networked relations within which they are embedded in the course of migration (Brooks & Waters, 2017; Waters, 2017). Therefore, the mobilities paradigm highlights a relational and contextual analysis of students' migration and focuses research attention on students' everyday experiences, interpretations and emotions as a way to understand the political, cultural and social aspects of students' migration.

The mobilities paradigm also informs scholarship on Chinese students at U.K. universities. Focusing on Chinese students' lived experiences during mobilities, several studies have discussed students' educational migration to the United Kingdom from social, cultural and political perspectives. In an analysis of Chinese middle-class female students' construction of distinction, Zhang and Xu (2020) exemplify how transnational education mobilities reproduce their social advantages. Conceptualising China and the United Kingdom as two different fields, Zhang and Xu (2020, p. 1254) found that students' attainment of distinction is obtained 'depending on features of specific fields that these students are embedded in' during transnational mobility. Studies also exemplify how Confucian family culture structures Chinese middle-class students' transnational mobilities (Hu et al., 2020; Tu, 2018a). According to Hu et al. (2020) and Tu (2018a), students' close emotional and financial attachment to their family members in China plays an essential role in their transnational education (im)mobilities. In another study, Wang (2021) illustrates how transnational Chinese students' return migration results from their construction of political and cultural identities as mainland Chinese in everyday interactions with the otherness they encounter in transnational mobilities. However, little is known about the association between Chinese students' transnational education mobilities and their lifecourse. Therefore, this paper advances exiting scholarship by attending to the adulthood transitions experienced by Chinese students at U.K. universities. In what follows, I explain how the mobilities paradigm provides an incisive set of tools to explore the interplay between university students' migration and their transitions to adulthood.

First, scholarship establishes the link between university students' migration and their transitions to adulthood by showing how education mobilities transform social relations in which students construct their identity as an adult in everyday interactions. Emphasising a relational and contextual analysis of mobile youth's life transitions, researchers have explained how youth achieve adulthood in their lived experience of changing social networks (Robertson et al., 2018; Tse & Waters, 2013). When students move across different locations to study, they are physically away from their familial social and cultural contexts and required to integrate into new ones. Researchers discuss mobile youth's separation from old social relations and unification with new ones as significant events for the achievement of growing up, because experiences of overcoming difficulties and taking adventures lead youth to consider their career plans, life aspiration and interpersonal relationships (Michail & Christou, 2016; O'Reilly, 2006; Thomson & Taylor, 2005).

Second, the mobilities paradigm also helps scholarship interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions about mobile youth's transitions to adulthood as it facilitates exploring the unevenness and multiplicity of mobile youth's transitions to adulthood. This is because the relational and contextual nature of mobilities puts the mobile youth's experience of life transitions at the intersection between their backgrounds and the changing social relations and cultural and political contexts they encounter in the course of mobilities. For example, researchers combined a mobilities perspective with Bourdieu's capital theory (2018) and showed how middle-class youth manipulate migration to facilitate their life transitions (Cairns, 2014; Frändberg, 2014; Skrbis et al., 2014). In their articles, transnational mobility is an efficient way for middle-class students to accumulate embodied cultural capital and build social connections, which enhance their future employability and enable the development of the cosmopolitan skills needed in the globalising world. Young people's increasing transnational mobilities in the pursuit of independence, autonomy and self-enhancement further reproduce the idea of mobile transitions as class privilege (Collins & Shubin, 2017; Tse & Waters, 2013). However, Holdsworth (2009, p. 2861) challenges the dominant discourse that constructs adulthood as independence associated with long-distance education mobilities by elaborating on how students from less-privileged backgrounds

interpret adulthood as 'interdependencies, mutual support, and responsibility for others' to navigate their adulthood transitions in localised small-scale education (im)mobilities.

