

# Young Londoners in Beijing

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABOUT THE STUDY

This report is based on a study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) 2012-2014 under its Hong Kong Bilateral Programme (ES/J017272/1) and the equivalent research council in Hong Kong, in collaboration with Dr. Ho Wing Chung, Associate Professor at the City University of Hong Kong. It is part of a larger, three city, study based also in Hong Kong with migrants from London and Beijing; and in London with migrants from Hong Kong and Beijing. The findings for each city are reported separately. This booklet reports on young Londoners in Beijing. A separate report details the lives of young Chinese migrants in London in association with the Runnymede Trust think tank. It is available at: [http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/Young\\_Chinese.pdf](http://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/Young_Chinese.pdf)

The names of the participants have been changed and details that might identify them omitted in order to protect their anonymity. My deepest thanks go to you for the time you took explaining your Beijing world to me.

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## KEY FINDINGS

- The young migrants in this study understand their migration to Beijing in instrumental terms as providing an assemblage of resources they hope to make use of in navigating the future. They intend to be temporary migrants, but have only sketchy plans to return to London or move elsewhere.
- The resources which young migrants think migration supplies are interconnected, but for analytical clarity I have divided them into: adventure; The Beijing Party; Beijing's impact on their personal transformation; employment opportunities and alternatives to the insecurities of London.
- The young migrants like living in Beijing. It provides them with the freedom of a viable adult life they cannot find in London because of limited opportunities, especially in arts and culture industries, and because of the gap between wages and living costs. This is a brain drain of highly educated young talent.
- Their migration is a response to structural adjustments in the UK middle class, making previously accessible opportunities more difficult and subject to fiercer competition. This makes their transfer from elite universities into the world of work more difficult.
- The young migrants navigate these new landscapes of uncertainty with growing anxiety about how to piece together the elements of a viable adult life in jobs and intimate relationships.
- Beijing is important in the production of this particular segment of London middle class life: it provides job opportunities and training.



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## INTRODUCTION

Immigration, arrivals and not departures, are the focus of UK migration studies. This report is about a small subsection of departures. Because we<sup>1</sup> think the city is the right scale of analysis for studies of migration, this after all is the scale on which migrants live, this study focuses on a sending city – London – and a receiving city – Beijing. We also think that migration studies have overlooked the dynamics that migrants establish between sending and receiving cities, usually focusing on arrivals rather than departures. We disagree with this approach and think that both urban contexts are made in the ways in which migrants live and compare them.

The young Londoners in this study are a minority among UK emigrants. While close to 10% of the UK population lives overseas, the most popular destinations are Australia, Canada, New Zealand, France, Spain and the US: emigrants show a strong preference for English speaking countries<sup>2</sup> and China is not a popular destination. Young Londoners are also a minority among migrants in China: Koreans and Japanese are the biggest foreign migrant groups. Estimates of foreign migrants in Beijing – which has a population of 21 million and rising – suggest they number around half a million<sup>3</sup> of which only approximately 5000 are from the UK<sup>5</sup>. These are not broken down by age, and there are no figures for London, but young Londoners would constitute an even smaller subsection of a small population. A leading voice in the UK Beijing business community suggests that he doesn't see much enthusiasm for Beijing among young interns and business-minded young people from the UK.

'... law firms ... out here offer internships or apprenticeships or opportunities for their bright young partners to come out from their offices in London or spend six months in Beijing or Shanghai or Guangzhou, even Hong Kong. The number who didn't come out was startling. It was as if they felt the air is bad, it's a repressive state, we don't speak the language, and there are better opportunities for us in Europe or the USA. ... I think they're wrong – but it was interesting to say that, whilst the flow of young Chinese into schools and universities [in the UK] ... seems to be on an upward trend. The number of Brits in China, studying Chinese or finding opportunities or using the fact that they're in a British company to be relocated, we seem to be at the back of the queue...'

With few exceptions the young Londoners in this study<sup>5</sup> are not oriented towards business but the creative industries<sup>6</sup>: writing, journalism, filmmaking, arts and working in NGOs describe all but the three of them who operate in the corporate world. Some already have these jobs; others aspire to them, and fill in teaching English, Philosophy, Latin and Greek to young Beijingers while they wait for better opportunities.

