



Dreams of Flight – in conversation with Fran Martin

Speaker: Associate Professor Fran Martin, Associate Professor and Reader in Cultural Studies, University of Melbourne

Moderator: Professor Louise Edwards, Adjunct Professor, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney

July 28 2022

Online

[E&OE | Check against delivery](#)

Dr Corey Lee Bell (00:03):

Good afternoon members of the audience and special guests. Okay, so before we begin proceedings and on behalf of all those present, I would like to acknowledge that this webinar is hosted on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. I would also like to pay respect to their elders past, present, and emerging, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for this land.

This session will now be recorded. We will record audio screen share and our presenters. We will not be recording any video or audio output from the audience. So, welcome to all: UTS students, staff, and all friends of ACRI and UTS. My name is Corey. I'm a Project and Research Officer at the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney, or UTS:ACRI. UTS:ACRI is an independent, non-partisan research institute established in 2014 by the University of Technology Sydney. Chinese studies centers exist in other Australian universities, however, this institute is Australia's first and only research institute devoted to studying the relationship between these countries. UTS:ACRI seeks to inform Australia's engagement with China through research, analysis, and dialogue grounded in scholarly rigour.

If you want to learn more about UTS:ACRI and the Australia-China relationship, details are available on our website at australiachinarelations.org. Today we'll launch the book *Dreams of Flight: The lives of Chinese women students in the west*, written by Fran Martin. This discusses how young women from China negotiate the competing pressures of academic, career, and character development on the one side and normative ideas associated with gender and cultural identity while studying in Australian universities. It's available for purchase at dukeupress.edu.

Fran Martin is Associate Professor and Reader in Cultural Studies at University of Melbourne, and she'll be introducing her work for us. Dr Martin is the author of a number of books, including *Backward Glances: Contemporary Chinese cultures and the female homoerotic imaginary* and a co-author of *Telemodernities: Television and transforming lives in Asia*, both of which were also published by Duke University Press.

The moderator today is Louise Edwards. Louise is an Adjunct Professor at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney. Professor Edwards served as President of the Asian Studies Association of Australia from 2016 to 2017 and is Editor in Chief of the Association's 'Women in Asia' book series. Her most recent sole-authored books include *Citizens of Beauty: Drawing Democratic dreams in Republican China* published by Washington University Press; *Women, Politics and Democracy: Women's suffrage in China* published by Stanford University Press, and *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China* published by Cambridge University Press. I will now hand it over to Professor Edwards to give an overview of the book and the contribution it makes for its field. Thank you.

Professor Louise Edwards (02:56):

Okay. Thanks very much, Corey.

It's a real honor to be here to talk with Fran about this amazing book. When I read it, I was so excited, and I thought, 'This is a perfect discussion for ACRI to host because international education is one of the key planks of Australia's relationship with China.'

The book itself is a remarkable study, an in-depth ethnographic study of students and their families before they come to Australia and while they're here. And so, over a long series of years, Fran has engaged with these remarkable students and their families and presented her findings in this book.

I think what you'll see from the discussion today is that the novelty of the book is not only that it is the first academic study of specifically Chinese women coming to Australian universities, but also one of the important contributions it makes is to the field of gender in China studies, because it tells us a huge amount about what is going on in China today in the formation of femaleness – how people perform their roles as daughters, as female travelers, as female students, how do you become a successful Chinese woman in this transnational world?

The book is called *Dreams of Flight*, as Corey mentioned. I want to ask Fran about the title at the end of our discussion. But to start us off, besides saying congratulations, Fran, on a great project and a great book, I'd like to ask Fran to just give us some framing around the international education market that prompted this book. Take it away, Fran.

Associate Professor Fran Martin (04:47):

Thanks, Louise. I'd just like to thank ACRI too, for hosting this event. It's really a pleasure to be here virtually with you all and lovely to speak with you as ever, Louise. So thank you. Thank you, Corey, for the intro.

I guess on a personal level, the thing that started me wanting to research a book like this was my own experience in Australian universities teaching in an Arts faculty, as I do, and noticing the growing numbers of international students from mainland China who have been joining us, as we all know, in our classrooms over the last 20 or so years. I became curious about what their personal subjective experience is like. This was not just me noticing this, obviously, in my classroom, but it's part of a broad trend, which I'm sure many of us are quite familiar with.

If we look back at some of the figures of this industry, what we call education export as an industry in Australia over the past few years, we see that in 2019 to 2020, just before COVID, international education was contributing no less than 37 and a half billion dollars to the Australian economy, which made it the most valuable sector after extractive industries, or mining, as it had been for a number of years. I guess the broad context for why that's the case, it does result from declining per student government funding for universities over recent decades. We see that between, for example, 1994 and 2004, public funding for universities fell

by 27 percent per student, which is significant. And by 2014, government contributions made up under 40 percent of universities' revenue, which was the sixth lowest of all OECD nations. So despite the fact that we do have a robust and important and high quality higher education system, there was a bit of a financial squeeze.