Similarly, Robertson et al. (2018) use the concept of 'mobile transitions' to capture the complex and transformed meanings of youth, adulthood, dependence and autonomy. Reviewing the diverse life transitions experienced by mobile youth, Robertson et al. (2018, p. 205) argue that youth's capacities for mobilities are differentiated by their 'class, ethnicity, sexuality, race, gender and migration status', which make their experiences of mobile life transitions multiple. They propose to understand youth's mobile transitions in relation to three 'intersecting domains': economic opportunities, social relations, and citizenship practices. Collins and Shubin (2017) exemplify how a relational perspective helps explain the multiplicity and fragmentation of mobile students' transitions to adulthood. Theorising youth's experience of life transitions as subjective temporalities caught up in everyday relations, Collins and Shubin find that education mobilities bring about changing social and cultural structures of time that influence mobile students' understandings of and pathways to adulthood. For example, 'human capital' migration policies may influence mobile youth's adulthood by using age as a criterion to determine their eligibility for skilled-youth visa applications. When students move across different countries and cultures, they are embedded in different time structures such that they experience life transitions as uneven, fragmented, nonlinear temporalities. This argument is further supported by Ho (2021), who elucidates how one's experiences of lifecourse are socially constructed in everyday lived spaces and places. Therefore, through the lens of mobilities, recent literature departs from normative discourses that regard mobile youth's lifecourse transitions as predictable, controllable and predetermined events, and highlights the multiplicity and complexity of life transitions to youth on the move.

Third, concurring with arguments in favour of the relational and contextual examination of mobile youth's life transitions, I further propose to situate the analysis of youth's transitions to adulthood in their lifecourse geographies. To begin with, the meanings of particular life events are always in relation to other events experienced at different life stages (Bailey, 2009). Migrants' interpretations of their life events are in the process of changing and becoming, as mobilities bring about different circumstances that influence migrants' understanding of particular life events. This relationality requires an analysis of one's life events to extend beyond segmented present moments and connect with their pasts and futures. Moreover, the mobilities paradigm theorises people's migration as parts of continuing movements through lifecourse (Adey, 2017). To migrants, their mobilities are always time-spatial, as they not just move between segmented places but travel from a space in the past to a space in the future (Massey, 2005). Therefore, to situate the analysis of mobile youth's transitions to adulthood in their lifecourse geographies means to pay attention to how they make sense of and reflect on their transitions to adulthood before and after their mobilities. This argument echoes recent scholarly accounts of transnational students' life events and transitions. For example, Xu (2021) finds that when mobile youth talk about their life events, they usually connect their interpretations to their previous experiences and expectations before the mobilities, the meanings attached to the mobilities, and their aspirations associated with future mobilities and life plans (also see Lee, 2021).

To sum up, the mobilities paradigm sheds a light on mobile youth's transitions to adulthood. Stressing a relational and contextual analysis of mobile youth's transitions to adulthood, the mobilities paradigm pays attention to their everyday lived experiences, reflections and aspirations before, during and after their migration, and emphasises the political, cultural, social and educational aspects of their life events. Therefore, by drawing on the concept of mobilities, this study aims to investigate transnational Chinese students' transitions to adulthood by examining their life transitions as lived events caught up in their everyday experiences before, in and after studying at U.K. universities.

4 | METHODOLOGY

Data are drawn from in-depth interviews conducted with 43 Chinese graduates with U.K. higher education degrees. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and attention was paid to ensure the inclusion of participants from diverse backgrounds. Regarding their families, most of the participants were 'well-off' (i.e., financially secure) and parental occupations were professional, including civil servants, managers of state-owned enterprises, journalists, university lecturers or business people. Twenty-seven participants were female, while 16 were male. Participants had received degrees at different levels: bachelor's (4/43), master's (30/43) and PhD (9/43). Seven participants were fully funded by scholarships; one participant was self-funded; one partially self-funded and partial parent-funded; the remaining 34 participants were fully funded by their parents. Forty-one participants were younger than 25 when they came to the United Kingdom. Two participants had worked, and two participants had studied in other foreign countries before studying in the United Kingdom; the remaining 39 participants had neither studied abroad nor worked before and showed similarities in their reflections on their U.K. study experience. My identity as a Chinese student studying at a U.K. university enables me to provide 'inside' perspective. In fieldwork, my identity allowed me to gain a great deal of trust from participants and helped me collect rich data in conversations.