1. 'We' refers to my co-investigator – Dr. Ho Wing Chung – and I, who divided this research between us. He worked with young Hong Kong migrants in Beijing while I concentrated on Londoners.
2. Sriskandarajah, Dhananjayan and Drew, Catherine (2006) *Brits Abroad*, London: IPPS Report. Numbers and destination countries for UK emigrants are imprecise. The International Passenger Survey is the UK's sole measure of emigration. Its data suggests that in 2010 3000 UK citizens went to Mainland China and 3000 to Hong Kong. In 2011 the figure for the Mainland dropped to 2000 and Hong Kong remained the same.
3. Brookings. 2011. "Inflow of International Immigrants Challenges China's Migration Policy." [www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/09/08](http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/09/08)
4. Willis, Kate 2001. 'Skilled Migration as an Embodied Experience: British and Singaporean Migration to China', 6th International Metropolis Conference, Rotterdam. Figures are approximate; it is difficult to get this information.
5. My research partner Ho Wing Chung worked in parallel interviewing young Hong Kong migrants who were living in Beijing.
6. This is partly an artifact of the ways in which they were recruited using snowballing techniques – in which participants refer the researcher to their social network – through which we attempted to access younger migrants through the contacts established in an earlier project with adult UK migrants of all ages.

As the UK Beijing business commentator suggests, UK interest in Beijing and China contrasts sharply with Chinese interest in London and UK education. Estimates of Chinese London suggest a population of 124,250 (1.52%) and this is believed to be an underestimate in not including the undocumented migrants who would push this figure closer to 300,000. Figures for 2011 show a rise in UK visa applications from China (291,582), and 40,000 Chinese came to the UK in 2013, more than from any other country, in part due to a large number of students. Clusters of Chinese students are to be found around the UK's most prestigious universities<sup>7</sup>.

Our online questionnaire surveyed 32 young migrants from the UK, predominantly from London, and 19 Londoners participated in our detailed qualitative study. This involved detailed biographical interviews which explored their spatial orientation and life in the city, as well as their travel and migration trajectories. Sometimes conducted on the move, these interviews always took place in the parts of the city they most closely identified with: they were asked to invite me into *their* Beijing. The male/female ratio was 15:4 meaning that our study explores young men rather better than young women. All were in their late twenties and early thirties, although our survey age range is 23-39; the majority are single and all are childless. They have been in Beijing from two months<sup>8</sup> to two and a half years, and they intend to be temporary migrants. They are no longer in full time education as we wanted to capture decision-making related to transnational mobility at the launching-point of working lives and thus excluded students. All are graduates, the majority from elite UK universities. Some are considering postgraduate study. Their names have been changed to protect their anonymity. Ali says: *'I'm one of the few that are not from Oxford, Cambridge or Edinburgh'*.

They are mostly from professional middle class families. Alex's dad<sup>9</sup> is an Oxford Don and Alex did his degree at Corpus College; Edward studied classics at Oxford; Harry went to Cambridge. Ali is different in other respects too. He is a Londoner of Ghanaian heritage and is in Beijing with the encouragement of his mentor, Kim, who gives inspirational talks in London comprehensive schools. It is unlikely that otherwise he would have found his way to Beijing. Chi is the other study participant with an unusual background. He is British Chinese; a child refugee whose father swam to Hong Kong to escape the authorities and the consequences of his activism around the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, later relocating the family to the UK. Participants have varied levels of Chinese from rudimentary greetings to high levels of fluency and ability to interact with local city life: most report having made efforts to get to know local people. Even those who are convinced they will never learn Chinese, and who consequently see this as a failing, take Chinese seriously.

7. Figures come from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) 2011 Census. For a fuller discussion of young Beijingers in London see Knowles, Caroline (2015) *Young Chinese Migrants in London*, London: Runnymede Trust <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects-and-publications/equality-and-integration/young-chinese-migrants>. <https://cucrblog.wordpress.com/2015/06/19/who-are-the-new-chinese-migrants-in-the-uk-by-caroline-knowles/>

8. The UN definition of a migrant involves a minimum stay of 1 year so this person is not technically a migrant.

9. All names have been changed to protect informants' anonymity.

## NAVIGATING BORDER CONTROL

Navigating border control is a key migrant skill. Chinese bureaucracy is complicated, but more flexible than its UK counterpart. Those with formal employment in universities, with magazines, with schools and companies prepared to do the paperwork involved in employing a foreigner, have visas which allow them to stay and work in Beijing for several years at a time. These circumstances described only about half of our participants. Those with less formal employment found other ways of navigating borders.