So as we know, the marketing of degrees to international students, largely from Asia, has become a key strategy to fill that shortfall. So under those conditions, international students have increased really dramatically since the early 1990s, and they recorded double digit annual growth, which is extraordinary over the pre-COVID years up to 2019. Within 10 years up to 2014, for example, the number of places for international students rose by over 40 percent, and by 2017, revenue from their fees accounted for over 23 percent of Australian public universities' revenue, making it their single largest non-government source.

And among all of this, for many successive years, which also mirrors a global trend, students from China have comprised the largest group studying in Australian higher education, which was over 38 percent in 2019. And that, in turn, is connected clearly with economic, social, cultural changes within China, the growing urban middle classes, growing credentialism in the Chinese professional job markets and so on, making an overseas degree seem like a smart investment by families there.

Professor Louise Edwards (08:11):

Right. I mean, those statistics are astounding, and when you're in the classroom, you notice it, but having that data behind to explain the trend, it's really quite remarkable.

I'd like to now move us onto the gender aspects of the study, because one of the things that you pointed out in your book was that Chinese women dominate the market in Australian universities. That, to me, was really surprising because all of my friends from Hong Kong and Taiwan, they're about my age – fifties and sixties – and they're all women who knew of female family members who were sent to work pretty soon after middle of high school so that they could earn funds to send their brothers overseas. So a lot of Hong Kong men, Taiwan men, have overseas education funded through the labor of their sisters, and that was to give the male of the family the best possible chance.

This doesn't seem to be happening now. We've got an entirely different things. So I want you to tell us about what's happening in the Chinese context that has transformed this from the 1970s to now. Is it changing gender norms in Chinese families or Chinese society? Is the gender hierarchy that favours men diminishing, or is it the opposite? Is it that the gender hierarchy that favours men is reinforcing, and so families with daughters are trying to get around that by giving their daughters a leg up, an extra credential that's an overseas education? So yeah, just tell us, why is it women? Is this unique to Australia?

Associate Professor Fran Martin (10:04):

Yeah, thanks, Louise. It's such a great and rich question there. It's always wonderful to have people read the book who were so engaged. It's fantastic and exciting.

I'll respond to that question in two parts. The first part of the question about the historical context that produces this change where Chinese young women are going out in unprecedented numbers for educations overseas. We do know that over half of the students who leave China for overseas study are female, according to China's own government statistics. So why is it so? On the one hand, I think the obvious thing to note here is the one child policy has created quite a unique generation of women. Because [they have been] generally lacking brothers, and therefore not so much subject to that entrenched son favouritism which may historically have been the case, they therefore have concentrated parental resources available to them due to the lack of competition from brothers. The anthropologist, Vanessa Fong has called these daughters their families' only hope, as in only child in the hope for either consolidating or advancing social and class status, I guess, in future. So this generation of middle class parents have turned out to be extremely supportive of

their daughters' educational development. When I say this generation, they're actually about our age. There are people born in the sixties and seventies. They're very supportive. If you only have a single child and it's a daughter, you hope for her success and support her educational attainment strongly.

This is all in the broader context, of course, of the emergence of the new urban middle classes since the 1980s in that post-reforms era, so that there is money available then to invest in education. And it's also in the context of intensified job market competition and rising credentialism in Chinese urban society, as I mentioned earlier. I think in the case of – or my research suggests in the case of – women students, particularly and their mothers, there's a real awareness, too, of the existing gender bias in China's job market where particularly in the private sector, employers have been openly favoring male applicants for jobs because they don't want to be saddled with the costs of maternity leave and the costs of reproduction.

So an awareness of gender bias in China's job market can be a motivating factor for some women and their mothers, as you said, earning extra points to try and even up the unlevel playing field in applying for jobs. And some daughters as well are dissatisfied with a standard neo-traditionalised feminine life course. They think that just getting away from the surveillance of elder relatives and mainstream society generally for a few years might help them there.

Then moving on to the second part of the question about what does this tell us about changing gender hierarchies? You said, is it that things are becoming better for women or are things becoming worse, paradoxically, and this is why they want to escape? I think weirdly, it's both. There is a rising neo-traditionalism and a rising post-traditionalism in relation to women's social roles and identities. If we look at the broader economic and ideological context of China today, we see that in the post-socialist society, there is a very powerful discourse, and this is a state-endorsed discourse, which pushes individual self-reliance and competitive self-advancement in the market economy. This appeals to well-resourced young women, like the ones who are able to study abroad. It nurtures their ambitions to achieve their personal and professional fulfillment and career success through investment in education.