All interviews were conducted face to face and in Chinese, and their words were translated into English. All names used are aliases. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences and understandings of adulthood related to transnational education mobilities. Even though participants were different in terms of gender, majors attained, degrees and length of stay, they shared a range of similarities when explaining their transitions to adulthood in the United Kingdom. In what follows, I illustrate how participants regarded studying in U.K. universities as a stepping-stone to transit to adulthood.

5 | TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD AT U.K. UNIVERSITIES

'Becoming an adult' and 'adulthood rehearsal', which emerged from participants' narratives, were recurring themes: this is how participants made sense of their experiences of travelling to the United Kingdom to study. In interviews, participants often made a distinction between their identities before and after studying abroad, as they 'grew up' from a parent-dependent child to a responsible family member, and from a campus student lacking social experience to a member of broader society. To be more specific, studying in the United Kingdom was a stepping-stone for their transitions to adulthood because transnational education mobilities situate participants in changing networks of relations in which they rehearse their identity as an adult. These networks of relations are constitutive of student-family relations, student-student relations, student–teacher relations, and human-materiality relations, exemplifying the assemblage thinking of transnational education proposed by scholars (Brooks & Waters, 2017; Sidhu et al., 2016). Moreover, this section critically points out the social and cultural construction of transnational Chinese students' transitions to adulthood, by illustrating how participants' pursuit of 'independence' implies the idea of 'interdependence' valued by Confucian collectivism and how their class background structures their understanding of transnational education mobilities as opportunities of adulthood rehearsal.

5.1 | To redefine the role in the family

In interviews, participants usually regarded themselves as dependent children (i.e., dependent upon their parents) when they travelled to the United Kingdom to study, even though all my participants were over 18 years old at that time. To participants, their transition from children to adults depends on whether they have familial responsibilities or not, such as cooking and taking care of other family members. Their understanding of adults and children resonates with the existing literature discussed earlier, that only when youth begin to fulfil familial responsibilities can they be regarded as adults in the family (Huang, 2012; Nelson et al., 2013). Before studying abroad, participants eschewed familial responsibilities, because both participants and their parents believed that a student's main task was to learn and achieve excellence in academic performance, which should not be compromised by such 'trivialities'. Hence, to participants, parents' meticulous care in every aspect of their life made them dependent children regardless of their age.

Travelling to the United Kingdom to study creates a space where transnational Chinese students can redefine their roles and grow up from dependent children into adults who take more familial responsibilities. Geographically distanced from their parents, students are in a place where it is difficult to receive parents' help. As commented by Kaiyan (29, male): 'I was living alone in the UK, far away from home, and there was no one to take care of me. I needed to learn how to depend on myself'. Participants thus began to take on domestic responsibilities that were usually taken by their parents, including shopping for daily necessities, cooking, renting, paying bills and so on. Taking these domestic responsibilities, they rehearsed their role as an independent adult.

In interviews, cooking was the most frequently mentioned responsibility taken by adult family members. In the existing literature on the identity of transnational students, cooking is not a new theme, for example, Bochner et al. (1977) identification of cooking and consumption of ethnic food as an affirmation of international students' cultural identity (see a similar argument in Gu & Maley, 2008). In the interviews, however, cooking emerges as the practice of adult responsibility. As intimated by Kaiyan (29, male).

> It [learning how to cook] means that I can take care of myself independently. I had never cooked before I studied abroad, and my parents took good care of me [cooked for him]. They [parents] always spared me from cooking because they regarded me as a child.

Participants also rehearsed their role as an adult when they cook together with other transnational Chinese students. Every participant had cooked at some point together with other Chinese students during their time in the United Kingdom. Usually, they divided cooking into different tasks, and each one needed to take on certain responsibilities, including shopping for food ingredients, washing and chopping, setting the table and washing dishes after having food. In interviews, participants stressed the importance of one's contribution to the whole cooking process. Jeide (26, female) compared cooking with friends to playing house in reality:

> When we prepared the meal together, it seemed that we played house in reality. One or two were in charge, and the rest would help. Everyone had his or her own tasks, and everyone's contribution was significant. Although we were not related by blood, we were like a family.

