Hannah Soong’s book *Transnational Students and Mobility* (part of the Routledge Advances in Sociology series) is one of the newest additions to a fast-growing interdisciplinary scholarship on international student migrants in higher education. In perhaps the most comprehensive review and synthesis of literature on student mobility and higher education internationalization to date, Brooks and Waters insightfully observe that:

[R]esearch on student mobilities tends to be divided into work on large scale student flows and corresponding international, national, regional and institutional policy on the one hand, and in-depth, qualitative empirical research focusing on the experiences of individual students on the other.

(Brooks and Waters 2011: 48)

Soong’s work belongs decisively to the second category. In fact, *Transnational Students and Mobility* could be said to have taken the in-depth qualitative approach to the fullest extent possible, as the empirical data in the book are based on the author’s engagements with just seven research participants. Hailing from Israel, Sri Lanka, China and India, these seven research participants, aged in their twenties and thirties, were pursuing postgraduate degrees in teacher education in Australia, with a view to joining the teaching profession there and possibly settling down. What seems to be a small number of research participants is perhaps more than compensated for in terms of the depth of the author’s engagement with them. According to Soong, she carried...
out repeated interviews and ongoing informal interactions with these seven trainee teacher-cum-migrants between 2008 and 2011. The book’s appendices give detailed accounts of the author’s research activities as well as the research participants’ biographic information, in addition to the copious quotes and ethnographic notes found in the various chapters of the book. Thus, one main strength of Soong’s book lies in its rich ethnographic and narrative detail concerning the student migrants’ lived experiences, which also makes the volume’s various empirical parts enjoyable to read.

The book acknowledges and builds upon Shanthi Robertson’s (2013) conceptualization of the ‘education-migration nexus’, namely the intertwining of the educational project and the (im)migratory project at both the nation state policy level and individuals’ personal strategies and experiences – a phenomenon that is observed across many developed countries, but particularly so in Australia in the first decade of the 2000s. Soong’s work is differentiated from Robertson’s in that the former is preoccupied with the subjective experiences of being a student migrant, with a focus on what Soong calls the ‘transnational mode of consciousness’. In other words, Soong’s book is very much concerned with the question of the ‘state of mind’ of transnational student migrant subjects, and she uses phrases such ‘fitting in’, ‘looking out’ and ‘being in flux’ to describe the tensions and sometimes conflicted dynamics that characterized the subjective realms of her research participants. While ‘fitting in’ is typically a pragmatic response to exigencies of migration, and ‘looking out’ a desire for mobility driven by imaginations and fantasies of the beyond, Soong argues that ‘being in flux’ is the ‘most significant theme of this book’ (p. 17) because this perpetual state of contingency, uncertainty, yet also possibility, lies at the heart of the situation of transnational student migrants.

One interesting feature of the book that readers will hardly fail to notice is the author’s ambitious engagement with philosophy (especially hermeneutic phenomenology) in interpreting her data. As Soong acknowledges: ‘This book began as a study of the adjustment experiences of a group of international teacher education students which ended up as a hermeneutic phenomenological reading of the education-migration nexus on self-redefinition issues of seven student-migrants’ (p. 163). In fact, the book’s impressive bibliography includes weighty names such as Heidegger, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. This level of theoretical ambitiousness is rare in research on international students so far, and perhaps even in educational research in general; as such, the book provides an interesting experimental case as to how high theory might be applied to this particular field of empirical social research.

Apart from philosophy, Soong’s book also makes extensive cross-disciplinary references to a vast body of literature on transnationalism, migration, postcolonialism, social imagination/imaginary, identity, and so forth, as exemplified in the book’s dense introductory chapter. While this is certainly a laudable effort, one possible drawback is that a sense of the author’s distinct contribution to the field – be it theoretical or empirical – gets somewhat blunted in this meandering trip of theoretical gymnastics.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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CHINESE STUDENT MIGRATION, GENDER AND FAMILY,
ANNI KAJANUS (2015)


Cora Lingling Xu, Keele University

*Chinese Student Migration, Gender and Family* is a significant contribution to migration studies and China studies, especially in redressing the lack of a gendered perspective in the field of ‘transient’ student migration. In this book, Anni Kajanus explores the subjectivities of 36 aspiring, current and returned Chinese student migrants based on seventeen months of fieldwork in China, and two surveys conducted in China and the United Kingdom. A skilful writer, Kajanus presents a feast of rich ethnographic details and thought-provoking theoretical ingredients.

Kajanus draws on an impressive array of theoretical resources to effectively unpack student migrants’ practices. Broadly speaking, Kajanus outlines three basic aspects: (1) structure and context; (2) cultural models; and (3) individual agency/reflexivity. Regarding structure and context (Chapter 2), Kajanus provides an apt review of shifting patrilineal and patriarchal relations in China. Following Xibai Xu (2010), she highlights that access to provision of social welfare is based on privilege, and is presented as a gift rather than a right. Together with the lack of social trust typified by the absence of institutions such as freedom of speech, rule of law and power checks, this has produced the vulnerable and self-serving individuals who tend to consider overseas education pursuits as a private matter of the nuclear family. In Chapter 3, Kajanus builds on her ethnographic data of education exhibitions in China and various statistical data to discuss the impact of shifting policy changes in both China and destination countries on the student migrants’ and their families’ practices and strategies.

