

Is temporary migration a strategy of escaping from home: Chinese higher-educated “leftover women” in Singapore and New Zealand

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Abstract

In the past decade, there has been a rise in the number of single, Chinese, unmarried women who actively engaged in temporary transnational mobility. These Chinese, single women, aged in their late 20s, share some common features, including having a good education or a stable job with a regular income. Nonetheless, such women are labelled as ‘leftover women’ in Chinese society. Their involvement in the transnational flow provides hints for investigating the recent change in gender migration. Since male, skilled migrants and their families have been the focus in illustrating migration stories, this research shifts the attention to Chinese independent, single women migrants. The primary goal of this study is to understand the relationship between the decision of migration and single women’s migration experience, and through this, give these women a voice to tell coherent stories of their migration trajectories. At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, this research also has an opportunity to explore the diverse attitudes in post-COVID migration.

In this research, 14 individual semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions were conducted to understand Chinese higher-educated single women’s decision and experiences of migration from China to New Zealand and Singapore, and their perceptions on identity transition and gender-related issues as single women migrants. Furthermore, the influence that the label of ‘leftover women’ has on migration experiences is explored, as well as how their perceptions of identity and gender are constituted and affected by the ongoing reality of gender construction in contemporary New Zealand and Singapore.

This research aims to address three questions:

1. What are the main reasons for leftover women leaving China?
2. What are the migration experiences of Chinese leftover women in Singapore and New Zealand?
3. How do Chinese leftover women (re)construct their gender, social, and cultural identities in their chosen new countries?

Preliminary analysis suggests that 'leftover women' are the emerging and independent generation of contemporary Chinese women, who have specific individual pursuits and high expectations of marriage. However, they are still constrained by the language, the patriarchal and gendered power in China, which are the long-standing unequal relations and attitudes towards women, whereas through the channel of flexible temporary migration, they expect to dismantle the restrictions on their identity transition. Implications of this research are expected to augment the theorization of gendered mobility from the perspective of well-educated single women migrants.

Biography

Yunying Liang is a PhD candidate from School of Teacher Education department, University of Canterbury. Her doctoral research interests focus on higher education mobility, labour and gender migration, as well as transnational and international (im)mobility. Her research uses qualitative methods and ethnographic case studies to gain in-depth perspectives from participants. Prior to her doctoral studies, Yunying completed a MA in Education from the University of Edinburgh and subsequently started a short-time sojourn experience as a working holiday maker in Singapore. Her experience in the transition between different countries, including China, Singapore, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, allowed her to reflect on the meaning of (temporary) migration for Chinese single women who have the capacity and ability to make their own choices in mobility decisions in contemporary society.