'...When I moved here I only had one friend with a legitimate visa.... you don't qualify for a work visa until you've graduated for two years, so the first two years you don't qualify' [Jack].

'So I've negotiated a company to sponsor me ... but that's very much part-time, so that's my, sort of... I'm legal in China... A lot of foreigners, if not most young foreigners... maybe around the 50% ballpark who aren't in education, about half of them are illegal, if not more of than half, as in visa runs to Hong Kong or Mongolia. Bureaucracy, red stamps, buying products, all of these things, language barrier, culture barrier, making friends, all of these things are very difficult, very frustrating...' [Alex].

'... The ones that they have at the moment have a 30-day limit. You can maybe have a six-month visa but you have to leave every 30 days ...' [Celia].

Edward and Chi are on 90-day tourist visas and Edward uses his UK and New Zealand passport interchangeably, buying extra time. Jack makes regular visa runs to North Korea and Russia. If not exactly undocumented, about half our group of informants is improperly documented. This causes its own tensions for them, making summary deportation a possibility. Otherwise it appears not to shape their employment and life opportunities in any serious way, other than creating extra travel, expense and red tape. This is in marked contrast to the ways in which undocumented status shapes Chinese lives in the UK, making it difficult to find formal employment, open bank accounts or seek medical advice.



Border\_stone\_china-corea.jpg is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

## LONDON CONNECTIONS

Young migrants' connections with London are sometimes straightforward: Mark grew up in Chiswick, West London, for example. Others are Londoners in the same way as many other Londoners; they have travelled to London from other places, drawn by its opportunities and the independence necessary to be able to decide where to live:

'But nowadays, yes, my friends either live in London or they live abroad... So London sucks everyone up, poor people go abroad... London has sucked up nearly all of my friends ... a lot of my friends live in one house in Hammersmith'. [Edward]

Edward's friends work for prestigious law firms concentrated in London; one is a press secretary for a Conservative MP, another London-only opportunity; others are working in one of the major management consulting firms in London. For a second group living near but not in London, the city functions as a focal point in distributed hinterlands. It wasn't growing up in Essex, a 59-minute train ride away that made London a destination for Edward (his precision here is instructive), but his time at Oxford. Alex too lived along the Oxford London axis moving to London after university. Tim grew up in London's suburban hinterland.

'I would say it's only once I went to university that I started to become conscious of London and the resource that London is. Only when I go back now do I go to the Docklands Museum - the last time I was home - and I went to Natural History Museum - places like that. It's an amazing resource, London. The views you can see, and so much fantastic free entertainment. But I would say growing up I didn't use it extensively.' [Tim].

School friends drew Jade to London:

'I went to boarding school: So the average London girl from my school was very much a Kensington and Chelsea-type girl so, I guess I always used to be around there, because that's where everyone lived. And then, once I'd left Manchester and was living on people's sofas, I stayed mainly in Shoreditch and East London'.

Jade found it harder to live in London once she was working, suggesting some of the difficulties of navigating London labour and property markets and further complicating her relationship with the city:

'I was bored because I was living at home (20 minute commute), couldn't afford to pay rent, couldn't get a job that was paid. I was working at a place called Asia House, which... it's near Marylebone, right next to Harley Street...'

A third group established connections with London through Beijing. Celia stays with friends in London on trips back from Beijing, although she is from Scotland. Harry, who grew up in Wales and Surrey, came to London only as he began travelling, like others gravitating towards friends in East London. For several of our informants East London in particular exerts a gravitational pull and this, as we will later see, is significant in their navigation of Beijing.