To transnational Chinese students, in the process of cooking together with friends, they developed a sense of family among each other and played the roles of adult family members. Therefore, while scholars have emphasised kin like friendship as the localised social and emotional support to transnationally mobile youth (Harris et al., 2020), participants' construction of kin like friendship reflect their practices of familial responsibilities in transitions to adulthood.

Taking familial responsibilities as an adult also refers to taking care of parents. Studying overseas provides transnational Chinese students with an opportunity to become reliable adults in their family. For example, some participants hosted their family members from China when studying in the United Kingdom. Since their parents barely spoke English, participants were responsible for all travel arrangements, such as visa applications, ticket buying, booking hotels and so on. As recalled by Anxin (24, female):

> I organized everything for my parents and took good care of them. They cannot speak English and I was the only one the whole family counted on. It used to be my parents who took care of me and helped me, but then I had to take responsibility.

Connecting students' travelling and their hosting parents' travelling to the discussion of adulthood transitions provides a new lens through which to consider transnational students' mobilities (see e.g., Liu & Ryan, 2011).

It also should be noted that even though participants stressed living independently as a criterion of adulthood, they seldom included financial independence. In interviews, participants understated the importance of financial independence to their transitions to adulthood experienced in transnational education mobilities. Most of the participants felt little pressure to earn money as they were dependent on their parents for tuition fees and living expenses while studying abroad. When commented on the importance of financial independence to his transitions to adulthood, Maike (25, male) told me that 'earning money is a task for the later life stage. The first step is to learn to take care of yourself, such as the ability to cook'. Like Maike, most participants divided their transitions to adulthood into several stages and assigned different adulthood responsibilities to different stages. Some participants told me that they did part-time jobs while studying abroad, but the main purpose of this was to experience 'local life' rather than earning money.

Participants' downplaying of the importance of financial independence shows a striking contrast to the existing scholarly observation that Chinese youth's financial contribution to their family is an essential criterion for their transitions to adulthood (Nelson et al., 2013). Most participants came from comparatively well-off families, and they told me that their parents also believed that priorities should be given to learning how to take care of oneself rather than earning money. In addition, participants also expressed that they did not feel any urgency to gain financial independence as there was no such a peer pressure among transnational Chinese students in U.K. universities. Therefore, unlike their counterparts in China, as children from comparatively privileged class participants experience a 'more relaxed timetable' and 'a [more] leisurely pace' in their pathways to adulthood (Furstenberg, 2008, p. 6). Participants' division of transitions to adulthood into different stages also echoes Xu's (2021) article on the study-to-work transitions experienced by Chinese students at U.K. universities. In the article, students from privileged families rely on their family financial support to 'go through a waiting period to engage in work that they felt truly passionate for' (Xu, 2021, p.12). Adopting a Bourdieusian framework Xu (2021) theorises time in students' career plan as coveted cultural capital, access to which depends on their class. Like the students discussed in Xu's article, participants in this study also exemplify how mobile students' anticipations, experiences and interpretations of time and life trajectories are structured by class.

Therefore, transnational Chinese students regard studying in the United Kingdom as a stepping-stone for their transitions to adulthood because transnational education mobilities create a unique space for them to take familial responsibilities. This observation belies 'the stereotype that mobile young people are free of family and community care obligations' (Harris et al., 2020, p. 5). To Chinese students, the meaning of transnational mobilities is tied to their practices of familial obligations and responsibilities as an adult. Hence, while existing literature has already pointed out the value the family perspective in exploring transnational Chinese student' mobilities (Hu et al., 2020; Tu, 2018b; Wang, 2021), here I show it helps investigate mobile students' pathways to adulthood. Moreover, since most participants rely on their parents' financial support to study at U.K. universities, this subsection also stresses the social aspect of students' expectation and realisation of mobile transitions to adulthood.

