EDUCATION, MIGRATION AND FAMILY RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND THE UK

The Transnational One-Child Generation

MENGWEI TU

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To the parents of the one-child generation
who supported their child's dream, including mine.

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Acknowledgements

This book is written a year after the completion of my PhD. Most of the material in the book is drawn from my PhD research conducted in England from 2013 to 2014. My life has changed during the writing of the book. I moved from England to China. I left my beloved quiet sweet Canterbury and started an academic post in Shanghai. Having lived in England for seven and a half years, the sudden return to and intense integration into a rapidly-developing China brought excitement and challenge. These border-crossing changes constantly remind me of the difficulties my research participants experienced when they first arrived in England as well as when some of them travelled back and forth between China and the UK in response to career pursuit and family responsibilities.

As I continue to analyse and edit the material, the support and kindness I received during the fieldwork period became vivid during each writing day. I still remember the first time I approached a potential participant for my research, asking her to go out of her way to central London, to spend two hours with no financial return and, more importantly, to tell a stranger about her past, her family, her fear and her hopes. Each time a participant said 'yes' to my interview request, I felt a great sense of responsibility to guard her or his story.

The consent form at each interview gave participants the right to decline questions they did not feel comfortable with, and withdraw at any stage of the research. But no one declined to answer any question, even some of the very difficult questions which may have been considered 'rude' in daily exchanges. Some participants went beyond their role to offer me help and encouragement. For example, Bolin let me stay in her house for two nights so I could do a few interviews in the surrounding area; twice I was late for interview appointment by almost an hour because of delayed trains, Wenbin and Liwen waited patiently for me; Ran's parents took me to a restaurant for a meal after the interview so I did not have to leave during the peak traffic hour with an empty stomach. I thank my participants for their trust and willingness to share part of their lives with me, without whom this book would have been impossible.

My two supervisors at Kent, Professor Miri Song and Dr Joy Zhang, had been my guides when I first entered the field of sociological research. Miri is an inspirational woman and her influence on me goes beyond her role as a PhD supervisor. I am also fortunate to have known Joy, another inspirational and intelligent woman who set a great example of how to tell international audiences the 'stuff' about China. I am grateful to have had Dr Johanna Waters and Professor Adam Burgess as my PhD examiners and their valuable suggestions helped to improve the book. Johanna's on-going work in education-motivated migration continues to benefit me. I would also like to thank Kristina Göransson for letting me use a diagram inspired by her book; and for her interest in my work.

Writing a book while looking for a job can be sometimes frustrating. As most writers would appreciate, a long quiet writing period is heaven. Since my return to China in early 2017 my parents put me up for several months so that I could stay in my former bedroom. It was also the room where I wrote the dissertation for my Bachelor's degree, eight years earlier. I am grateful that the Department of Sociology at the East China University of Science and Technology opened its door to me. This book benefited from the support of "The Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities". The Head of School, Xuesong He, and the Head of Department, Hua Wang, were so understanding that they gave me enough time and flexibility to complete the book.

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Prologue

Birmingham, UK, 7 June 2014

'You are more than welcome to stay in my place. I'm making five-spices-slow-cooked beef tonight, the Chinese way!' Bolin, in her late thirties, led me to her kitchen as she started cooking: I make Chinese food most of the time, even after having lived here for 11 years. Fortunately my husband has a Chinese stomach, and my sons like my cooking, too. I will never get used to British food!

Food is usually a topic which opens conversation in China. Here in Bolin's Birmingham home, we quickly agreed upon the superiority of Chinese cooking over British cooking; this (perhaps biased) opinion is shared among most of the 33 Chinese migrants I interviewed in various parts of England.

'So, are you used to other aspects of the British life now?'

"Well, I'd say yes. My husband is English, my children have become just like any other British children. So I'll have to adapt. I know many Chinese friends who do not want to change their lifestyle, but I think if you decide to settle in a place, you'd better change yourself to suit the local life—makes life easier".

Suddenly the front door opened and Bolin's two sons rushed in, followed by Bolin's sister-in-law, a young woman with few words who quickly disappeared from the kitchen. The boys were aged 7 and 8, they briefly exchanged school news with their mother in English and then were told to go and get changed. One of them gave me a curious look, smiled and said 'A-yi! (Auntie)' before skipping out.