But, as you rightly note, at the same time, there's also a resurgent gender neo-traditionalism which causes misgivings among some in the state apparatus and in the mainstream society generally about these women's ambitions. We see mockery of women with PhDs as a sexless third gender, so-called. We see the state-led disparagement of unmarried women over 27 years old as leftover women. We see the jailing of feminist activists. So it seems that both China's government and conservative public opinion fear what they have unleashed, right? These young middle class, urban women's self-transformations seem to be going too far as a result of the new opportunities that are available to them, which leaves the women themselves in a conundrum. They're caught between their own desires for self-advancement on the one hand, which has been nurtured in them as young students, and on the other hand, a strong social pressure to follow a standardised life script and settle down, have children, focus on family before you turn 30.

So they really do embody a historical paradox in my view. It is state-led changes to life in China, in the economy, in the educational system, in the culture over the past 30 years that allow these women to exist – to emerge as a generation – and allow them to travel abroad. But the kind of women that they become as a result of all this makes the official culture slightly nervous. And it's this that I think sometimes women want to escape from even temporarily. Particularly slightly older participants in my study – the master's level, mid-twenties – they found that studying abroad offered an attractive alternative from all of these intensely competing pressures that were on them at that time of their lives.

Professor Louise Edwards (16:17):

Pressures that are really hard to resolve, so one good option is to escape. What are they doing in terms of partnering choices? From your interviews and discussions with both parents and with the students

themselves, what are they planning in their lives? How are they forming relationships? Do they see children on the horizon? What are they telling you?

Associate Professor Fran Martin (16:42):

Yeah, this is one of the key questions I was interested in seeing. I don't know yet because they're not quite there. My participants have just graduated and started working. I want to keep following them to find out what actually happens. But we can see, I think, from my study that studying abroad in a Western location like Australia seems to amplify certain trends that we already have noticed in young people's intimate relationship practices in China's large cities. For example, the normalization of sex and even cohabitation before marriage; serial monogamy before marriage; queer possibilities for some women, multiple sexual partners for others; and non-standard sexual partners, whether that's men of different races, casual sex, and so on. I don't mean to imply that every single student engages in every single one of these behaviours when they're overseas. Please, that's not the case. But there's a trend towards these things becoming more normalised, perhaps, in people's minds.

I noticed that participants in my study who were from smaller cities were remarking to me throughout the years in Melbourne when they met other Chinese women here from larger cities that, 'Oh gosh, they're very liberal, aren't they, in their views?' And so, there seems to be a finding of levels while the women are overseas such that those who would've perhaps had a more conservative background come to identify more with the big metropolitan background of the other students and while they're overseas find that these slightly more liberalised attitudes become normalised.

After graduation, my participants, really, to a remarkable extent among all 50 of the core participants, they spontaneously said to me that they felt – individually they kept saying – they felt that they wanted to put themselves at the center of their life's plans. They said things like, 'I feel I have become more self-focused than my cousins back home or my old high school classmates back home. I want to delay marriage. I don't want to get married before I'm 30. Maybe it could even be later. Maybe I won't get married. Maybe I will have children later than I previously thought or assumed, maybe I won't have children.' And they had as part of that – and connected with that – a strengthening set of criticisms of the neo-traditional gendered pressures at home. That's one of the really major findings of the book as a whole.

Professor Louise Edwards (19:24):

And what are the parents saying about this? And the young women, how are they explaining this to their parents who potentially funded their study and have these amazing aspirations for these amazing women? But what are they thinking then in terms of grandchildren?

Associate Professor Fran Martin (19:42):

This is a bone of huge contention. I mean, it was such a theme that my participants were telling me – some of them, not all – but a significant chunk of them were saying, 'Oh, my mom rang me again last night, she's stressing me out. She wants me to get married. My granny's on the QQ chat saying, 'Where are the grandchildren? You're too old to still be single.'" Huge emotional toll. I mean, I think sometimes when I tell the story in the way that I just have, it sounds a bit like, 'Isn't this terrific? People's attitudes are becoming liberalised. They're being liberated from the yoke of tradition, isn't that nice and happy?' I mean, maybe. But it's also a process that's immensely emotionally difficult because it's driven with more contradictions, more arguments, more pressures. So it's not easy.

Professor Louise Edwards (20:34):

It's really mirrored in Australia as well. I think young women today in Australia feel the same pressures, and it's partly because, I think, workplaces and family life haven't changed sufficiently to match the aspirations of women. We need more men taking on caring responsibilities. We need more flexibility in our workplaces. We need better childcare. And then, people can have it all. But at the moment, the support structures just aren't there. I think this generation of amazing educated Chinese women are just at the forefront of this experience, like many young women in Australia.

I want to ask now about this really interesting concept that you developed in the book that you called 'performative ethics of national representation'. Just as a background for the audience, it's that feeling that you have when you go overseas, and many of us have studied overseas or travelled overseas, and you feel like you are representing your country. Whether you want to or not, you feel like everything you do is going to fall back on that Australian woman or that New Zealand woman, that's what she said. You become unwittingly or unwillingly a representative for a whole nation. And so, there's that pressure came out in the book really clearly.