5.2 | To think as an adult

Transitions to adulthood also emerged from participants' descriptions of an 'independent mindset' when reflecting back on the value of studying at U.K. universities. Their explanation usually began with a comparison of a 'student mindset' and an 'adult mindset'. They used the word 'student' to refer to passive and dependent knowledge learners who rely on teachers' guidance, and the word 'adult' to refer to those who learn actively and solve problems independently. They exemplified the importance of the independent mindset to their transitions to adulthood with how it enabled them to make more positive contributions to teams than their peers within the workplace. For example, when doing a group project, compared to student-mindset employees (usually domestic graduates) waiting for directors' suggestions and orders, they, as overseas returnees, could think and behave more independently and actively. Jian's (25, female) narratives are quite illustrative:

> You are hired to solve problems for the company, and you are valued for your performance and contribution. If you were just an obedient person, always waiting for the manager to assign tasks and following orders, then your value (to the team) is little.

Putting emphasis on their contributions to groups, participants' pursuit of an independent mindset reflects group-oriented adulthood characterised by Confucian collectivism. In interviews, participants attributed their attainment of the independent mindset to a changing student–teacher relationship they experienced while studying in U.K. universities. They stated that unlike 'authoritarian' and 'teacher-centred' China universities (see a similar argument made by Yin et al., 2014, p. 967), U.K. universities are student-centred. Teachers in U.K. universities were described as knowledge guides. They encouraged students to think independently and actively, listened carefully to students' thoughts and opinions, and valued originality above standardised answers. As said by Hailun (27, female) that:

> In China, I was trained to be obedient and to learn passively. But British teachers inspired me to find my own ways to solve problems rather than learn knowledge by rote. They critically challenged my thoughts and arguments. Knowledge was learned in the process of defending my own opinions. I learned not only knowledge but also the way to learn.

Therefore, while earlier literature discusses transnational Chinese students' experience of the changing teacher-student relations through the lenses of students' learning experience and academic performance (Harris, 2012; Holmes, 2004; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Parris-Kidd & Barnett, 2011), this study contributes to the literature by discussing student–teacher relationships through the lens of adulthood transitions.

Participants' narratives on emotional independence also illustrate the group-oriented transitions. According to participants, expressing one's emotions to parents or friends may impose one's personal feelings on others and destruct interpersonal harmony. Transnational education mobilities create a space where participants practice their ability to control emotions, negative ones in particular. Travelling far away from home and studying in unfamiliar cultural and social contexts usually triggered negative emotions, such as homesickness, loneliness, depression, uncertainties and so on, but

> I hid them (negative emotions) from my parents. There was no point to make them feel bad. They were far away from me, and if they knew my negative feelings they could do nothing but worry about me. I needed to deal with it on my own and could not cause more trouble to my parents (Jeili, 24, female).

Like Jeili, many participants told me that hiding negative emotions from parents made them feel more like adults as they suppressed their own emotional needs for their parents' feelings and emotions. Existing literature has already paid attention to transnational students' emotions, but mainly focuses on how their emotions influence their transnational education mobilities (Sidhu & Ishikawa, 2022; Sidhu et al., 2019; Sinanan & Gomes, 2020). For example, Hu et al. (2020, pp. 1, 19) observed that international Chinese students and their family members in China strategically modify negative emotive expressions to each other, for example, 'downplaying worries' and 'foregrounding concerns', to sustain transnational education mobilities during the pandemic Covid-19. Participants' interpretation of their control of negative emotions as an adult further advances the discussion by showing how emotional independence is an essential component to Chinese youth's group-oriented transitions to adulthood.

5.3 | To integrate into broader society

In addition to taking familial responsibilities and thinking as an independent adult, integrating into broader society is also a recurring theme in participants' interpretations of their transitions to adulthood during transnational education mobilities. In interviews, there was a clear division drawn between the campus space and the social space outside campus (i.e., 'broader society'). The former, the space of university campus, was described as the 'ivory tower', a space of simplicity; the latter was a space of complexity, where they communicated and lived with people from diverse backgrounds and learned worldly wisdom. Participants believed that they rehearsed adulthood when studying in the United Kingdom because U.K. universities required and encouraged them to leave university campus and make connections with people in broader social space.

In interviews, participants usually depicted the Chinese university campus as an isolated space enclosed by physical boundaries, which separated them from the broader social space. As in Meite's narrative:

> [Chinese] university campus is enclosed by walls and iron railings, and gates are guarded by campus securities, both of which (walls and gates) make the university campus an isolated space from the outside world (Meite, 25, male).