## NAVIGATING BEIJING

Navigation is about how people move around cities in pursuing different dimensions of their lives. The young people in our study navigate Beijing on bicycles, on electric scooters, on motorbikes, on the subway, on busses and in taxis. Their use of the city, both as living space and as spaces of collective activity centred on cafes and bars, is geographically concentrated into two areas of Beijing. The first (and less significant) area is on the west side of the city around the fifth ring road and Wudaokou, which is Beijing's university area. A number of young migrants in our study began their Beijing life here, taking the intensive Chinese language courses offered by the universities. Some remain because they teach English to Chinese university students. Wudaokou has its own student-based social life in bars and cafes, but is strongly connected to the second area, which has a more legible social scene as far as foreigners<sup>10</sup> are concerned.

The second of these neighbourhoods is the most significant in the young migrants' geographies. It lies centrally in the east of the city around the second ring road in the Gulou/Drum Tower area and immediately north of Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, the political centre of Beijing, which now has 6 ring roads, extending the city into the surrounding countryside. The Gulou area contains what remains of the ancient courtyard houses – called hutongs. An area in the process of regeneration, it is inhabited by poorer Beijingers with longstanding connections to it, and by wealthy entrepreneurs who are refurbishing the hutongs, converting them into chic hotels and trendy bars frequented by young Beijingers and foreigners alike. All of our informants use this area for their social life, and many live in it or near it, sometimes extending into the eastern side of the city transected by the third ring road. This area is also near to Sanlitun, an upscale area of shops, cafes and bars frequented by wealthy Chinese and Western migrants of all ages, who often refer to themselves as 'expats'<sup>11</sup>. Some of our participants live closer to Sanlitun than Gulou and one lives in the Central Business District (CBD) near Goma. From previous research we know that the CBD is one of two centres of gravity for older migrants from the Global North, particularly those working in the corporate world. The other is Shunyi, a suburban location favoured by families on the eastern edge of the city close to the airport and the international schools<sup>12</sup>.

Here is Chi on the gravitational pull of East Beijing around the second ring road on his life.

'Why I like Dongzhimen is because it's equidistant between Sanlitun and Gulou, and Sanlitun is the 'expaty' kind of area, but there's a lot of bars and clubs. And then Gulou is where the, I suppose, hipsters and alternatives and trendy people hang out, with these little bars and clubs. That's where I usually go, but not just at night, of course; I like to sit at a cafe with my laptop and just read the Internet or write a little bit, maybe read a book and drink coffee. I suppose a lot of my life weekend-wise is quite... yes, I make dates for lunch or dinner or just to hang out with friends and stuff, but some of it's just self-driven, just... hanging out, really'. [Chi].

Alex describes Gulou as '*romantic and charming*'. It supports, as Chi points out, a hipster culture that resembles Shoreditch in East London and Brooklyn in New York with its

10. The Chinese term referring to non-Chinese people collectively.

11. The term expat has many meanings but its use primarily avoids the designation 'migrant'. Contacting the British Club of Beijing for help with finding young migrants from London living in Beijing, I was told that they were not migrants but 'expats who live all over the world'. The term migrant is applied to others – particularly immigrants arriving in the UK – but not to them. These are not necessarily the views of our young informants, some of whom suggested that they are, in fact, economic migrants.

12. Knowles, Caroline (2014) 'Dancing with Bulldozers: Migrant Life on Beijing's Periphery' in *City* Vol. 18, Number 1: 52-68

fixed gear bike shops; with cafes, bars and microbreweries decorated in unfinished-looking industrial aesthetics. Because his Chinese girlfriend works in one of these bars, Ben has some insight into how they are produced: suggesting they are the result of business partnerships between Beijingers and Westerners. Young migrants' attachment to this part of the city is about finding congenial company: it draws young migrants to it because it attracts other people like them, and thus boosts the prospect of serendipitous connection and extending their social networks. Aside from this there are two further things about this area that appeals to them.

The first is its bohemian forms of commerce in music, drink and food, which provide the right social context and working environment for the casually employed and artistically inclined portfolio worker. 'Independent' and 'alternative' rather than 'corporate' are important concepts for this group.

'It's kind of independent music, independent coffee shops, key for foreigners who don't have nine to five jobs involving going to an office. It's like if we're involved in arts and culture, or maybe actually not doing very much at all, so I'd come into a place like this and do my freelance in the day and see people. I'd know intimately all the coffee shops and new restaurants and bars and things around here, I was very plugged into this area...' [Jasper].