I wondered, is it a combination of exhortations from the Chinese state that 'Student, you go abroad, even if you're self-funded, you go abroad, you represent China, represent it well?' Or is it that plus the reaction they get in Australia, especially in the last few years where there's been quite a bit of tension between Australia and the Chinese government, and this idea that anyone who speaks proudly of China must be a spy or brainwashed or stupid. The only people who we can trust are the ones who are speaking negatively about China.

And of course, this just doesn't work in real people's lives. So tell us about this theory of performative ethics of national representation and also how these women managed all of those tensions that they've faced in the last few years here.

Associate Professor Fran Martin (22:53):

Yes, thanks, Louise. That chapter on students' patriotism or feelings for their nation while abroad I found a very fascinating part of the topic I was researching. It's a very complex picture, as you point out in the way you've framed the question. There are really multiple factors in play that shape students' national feeling while they're abroad. I think the complexity of the question is precisely what we don't see in mainstream media coverage, particularly in Australia, since about 2017 with the deteriorating bilateral relationship.

I remember, just as a way into this topic around national representation and how that feels, one of my early interviewees in the pilot study I did a bit earlier said something that's always stayed with me. She said, 'At home, you feel you're just a person. When you come here, you realise, 'Oh, I'm a Chinese person.' So there's a burden of representation to represent Chineseness favorably while abroad. I mean, in my analysis, I try to think through how this anxiety about national representation while abroad links with anxieties around how China itself is viewed on the world's stage in relation to its stage of capitalist development. It's as though becoming a wealthier society, becoming a more economically developed society, this is what will bring pride. But there is anxiety because there's a sense, are we there yet? We sort of are, but we feel like the Western world doesn't recognise that.

This can also be linked with a state discourse in China, the discourse of *suzhi* or population quality – I think of it as something like cultural civility – and anxieties that a perceived lack of these qualities of civility will be associated with China in the eyes of the world. For example, fearing that China's image abroad might be linked with older generations, with rural people, with non-middle class people, emblematised in the loud-talking, non-queuing package tourist. A lot of my participants are really middle class young women, sophisticated young

women sort of saying, 'Oh, those aunties, they're so embarrassing. We've got to show people abroad that we are not like that. That's them, this is us.' So they made efforts to do everything right while abroad in order to represent China appropriately, such as crossing the road with the lights, not littering, speaking politely. It's a huge pressure.

There's also a sense, I think, in this generation, partly due to the patriotic education campaign which has been in place post-1989, beginning in 1991, a sense of what, again, Vanessa Fong, an anthropologist I admire, has called 'filial nationalism'. This feeling, really an emotional feeling, shot up by the state discourse that one's feeling for the nation should be like one's feeling for one's parents. There's another anecdote I'd like to briefly tell here. This was actually told to me by another researcher, Andy Xinyu Zhao at a conference. We met and he told me a story which I think is great. He said, 'This business of nationalism while abroad or patriotism while abroad, imagine you are out somewhere with your mother and you are at some event with her. Some random stranger comes up to you and says, 'Geez, your mother's dress is pretty ugly, isn't it?' Now, what are you going to do? Regardless of what you yourself think of your mother's clothing taste, obviously you have to disagree with this person loudly and publicly in order to...[inaudible] What sort of a child are you? What sort of a son or daughter are you?

This is a metaphor for this kind of filial nationalism which I think is often not well understood outside China, sort of the idea of, why is it so emotional? But really it's a very successful form of emotional nationalism. This already probably exists. This feeling for the motherland probably somewhat already exists in this generation to varying degrees. When this meets the new kind or the rising kind of Sinophobia and anti-Chinese racism in Australia, a really potent tension gets created. I'm talking about Sinophobia and racism both at the street level, of people yelling racist things at you while they drive past in a car or see you in the supermarket buying something, suddenly there's a racist epithet hurled, which was an upsettingly common experience for these women. Or maybe there's racist anti-Chinese graffiti in the toilets at the university, also happens...[inaudible] at the government level.

I mean, this was the era when I was conducting the field work for this study. This was the era when our former foreign minister issued what she called a stern warning to Chinese students to not be spies, which just was met with nonplussed confusion. Everyone I spoke to was like, 'Why is she saying that? Is this something to do with tensions between the two countries? It doesn't make sense. Of course, we're not spies.' That's only going to rile up a siege mentality or a sense of being under siege and to feed into the sense that, 'Well, we are trying to act respectfully towards our homeland while we're abroad and represented appropriately, and yet we are met with this.' And then it's just a hostile – on both sides potentially – interaction, which is really unfortunate, and as I said, really not helped by some of the Australian government rhetoric in the past few years and ongoingly in fact.