The idea of isolation is also reflected in participants' description of on-campus facilities:

> Universities are equipped with everything a student needs within the campus, including canteens, students' entertainment centres, supermarkets, theatres, hospitals, salons, barbers, bookstores, cafes, gyms, cinemas and so on (Jian, 25, female).

Taking care of all aspects of student life, university campus operates as a self-sufficient community. So, participants expressed that they felt it was unnecessary for them to leave campus. Moreover, many Chinese universities are located in 'university towns', which makes it even more difficult for students to leave campus. Driven by urban development in China, over one hundred university towns have been constructed on the outskirts of cities since 2000, providing universities with new campus to house millions of students (Li et al., 2014). To participants, living and studying in university towns kept them away from integrating into urban life. As commented by Aili on undergraduate life in a university town:

> I did my undergraduate in a university in Shanghai. But I never felt like I was in Shanghai. My (undergraduate) university was located in a university town. It took me nearly two hours to go to the city centre. The university was surrounded by farmland. There was nothing outside the campus, and I felt like living in a prison at that time (Aili, 24, female).

In addition to physical boundaries, on-campus facilities and remote locations of university campuses, Chinese universities' student management systems also enhance students' sense of

isolation. For example, university dorms are managed uniformly by dormitory administrators. Every night, usually around 11:00 PM, dorm managers close all entrances of dormitory buildings and shut down the lighting systems in all dorms. If students fail to return to dorms before 11:00 PM, they will have no choice but to find a hotel or an Internet café to stay over. Therefore, Chinese universities students usually live 'a simple three-point-one-line life between the canteen, the classroom and the dorm' and discourage students from 'contacting and exploring the outside world' (Kaiyan, 29, male).

However, U.K. universities do not manage students' life in such a comprehensive way. For example, housekeepers will not close the entrances of dorm buildings nor turn off lighting systems at night. Moreover, the U.K. university campus is seldom enclosed by walls and usually scattered in local urban landscapes. Many dorm buildings are off campus, and students need to take a bus to have lectures. Travelling in cities enables students, in Jeisen's words, 'to get close to local people and their lives, feeling like that I was more like a city resident rather than an international student'. Furthermore, unlike Chinese universities which strictly forbid students to cook in the dorm, U.K. universities provide students with well-equipped kitchens in student accommodation. The cooking facilities not only make cooking possible but also 'motivate participants[me] to go out of campus to shop groceries' (Kaiyan, 29, male). Shopping for groceries was also frequently mentioned by transnational Chinese students as a way to participate and integrate into local urban life. Finally, studying overseas also requires them to communicate with institutions and organisations outside campus. For example, before studying abroad, participants had familiarised themselves with the visa application systems and banks' exchange currency systems (also see in Madge et al., 2015); when studying abroad, they learned to deal with housing agencies, energy companies and so on.

Therefore, unlike Chinese universities, U.K. universities encourage transnational Chinese students to leave campus and participate in urban life as adult social members. To participants, the U.K. university campus guides them 'through educational and social spaces and to manage their integration into the broader urban fabrics the universities sit within' (Sidhu et al., 2016, p. 1504). It aids their *transitions*. Participants' description of their urban life and travelling between accommodation and campus also echoes Holton and Finn (2018) on the everyday mobilities of students in U.K. universities. In their article, they discuss how students' everyday mobility 'into, through and away from the campus' and interactions with cities play an essential role in students' formation of identity (Holton & Finn, 2018, p. 438). To participants, their identity as adult social members is constitutive of everyday events such as commuting and shopping in the studying city and chatting with local residents.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Exploring how transnational Chinese students relate their transitions to adulthood to transnational education mobilities, this paper exemplifies the importance of a relational and contextual analysis of mobile youth's life transitions. I argue that transnational Chinese students' subjective sense of adulthood comes from their practices of adult roles in changing intergenerational and intragenerational relations experienced in transnational education mobilities.