Bolin laughed: "See, that's the only Chinese word they remember now. My parents looked after them for 5 years, they could speak more Chinese when they were little. Look at them, they are completely British now, there is hardly any Chineseness in them. I tried to teach them Chinese, but they don't use the language, they forget quickly".

'Where are your parents now?'

'They went back to Shanghai a couple of years ago, after the boys started schooling. It was difficult to renew their visa. Also, the British lifestyle doesn't agree with them, especially the food and the weather. Eventually they want to retire in a more familiar environment. They miss the boys so badly though, they looked after them since they were born, but I doubt if the boys will remember their Chinese grandparents in the future. I'm the only child. My parents can only see their child and grandchildren on a computer screen these days. Sometimes I feel I haven't been a good daughter to them. Ai…' Chinese people often sigh with a long 'Ai' when they do not know what to say but still want to express their feeling of disappointment, helplessness, confusion or anger: perhaps a combination of them all. 'Ai' is an ambiguous expression, it can be used at the beginning of a sentence to set the tone of what the person is about to say; in the middle of a sentence to indicate a change of meaning (like 'but'); or at the end of a sentence to politely end a topic, which seems to bring a negative emotion to the conversation. I tried to cheer Bolin up by mentioning her sons: 'Your boys are lovely, are they enjoying their school?'

'Yes, they are doing well in school.' Bolin's cheerfulness came back: 'Especially the younger one, I really want him to become a lawyer. I was a lawyer in China before I came to study in England. I gave up my career as lawyer, but I hope my son will become one, a better one. Well, who knows what they will become in the future?' Bolin had been a lawyer in China for three years before she decided to do a Master's degree in Birmingham. She was planning to return and work in an international law firm in Shanghai after the degree. 'I was naïve, I thought if I could study abroad for a year, my plans will be realised. But life changes faster than plans.'

Upon her graduation, Bolin found great difficulty in readjusting to her life back in China. Her second attempt to leave China was more of a lifestyle choice.

Later that night, after an extensive 3-hour interview, I asked Bolin if there was any possibility that she may return to China in the future.

After my sons grow up, if my parents become ill and need my care, I will move to China for as long as they need. I will quit my job if it comes to that. However, I need enough savings to be able to do that, and I can't leave my sons when they are so young. That's why I'm working hard to pay off the mortgage and to prepare for anything that may happen to my parents.

'Do your parents want you to return?'

'Yes and no. It's very complicated. My parents said they would support my decision. I have always been their centre, I took it for granted that my

parents would always be there for me, all I need to do is to tell them my decision.'

Shanghai, China, 27 September 2014

When I met Bolin's parents in Shanghai three months later, they told me that they had hoped for their daughter's return until the birth of their grandchildren. 'I wish I had another child, so I can keep one near me, then I don't need to worry that much about whether Bolin stays in England or not. Ai…'

Bolin's mother turned away to hide her tears. Bolin's father changed the topic to supper: 'Do you like dumplings? We have many dumplings ready in the freezer. They are not supermarket dumplings, we handmade them with fresh vegetables and pork. Let's boil some—quick and tasty!' He explained to me during supper that they usually make a hundred dumplings to freeze and eat a dozen of them each day: 'We don't bother with a lot of cooking these days. It's just the two of us, not much appetite. We like dumplings anyway.'

Bolin's parents live in a 3-bedroom flat located in a pleasant area of Shanghai. The flat was once owned by Bolin's paternal grandparents. As we were having dumplings, the former owners' portraits, which were hanging on the wall near the dinner table, became a blur in the hot steam. Bolin's father bore many similarities to the man in the portrait: 'My father was a soldier. He was strict, but open-minded. I was also strict with my daughter. I finished high school on June 1, 1966. Four days later the Cultural Revolution began, I couldn't go to university, so when my daughter was born, I swore I'd raise her to the highest standard.'

Bolin has been the pride of her parents since she was a child. I listened to the achievements she made, from winning a writing prize in her primary school to securing a place in one of the top universities in China. I also heard her parent's critical remarks about the sometimes lack of obedience from Bolin to the older generation, as well as their disappointment of not being near their daughter and grandchildren. 'We are most likely to end up in an old people's home here,' declared Bolin's father, who was in his late sixties, 'It's just not feasible that we move to England.' Bolin's mother agreed: 'We can still look after each other, and we have some relatives here. I'm sure they can give us a hand when needed. But everybody is getting old, what would one of us do if the other one dies first? These are the questions for the future. We have no answer now.'