Professor Louise Edwards (29:01):

Yeah, because street-based racism is an ongoing scourge that we have to deal with in Australia, but adding an official level to it was another whole problem, I think. One of the other things that always struck me when I had many interactions with the Chinese women students that I was teaching in earlier years was that they seem to be really annoyed with this simplistic binary that circulates that Chinese students are either Ferrari-driving, penthouse-living spoiled brats or they're cringingly impoverished and dependent upon parents who are working 20 jobs to fund their education. The idea that it was one or the other seemed to be a real burden for a lot of students and just being a person, being a student. What did your participants say about this kind of thing?

Associate Professor Fran Martin (30:04):

Yeah, they were very aware of this and very, again, nonplussed and confused by the assumption that they must all be rich. That was very strange to some of the students when they first arrived, and they earnestly

sought my advice and said, 'Fran, why do they think we are rich? I mean, China's not as wealthy as Australia, right? So where did that come from?' And we had some interesting discussions around that.

I mean, I think that what my study really shows beyond this binary that you so rightly point to that's so pervasive, of Chinese as either victim or an oppressor, is that these Chinese students and their families are strongly agential in ways that I think would be understood as fairly ordinary by many Australians, right? So regardless of what the Chinese or the Australian governments say or want, China's urban middle class families and their young people are empowered to act in their own best interests, and they will continue to do that as much as they can. It might go against government hopes in both nations perhaps sometimes. Overseas educational investment is one of the ways that they show their independent agency.

The aspirations of the students and their families were deeply recognisable and ordinary. They weren't exotic, bizarre, or extreme. They want to hedge against future risks and uncertainty in professional markets in managing their familial assets and so on. They aspire towards a comfortable life, personal and family security, and personal fulfillment. So really, I mean, I feel reading the book, people will hopefully think, 'This is surprisingly ordinary. It's surprisingly the same in some ways as the aspirations, the backgrounds, the ways of understanding one's life that we might see anywhere in the world in a middle class society.'

Professor Louise Edwards (32:06):

Yeah, that's great. I want to move now to talk about what was the young women's experience of living and studying in Australia. Teaching Asian studies [I] would always refer to the Colombo Plan, the original one, and the wonderful new Colombo Plan that's operating now. But one of the things that was really apparent with the 1960s/'70s Colombo Plan, students was that while they were really happy to be in Australia and they were really enjoying their degrees and the friendships they made, some of them came away thinking, 'Well Australians really are the dumb, drunk racists that we see, you know, the stereotype.' I guess, are the students that come to Australia actually able to have the cross-cultural exchange that they hope for with other young people? Are they happy with the quality of the education they're getting? Are we delivering what these young women aspire to achieve when they come here?

Associate Professor Fran Martin (33:12):

Thanks. That's one of the \$64,000 questions, to use a very ancient phrase. Absolutely.

I mean, no, they're not getting what they hoped for. Some do, but a majority, I would say, find it difficult to break into local or non-Chinese friendship circles. We've got to ask why. There's a lot of simplistic assumptions often in media commentary about why this may be the case. I would instead put it in the bigger picture of the way that Australian governments have tended to view international students, which is principally as consumers, right? There are consumers of an export commodity. So they are not endowed with broader social and welfare and wellbeing rights beyond their rights as education consumers, which largely devolve back to education providers. They do experience suboptimal outcomes in many domains, including socially.

I did write a publicly-available policy report on some of these questions that's called 'Chinese international students' wellbeing in Australia: The road to recovery' that came out in 2020. If anyone's interested, you can Google that, it's open access. It talks about some of the issues with wellbeing, which I won't go through in detail here, but one of them is in response to your question. Certainly, the experiences of social exclusion, restricted opportunities for intercultural mixing, and restricted work opportunities, including exploitation and exclusion at work. So all of this is exacerbated by Sinophobic racism, as we've discussed a moment ago, from the Anglo-dominated mainstream, and the lack of structural support for diverse social engagement.

I mean, I think it's clear from studies in education that you can't simply plunk different kinds of students into a classroom or onto a campus and go, 'There you go. That's done.' It's not that simple. We need to structurally

support diverse social engagement, not least for our own domestic students who seem to be fairly bad at making cross-cultural connections. Also structurally, we see the concentration of large numbers of students of a particular nationality, whether that's Australian or whether that's Chinese in particular university courses, which is not great for either side. We see socio-spatial segregation of Chinese students living situation in demarcated areas of Australian cities. Ruth Fincher and other colleagues in planning and architecture have some good studies of this in the case of Melbourne. We can map the spatial segregation quite clearly and relate that to particular forms of real estate regulation and so on.