This paper stresses the cultural and social aspects of transnational Chinese students' transitions to adulthood. To begin with, I illustrate how Confucian collectivism structures transnational students' pursuit of independence in their transitions to adulthood. Independence is a recurring theme discussed by the existing literature on mobile youth's transitions to adulthood (e.g., Holdsworth, 2009). Here, participants also emphasised their attainment of independence to explain how studying in the United Kingdom facilitated their transitions to adulthood. However, while prior studies deploy individualism to explain the association between youth's attainment of independence and their transitions to adulthood (Nelson et al., 2004), my study finds that Confucian collectivism is embedded within transnational Chinese students' aspiration of adulthood independence. For my participants, independent adults need to take on family responsibilities, control personal emotions for solidarity and make group-oriented contributions. The adulthood independence characterised by collectivism is also exemplified by participants' interpretation of independent thinking as an adult mindset. Participants believed that the independent mindset helps them 'better contribute to the company', while a dependent mindset 'causes troubles to others' in the workplace (Jerry, 26, male). Similarly, participants' interpretations of emotional control as an others-oriented adult mindset also reflects Chinese collectivist culture (Bond & Hwang, 1986). Hence, to participants, adulthood independence is a rite of passage to solidarity. Therefore, resonating with the existing scholarly criticism of an exclusive analysis of adulthood as 'separation, self-reliance, and responsibility for the self', this study proposes to think adulthood transitions as 'interdependencies, mutual support and responsibilities for others' (Holdsworth, 2009, p. 1861).

Transnational Chinese students' understandings of transnational education mobilities to the United Kingdom as a stepping-stone to adulthood are also influenced by their social background. Class is a crucial factor structuring participants' interpretations of their mobile adulthood transitions. According to Nelson and Chen (2007, p. 87), financially independence, as one's family obligation to ageing parents, is a benchmark for Chinese youth's transitions to adulthood. However, to participants, 'being financially independent' or 'being capable of supporting parents financially' was neither necessary nor essential for their mobile adulthood rehearsal when studying in the United Kingdom, but tasks for later life stages. Most participants relied on their family's financial support to live and study in the United Kingdom. Even when some participants did part-time jobs, they regarded it as a way to get involved in broader society rather than a financial obligation to their family. As in Liang's (25, female) words, 'working as a barista is crucial to my growing up as it offered me a chance to work with people from different backgrounds and to see broader society'. These findings echo Xu's (2021) work on the study-to-work transitions of Chinese students studying in U.K.

universities. She finds that 'Chinese international students' career imagination is class-differentiated' (Xu, 2021, p. 2), because students from more privileged family background are more capable of bearing the cost of waiting in their study-to-work transitions. Likewise, participants' class background allows them to develop a stepwise route to adulthood and rehearse the yet-to-come 'real' adulthood in transnational education mobilities.

Emphasising the embeddedness of transnational Chinese students' transitions to adulthood in webs of social relations also illustrates the spatial entanglements of lifecourse. In interviews, participants usually related identities at different life stages to different spaces experienced throughout their lifecourse. Family space, workplace, university campus and broader social space outside the university campus are all different socio-spatial webs in which they constructed different lifecourse identities in their everyday interactions. Thus, a relational and contextual analysis of life transitions recognises that migrants' lifecourse geographies are participative and constitutive of their life transitions (Hörschelmann, 2011; Murray & Robertson, 2016). Participants' interpretations of their spatialized lifecourse also exemplify how meanings of spaces and places only 'emerge through their connections with other spaces and places' that are experienced in one's lifecourse geographies (Skinner et al., 2015, p. 787; Wood, 2017; Worth, 2015). Therefore, this paper explains the tangled nature of mobile transitions to adulthood by showing how transnational Chinese students' lifecourse geographies are constituted in and connected to different socio-spatial networks experienced before, in, and after their mobilities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Johanna Waters (University College London), as well as anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback and suggestions on an earlier version of the manuscript. I would also like to thank all participants that took part in the research and enabled this study to be possible. Responsibility for any errors in the resulting work remains my own.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable due to ethical restrictions. Due to the nature of this study, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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How to cite this article: Wang, Z. (2022). Chinese students at U.K. universities: Transnational education mobilities as a stepping-stone to adulthood. *Population, Space and Place*, 28, e2571. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2571