Secondly, this area's appeal lies in the access it provides to particular streams of Beijing life beyond the young expat scene. Crucially, its '*old China*' aesthetic, populated by local inhabitants and petty commerce, constitute bohemia in Gulou. As Tim points out, it is possible to sip expensive cocktails and eat vegetable chips in a bar, while outside (local) people are using the communal street toilets. The visibility of life in the hutongs provides passing access to locals, as here, unlike the more private living spaces in the neighbourhood, Chinese life is lived in public view.

'... I've got lots of very weird old neighbours who just sit outside all day, just sitting on their sofas and chatting away, and it's nice, actually' [Jade].  
'I think it's the intimacy, the way that you can pass right by people's living space and kitchen and catch glimpses into their lives... When you cycle around hutongs you're very much in touch with the local community ... so it feels more human...cycling through hutongs sometimes there's the sense that you're able to see through the archaeology of the city. They might be tearing down one hutong house to reveal something older behind there ... so you see these various layers of history' [Jasper].

The intimacies born of these proximities are valued for providing an experience of 'Chinese community', even as these young migrants live beside rather than in it, and this is important in providing a sense of living in a bohemian style somewhere more exotic than London. Hutong life provides legible markers of cultural distinctiveness – an accessible Chineseness – offering a casual proximity to the broader stream of Beijing life. Hutongs make big city life visible, legible and intimate; and they provide an alternative to an otherwise alienating big city made of glass and steel towers and highways, they provide human forms of attachment to Beijing life.

'I just like the idea of feeling like I'm living in a community. I know the people who work... who sell the fruit and vegetables and the guy in the bike shop, the bike guy... these little community areas within the city ... and it makes a big difference if you're staying there' [Celia].

While they like to live in the hutong neighbourhood, the young migrants don't especially enjoy living in hutongs; their lack of privacy and heating and their communal water supplies are challenging, especially in the harsh winters. The modern apartment blocks springing up in the area are preferred for their amenities.

The city beyond forms the background to these neighbourhood intimacies. With a population of 21 millions and rising, Beijing, with its cranes and construction sites, is visibly a city in the making. The scale of urban clearance and displacement, the building of apartments and transport infrastructures, and the arrival of (rural and urban) migrants from all over China make it one of the world's most dynamic cities. Beijing runs its own land distribution and zoning systems, the framework in which municipal authorities, officials and developers operate<sup>13</sup> the 'lucrative business'<sup>14</sup> of commercial and residential building that fuels China's growth. Urban real estate is an engine of investment and economic growth in contemporary China, and although the Chinese state is highly centralised, local city authorities control land rights and development<sup>15</sup>. Relentless urban transformation and expropriation result from this, especially on the city peripheries, which extend into the countryside. Pressure on what are now globalised housing markets from foreign workers and newly wealthy Chinese<sup>16</sup>, extends housing prices beyond incomes, making Beijing one of the world most unaffordable cities for the majority of the people who live there. Multiple streams of globalization produce 'an increasingly cosmopolitan life'<sup>17</sup>: new geographical and social mobilities within China have opened more distant mobilities beyond it, generating multiple uncertainties<sup>18</sup> in Beijingers' lives. As the capital city condenses the rapid and far-reaching social transformations and new mobilities that the Chinese are living through, these changes bring Beijingers to London<sup>19</sup> and Londoners to Beijing.



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13. Zhu, Jiangnan. 2012. 'The Shadow of the Skyscrapers: Real Estate Corruption in China'. *Journal of Contemporary China* 21 (74): 243-260

14. Paik, Wooyeal, and Kihyun, Lee. 2012. 'I want to be Expropriated!: The Politics of Xiaochaquanfang Land Development in Suburban China'. *Journal of Contemporary China* 21 (74): 261-279.

15. Zhu, Jiangnan. 2012. 'The Shadow of the Skyscrapers: Real Estate Corruption in China'. *Journal of Contemporary China* 21 (74): 243-260.