But my broader argument is that I think Australian governments at all levels and education providers, but especially governments, would be better to reconceptualise international students not as consumers of an educational product but rather as part of the national youth population broadly conceived and as residents within local communities, because they are residents within local communities. They do live here. So they should have rights obtaining as such and interests that are, in fact, not just devolvable to universities because universities can't help what happens in the workplace, what happens in the rental agreement with the landlord, what happens in the streets, right? These are community concerns for different agencies and different levels of Australian government that should also be taking an interest in these matters for international students more broadly.

Professor Louise Edwards (37:07):

Yeah. I mean, we've really got our work cut out for us, I think, within the university sector, to make the environment more conducive to really deep cultural exchange so that both Australian students and international students can benefit. But I really think your points about the broader context are important as well. One of the slides I used to start each semester with in my teaching career was the 'Your Rights at Work' slide that the federal government operates and remind people of the minimum wage and that they as international students do have the same rights as ordinary other workers because there were a number of students that were told by bosses, 'Oh, you are an international student, you have to take this lower wage.' They had no idea. I mean, it was terrifying how vulnerable these young people are.

Associate Professor Fran Martin (37:52):

Yes.

Professor Louise Edwards (37:53):

University campuses are incredibly monolingual. If you've got an illness, for example, there is no way you can find out where to go to get help for that illness unless you're really up with the play on all the different acronyms for the health center or the social services and that. And just given the number of Chinese students, you'd think that some of the universities would have some multilingual signage, but just key things. Because if you're sick, you're not really playing at the top of your game. You need that extra help.

Associate Professor Fran Martin (38:23):

Absolutely.

Professor Louise Edwards (38:24):

...Really, really important. I'd really encourage people to go and have a look at that policy report that Fran has done. We'll try and get that on the website as well so that if you come back to the UTS:ACRI website you can click through to her paper. I'm going to finish off the questions with asking about the title. Why was it called *Dreams of Flight*? Because I had both the idea of soaring to new achievements but also fleeing from something and flight from something. Was that a deliberate choice? What was going on there?

Associate Professor Fran Martin (39:01):

It was. I did intend both of those meanings in the title. In fact, I think there are three aspects of flight that I could just briefly note in this final little part of our discussion.

The fleeing aspect was related to what we were discussing earlier, students gendered motivations for overseas study, escaping gendered restrictions at home, whether that's bias in the professional job market or corraling into a neo-traditional feminine life script. So that's to get away from that.

Post-study, in terms of the soaring aspect of the title - one notable trend among the graduates was their hopes and desires to keep moving after they graduate. So to stay on the wing. They were looking for post-study lives incorporating both dreams and practices of professional mobility, within China sometimes, working far from home, or with domestic travel as part of professional life, also dreams and practices of transnational professional mobility, say, through obtaining an Australian PR [permanent residence visa] and remaining mobile between the two countries. So that's a kind of hoped-for ongoing sense of flying or soaring.

And then thirdly, taking the mobility desire even further, just a couple of the core group of participants had aspirations toward quite unconventional forms of ongoing flight, whether that's through holidays, tourism, in some cases, aspirations towards non-directed forms of alternative travel, right? Like backpacking, working holiday travel, changing the entire life course to have a different value at its center as a path to personal enrichment rather than professional advancement. So I'd call that true soaring. And it leads to an emerging form of mobile subjectivity, right, a mobile identity, a new person who's permanently on the wing.

Professor Louise Edwards (40:55):

Well...

Associate Professor Fran Martin (40:57):

...Right, like those birds that seem to never need to land.

Professor Louise Edwards (41:00):

What a great title.

Associate Professor Fran Martin (41:03):

It is connected with the demands of global capitalism, too, for a flexible and mobile workforce, but it doesn't always take that form. It could be quite to one side of that as well.

Professor Louise Edwards (41:13):

Yeah. Okay, great. We've got a bunch of questions coming in now. I'm going to open with one from Bingqin Li who's also an outstanding social scientist like yourself. She says, 'A very interesting talk. I wonder whether intersectionality plays a role here. Young high school graduates are vulnerable to depression and the psychology and social exclusion literature in the West. There are policy efforts on how to socially include young school leavers. To what extent is the anger and anxiety of Chinese young people in Australia related to the fact that they're at a rebellious age? Is it a sign for them of defiance to authority that's trying to dominate them, because the same thing seems to be happening to Chinese young women in China and to Western young women in the West?'

Associate Professor Fran Martin (42:00):

Right. Right. Right. So the extent to which life stage plays into these forms of rebellion, I mean, yeah, absolutely! What the rebellion is, though, is quite distinct because what's normative or seen as standard in the different societies is different. For example, on the point I was just speaking about a moment ago, one of my participants, I think she's amazing, she comes from a very small city from a fairly humble mid-middle class/ low-middle class background somewhere quite remote. She's completely remade her desires and aspirations for life in that she wants to continue backpacking, working holiday making. She doesn't want to have a standard career. She doesn't want to get married, doesn't want to have children. She wants to go for self-enrichment. She's bought a ukulele recently. So, to me, that's a massive rebellion against the values of her home society. For an Australian young person, it sounds pretty standard, really, traveling, playing the ukulele. It's like, yeah, you're in your twenties, that's what you do kind of, if you've got the resources to do so.