Such structural realities have contributed to the cultural models that this book draws on to understand the subjectivities of student migrants. Specifically, Kajanus lists family/kinship and gender as two major cultural
models typical of the Chinese context, and perceives them ‘not as separate domains but as two perspectives on the same set of issues that concern human relatedness’ (p. 6). While the cultural models inform subjectivity formation on an abstract level, on a practical level, Kajanus incorporates the notion of ‘economies of affect’ (Richard and Rudnyckyj 2009). Affect is not only about emotional impacts on individuals, but also a form of subjectification that is ‘inherently reflexive and intersubjective’ (p. 7). The notion of affect thus allows Kajanus to position student migrants on a continuum of the self, the family and the state, accounting for individual agency by reflecting upon shifting ‘hierarchies of gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, generation and sexuality’ (p. 11). Here, Kajanus usefully pinpoints the possibility that agency within one system of power can often be embedded in another power system. However, throughout this book, there seems a somewhat unproblematic usage of ‘power’. At times, power is employed in a Foucauldian sense, relating to governance of the state and the individual. At other times, power reveals a Bourdieusian understanding, especially when referring to ‘symbolic systems’. It would therefore be useful if a more overt explanation of power can be put in place.

Most intriguingly, while most of this book concerns itself with the migration trajectories of students from urban single-child families, Chapter 7 usefully includes the story of Hannah, a young woman from a multi-child rural family from Fujian, who moves to study and work in Beijing but aspires to study abroad. This timely addition provides a penetrating account to mark the financial burden and caring responsibilities demanded of this educated young woman. Despite her ambition, determination and amiable cosmopolitan skills, Hannah eventually decides to apprentice in a Buddhist temple in Guangdong, thus forfeiting her prospect of getting married and becoming a mother. Her trajectory serves as a resounding reminder of the debilitating constraints that China’s uneven urban-rural disparity has placed on aspiring, striving rural females. In this sense, student mobility (in this case interprovincial mobility) for the socio-economically deprived becomes a trap rather than an opportunity; it perpetuates, rather than decreases, social inequalities.

As detailed in Chapters 4 to 7, such inequalities are prominent in terms of how gender is played out amidst the intersection of the urban family, as well as the job and marriage markets. Specifically, parents and young women are generally concerned about their becoming ‘too successful’ and ‘too old’ to get a ‘good’ husband. As single children, a daughter’s education and career ambitions are encouraged; however, as a prospective wife and mother, young women are anxious to avoid becoming ‘leftover’. While struggling against such discriminations stemming from a patriarchal cultural model, some female student migrants have orchestrated what Kajanus calls ‘cosmopolitan assets’ in order to acquire a husband. Such assets include exploiting the bachelor pools in their respective destination countries overseas, as epitomized in the case of Lulu (Chapter 6). This, to a certain extent, has mitigated the ‘damage’; however, the challenges presented by such international marriages prompt further intergenerational tensions between the single child and their elderly parents with respect to the former’s caring responsibility.

Indeed, intergenerational ties within families of these student migrants have been a recurring theme of this book. Kajanus categorizes three types of ‘family backgrounds’: (1) elite families (including political, cultural and economic elites); (2) middle-income families; and (3) low-income families. For elite families, the pursuit of an overseas education is effectively a family
project in which the parents play a central engineering role (and hence exert the greatest degree of control over their child). In comparison, the parents’ roles are less prominent in the second and third groups, while the child has a greater say in decision-making processes. In fact, in some of the low-income family cases (such as with Hannah), the child has to steer the overseas studies project alone, either in secret or against of the wills of their parents. Common among all these families, however, is an ongoing process of parent-child negotiation in the face of perpetual tensions between parental control and the child’s independence. Kajanus further teases out the complexities of such negotiations by showing that spatial mobility in these cases have often resulted in the shifting relative positioning of the parents and their child. Overall, this book will be a valuable read and useful resource for students and scholars interested in transient migration.

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In recent years, cities have been increasingly at the forefront of debate in both humanities and social science disciplines, but there has been relatively little real dialogue across these disciplinary boundaries. On the one hand, journals in social science fields that use urban studies methods to look at life in cities rarely explore the cultural aspects of urban life in any depth or delve into close-readings of the representation of cities in individual novels, music albums/songs, graphic novels, films, videogames, online ‘virtual’ spaces, or other artistic and cultural products. On the other hand, while there is increasing discussion of urban topics and themes in the humanities, broadly considered, there are very few journal publications that are open to these new interdisciplinary directions of scholarship. This means that scholars in Language and Literature fields are forced to submit their innovative work to journals that, in general, do not yet admit the link between humanities studies of the representations of cities and more social-science focused urban studies approaches.

The Journal of Urban Cultural Studies is thus open to scholarship from any and all linguistic, cultural and geographical traditions—provided that English translations are provided for all primary and secondary sources citations. Articles published in the journal cross the humanities and the social sciences while giving priority to the urban phenomenon, in order to better understand the culture(s) of cities. Although the journal is open to many specific methodologies that blend humanities research with social-science perspectives on the city, the central methodological premise of the journal is perhaps best summed up by cultural studies-pioneer Raymond Williams—who emphasized giving equal weight to the “project (art)” and the “formation (society)” We are particularly interested in essays that achieve some balance between discussing an individual (or multiple) cultural/artistic product(s) in depth and also using one of many social-science (geographical, anthropological, sociological…) urban approaches to investigate a given city. Essays will ideally address both an individual city itself and also its cultural representation.