16. Wu, Fulong and Webber, Claire. 2004. 'The Rise of "foreign gated communities" in Beijing: between economic globalization and local institutions'. *City* 21 (3): 203-213.

17. Pieke, Frank (2002) 'Recent Trends in Chinese Migration to Europe: Fujianese Migration in Perspective', Geneva International Organisation for Migration (p6)

18. Xiang, Biao, and Wei, Shen. 2009 'International Student Migration and Social Stratification in China', *International Journal of Education Development* 29 513-522

19. Knowles, Caroline (2015) *Young Chinese Migrants in London* published by the Runnymede Trust.

## MIXING WITH LOCAL LIFE

The extent to which young migrants mix with locals depends on their fluency in Chinese as well as their curiosity about the city and the people who live there. This operates in a broader context in which it is impossible for them to be anything but foreigners: *You'll always be a foreigner, but that doesn't exclude you from making friends' [Alex]*. Various connections are possible. Chinese life provides the material from which Alex plies his writerly trade. His Chinese is fluent and he has four or five Chinese friends although, he says, his closest friends – the people he *'opens up to'* – are *'expats'*.

Having one or two 'special' Chinese friends is fairly common: typically these are host families, Chinese language tutors, street vendors or others with a public presence, or neighbours.

'... I call her A Yi, which is the Chinese word for aunty. She was divorced and her daughter was studying abroad and she just really wanted company. She had a job in the front office of the building for foreign students and she was just a really fun and friendly person, so I knew... As soon as I met her we were laughing and getting along and I could speak hardly any Chinese, she couldn't speak any English so I don't know what we were laughing about. But I just had a really good feeling and I stayed with her for a year. It was an amazing year. I was very, very lucky to get her. I've been a bridesmaid at her daughter's wedding and we went to Hong Kong for her birthday and Christmas just last year... She was a major factor why I decided to come back to China after graduating, just because I'd had such a good experience living with her and it didn't feel like such a foreign place. She really felt like family. She still calls me her second daughter and I think of her as an aunty.' [Celia]

This is a special relationship; Celia thinks Chinese people are friendly, but she doesn't get on with her neighbours, having annoyed them with a loud party.

Most of the young migrants have what they describe as an 'international' group of friends:

'A Canadian who's also American and British, the New Zealander who's also Chinese, and an Australian who's also... that doesn't make 11 does it, about eight or something, an Australian who's also American, then me who's also a New Zealander. I say this because I think there are a lot of people like us, I don't know, I feel like your parental background, really in a way that you don't want to be true when you're a child, but it's amazing how you follow the way of your parents, and if they're drifters, then you become drifters'. [Edward].

They are as likely to be second-generation expats – or *'drifters'* as Edward refers to them – as to have geographically settled backgrounds. Both, it seems, provide the impetus towards mobility. The term 'expat' is used to refer not just to people from the UK but to Europeans and to North Americans too: generally it is used to refer to people from the Global North. Their most intimate networks, the networks with which they most frequently socialize, are expats who often, as Edward points out, have complicated *'drifter'* heritages. *'...most of my friends are Western, and it's where I have Chinese friends they are Chinese friends in a Western social area' [Jasper]*.

'I try to divide my time between Chinese friends and foreign friends, international friends, but I find that those two groups don't integrate as well as I would have thought, actually. I sometimes find that... tonight I'll go and have dinner with one of my Chinese friends, and it's just that one friend, whereas this other time it will be meeting up with a group of international friends' [Mark].

While most are open to, and some actively seek, Chinese connection, social networks are geographically and socially condensed into the neighbourhoods with which they identify, and, thus inevitably centre on other young migrants from the Global North and work in parallel to the local life of the area with small points of interconnection.

Some of the young migrants display high levels of interest in, and knowledge of, life in Beijing and China, often through their jobs, but sometimes just out of concern to understand what is happening around them. China drives Alex's writing career: he describes himself as a '*China Watcher*', a niche exploited by a number of the people in our study who trade on their knowledge of China and Chinese, and their ability to operate easily in English language contexts. Harry speaks knowledgeably on the contradictions of the socialist market hybrid when it comes to industrial relations, areas of Chinese life to which he has access through work.