So yes, I think that when we are evaluating what's rebellious and what's not, we need to look at what's normative in each place. But absolutely, I think it's a property of people in this particular life stage, and the sociology of life stages would support this. It's often is a theory of extended youth or emerging adulthood, that this is a time in post-industrialised societies of exploration, where identity is in flux and it's not clear to the person in the midst of it where that's going to land. So there's often experimentation, there's often non-normative behaviors tried out for a few years. I don't want to get too essentialist with it because I also think people are different from each other and some people might do this at different ages or whatever. But there's probably a general trend. You're right to think that this is at a particular time of life, yeah.

Professor Louise Edwards (44:03):

So a part of being young. We've got a question from ACRI director, James Laurenceson. He's asking about the foreign interference laws in university: 'So in recent years, the issue of foreign interference in universities has been a massive issue of attention. From your ethnographic research, did you receive any feedback about the responses universities have put in place, and did they feel singled out?'

Associate Professor Fran Martin (44:30):

I mean, it's approximately around the same few years that there was a general bunch of government discourses positioning Chinese students as problematic. So there was certainly responses from the students to the broader context, not particularly the foreign interference legislation. I don't think that they were particularly aware of that as graduating undergrads and professional master's degree students – a couple of them did PhDs – but they were not in the sensitive industries of tech and so on. I mean, what did come up more was the focus on CSAA (the Chinese Scholar and Student Associations), because some of them were members of those groups, particularly in Canberra, right at the time of the ABC reports suggesting that these Chinese student organisations were reporting to the embassy and they were an arm of the United Front Work Party and they were basically spy organizations.

The students who were part of those groups were mystified by this, because they just went along to drink tea and sing karaoke or whatever, they were doing in their little social movements or social events. They were singled out by some of the other student groups who said, 'Aren't you all spies? Aren't you pretty suspicious? What are you even doing?' And they were just like, 'What?' They felt very targeted. I remember there's an interview quoted in the book where one of the students in that situation said, 'It made me think that the media in Western countries is just as biased as the media in China, because the media here has obviously whipped something up, we don't even know what it is. Why did they single out China? Why did they single us out? It's obviously something to do with international politics that we don't even understand. So it made us feel victimised and I've just lost my faith in the free press.' Right?

Professor Louise Edwards (46:30):

That's really sad. I think we all need to keep in mind, these are young people, right? This kind of sense of being victimised when you're overseas and you're away from your family and your support networks, that's not a small pressure. That's where universities need to step up the support for international students, I think. We've got a question from Kevin Hobgood-Brown. He says, 'Fran and Louise, wonderful discussion. Fran, in the course of your research, did you get a sense that some of the trends that you've identified would be equally reflected in Chinese women who study in the US, Canada, and the UK?' What's the global comparison?

Associate Professor Fran Martin (47:08):

Yeah, I did get that sense because my participants had friends studying in other countries and they sometimes talked to them and talked to me about what they talked to them about. There were similar gendered pressures and anxieties.

A big part of this project was social media analysis and social media virtual ethnography. I was also reading a lot of the WeChat accounts which are targeted to Chinese students abroad, including some accounts based in European countries and in the US and Canada, New Zealand and so on, and the same topics come up there. It seems that there's a general self-awareness on the part of Chinese women students abroad that they might be a bit of a special cohort – that they may find themselves detraditionalised, they may find themselves leaning towards less normative and more liberalized forms of sex, gender, identity. So absolutely, it seems to be not just – I don't think it's something special about Australia. I think it's something about being taken out of or going yourself out of the home culture, being away from direct surveillance by the elders, having to develop the skills of independent living. This could almost happen anywhere. It's not that they are absorbing some Australian set of values, necessarily, given their difficulties with social interactions here with Australian peers. It's more that situationally being away fosters these changes here and elsewhere.

Professor Louise Edwards (48:42):

Yeah. Okay. That actually leads nicely into Kam Louie's question which is basically, 'Are Chinese governments and parents blaming Australian universities for making, supposedly, their young woman unmarriageable and unruly? If so, how do these young women react, and will it affect our highly profitable international student numbers?'

Associate Professor Fran Martin (49:03):

That's such a great question, Kam, thank you.

Yeah, look, just as much as there's a lot of proto-feminist online discourses, there are also strong discourses online in different forums about precisely that. I mean, I've seen quoted helpful netizens who say things like, 'Don't marry an overseas returnee because she'll be too hard to handle.'

One of my participants told me that a guy she was dating here, an older man, Chinese guy, said that girls who studied in Australia are all too independent. They're being ruined by this study abroad. I haven't heard Chinese governments saying that, but I have seen a lot of popular media voicing these opinions, and parents not – I mean, parents worrying about it, like, 'If I let my daughter study overseas, will she become 'leftover'?'

One of the mothers I interviewed initially back in 2015 assumed that that was what I was studying, and said, 'Yeah, I see you are right to wonder whether this will make her leftover. We don't know yet, but we're a bit worried.' So there's like this popular level of discourses. This infuriates the students themselves, obviously, because they have their own agency and they're going to try and do what they want. They don't like to feel

that people see them as somehow brainwashed by the West or something. So again, more conflict and contradiction when they return, if they do.

Professor Louise Edwards (50:37):

The fact that they're here and they're studying at university means that these are incredibly smart, young women. They've made it through. They're going to do their thing against all family or official pressure.

But that comes down to, I think, Ming Liang's question is a really good one to end on because it does come to the heart of this as an industry, as an export earner for Australia as well. She says, 'In the past few years, the Chinese government has warned Chinese students a few times about their personal safety if they're studying in Australia and that they could likely experience racist attacks if they study in Australia. So what do you think from your on-the-ground experience? Do you think that this is actually impacting prospective parents and students? Do you have any early data on this?' Oh, we've got one more question after this, so, okay.

Associate Professor Fran Martin (51:30):

Okay.

Professor Louise Edwards (51:31):

It just popped up, yeah.

Associate Professor Fran Martin (51:32):

Yeah, thanks Ming Liang, that's a great question. I mean, briefly, I think that what happened with those warnings from consulates a few years ago, it was clearly a rhetorical battle between our foreign minister issuing blunt warnings and then consulates issuing blunt warnings about racism. I think a lot of students were able to see that. It's like, 'We've become a pawn in an international standoff here.' That seemed fairly clear.

However, at the same time, I mean, I must say when that warning came out from the consulates saying that students may be subject to racist attack, I was in the midst of field work and I thought, 'Well, that's empirically true.' I mean, it's not untrue. Certainly, the timing is everything when you say this or if you have to say it, but it's factually true that one cannot guarantee that this won't happen. So there's also a realist aspect.

I think students and their parents are most likely to rely on their own experience, experience of people they know, to figure out how dangerous things are. And they're always asking each other through WeChat and other social media channels before leaving, 'How bad is the racism? Is it really dangerous?' They're more liable to take that real evidence seriously than rhetorical statements, I think, by governments.

Professor Louise Edwards (52:53):

So they're pretty informed consumers of public narrative in this way or media narratives apparently.

Associate Professor Fran Martin (52:58):

Hopefully. I think generally yes. Yes.

Professor Louise Edwards (53:02):

Actually, the item that popped up is not actually a question, but I think it's a really nice statement to end on. It's from Jing Dynon, and Jing says, 'Fascinating research, Fran. I don't have a question, just a comment.'

I come from Beijing and I studied in Canberra in the late nineties and have experienced many of the forms of Sinophobia and racism back then. Your talk explains some of the feelings I experienced, and I really look forward to reading your book. Thank you.' I think that there'll be a lot of people online today who feel the same way, that the book actually gives voice to a really impressive group of young women who have made amazing journeys in their lives. They're often just ignored in public discourse as consumers of a product and export industry. You've given face to them. You've given voice to them. I really hope that a lot of people go out and buy the book. It's a really great read. Fran's an amazing Associate... Yeah, there it is. There's the title. I had mine on my Apple Book, so I couldn't show you, it's an electronic version.

So it's out there, it's a really good read. It covers such an important part of Australia's education and social transformation. We know that Chinese women are changing their lives, and when Chinese women change their lives, it's going to change all of our lives. They are leading global change, they're experiencing global change in gender norms, in workplace norms, and in transnational lives. They're at the forefront. Buy the book, Fran's written it, it's great. You'll learn a lot about what's coming up in the future. So thanks, Fran, and I'll pass it over to Corey.

Associate Professor Fran Martin (54:43):

Thank you, Louise. And thanks Jing for the reflection. That's nice to hear. I hope you enjoy the book.

Dr Corey Lee Bell (54:48):

Yeah, so thank you very, very much to Dr Martin and Professor Edwards for today's discussion.

For the members of the audience, we'll be sending an email to everyone here asking for your thoughts on how this webinar went. If you could please fill out the feedback form, we'd really appreciate it, so we can make future UTS:ACRI events a better experience for everyone involved.

So as previously mentioned, Dr. Martin's new book is now available. So if you're interested, or would like to know more, the information will be now made available on the screen.

If you want to know more about the Australia-China relationship and about our research and our institute, more details are available on our website, australiarelations.org. The discussion today will also be available there. Please follow us on Twitter for the latest news at [@acri_uts](https://twitter.com/acri_uts). And thanks again very much to our speakers and all our attendees. See you next time.