'There's an increasing amount of strikes and protests, and it's a healthy thing, actually... there's no independent union system in China, so basically there's not a tradition of workers negotiating with their employers over pay, so often these events spiral into becoming more dramatic than they have to be. Also, you have this issue where the government often appears to be on the side of the employers, because they are concerned about investment in the local area, so they often side with the employers rather than the workers... It's quite questionable, arresting people for peacefully striking...' [Harry].

Anyone who works in the Chinese media deals with the censors and this provides its own forms of exposure to daily life in Beijing. Mark, who works for a Beijing events listing magazine, describes how journalists internalize what the censors will find offensive. This consists primarily in criticism of the regime, of official policies or of key public or political figures. Beyond this there is relative freedom to report on the social and cultural issues in the city on which he is well versed. Those who report on China from outside of the country for foreign publications or news agencies have to navigate various forms of disruption of their work instead of the censors, and this, too, exposes the young migrants to life in Beijing. Harry works for a news agency:

'... I've been arrested quite a few times, and detained... Sometimes, if you're reporting on a sensitive issue, local officials - and usually it's local - don't want you reporting on it, and so they will track you and find you. Then you might be in the middle of an interview, or whatever, and they come and say come with us and then you'll be detained, and you'll have to sign a confession saying that you did a terrible, wrong thing. They will look through your computer, copy your files, and wipe your documents, and if you have a photographer with you they'll delete the photos. It's a regular occurrence'. [Harry].

The young migrants in our study have different kinds of exposure, both personal and professional, to Beijing life and they value this. This is more extensive among those who have close relationships with Chinese people, and with it access to more personal and intimate forms of cultural exposure.

## INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Intimate relationships are important to this age group and must somehow be organized within the logics of mobile living. Intimate ties both bind and liberate: they exert influence, of different kinds, on the pathway of the migrant.

Beijing tests long-distance relationships. Alex returned from Beijing, where he wanted to live, to London to be with his girlfriend as a gesture of commitment. The ending of this, his first love, left him free to return to Beijing and contemplate new possibilities. Ben started a new relationship in London at the same time as he had decided to move to Beijing: he lived with his girlfriend's parents as part of his departure preparations.

'So that it was the decision to come to China I made in fact around about the time I met that girlfriend, and then it was delayed because partly through inertia on my part, and partly because I suppose our relationship developed and that made it more complicated, so that wasn't really an ideal situation. I suppose living with her family and to a degree being... not being completely financially independent for a while as well, but also feeling that I should be following through with my plan of going to China, I was also feeling that I oughtn't to do that' [Ben].

For a while they managed a long-distance relationship, but it soon broke under the strain. Briar follows her UK boyfriend to Beijing on what is for him an intermission: he will return to London soon to take a law conversion course and she will go with him. Their life in Beijing is a way of testing whether their relationship can work when they live together. She tolerates his enthusiasm for Beijing but doesn't share it. Beijing tests proximate as well as long distance relationships, with The Beijing Party - of this more later - providing alternative options.

Beijing opens new possibilities in intimate relationships along with the other opportunities the city offers. Chi experiences this as an absence of accountability back in London; being British Chinese, perhaps, opens opportunities he didn't have in London and which he describes in terms of a liberating energy.

'I like the energy of the people you meet and the kinds of encounters you get...Relationships as well ... in Beijing there are young expats, there are also young Chinese, and that's one aspect of expat life and why people move, I feel people don't talk about, but they really should, because I do think sometimes it is a motivating factor.... The opportunity to date people from abroad.... But I suppose just because you're abroad and when you're abroad something within you unhinges a little bit - or not unhinges, that's maybe not the right word; it makes me sound deranged or something...It's just like something unfastens and barriers come down a little bit because you're not at home; the expectations, the standards all around you seem a little bit different simply because you're abroad and not at home. So you're a little bit more open and you're open to experience. And people who do move, who do come, are more adventurous, they are more bold, and so people are looking for that experience to have, and I guess that's why maybe hooking up is a little bit easier here' [Chi].

Alex, Mark and Ben have Chinese girlfriends; Kim (a little older in his 30s) is married to a Chinese woman, as is Darren following the departure of his American wife and child to the U.S; Tim lives with his Chinese girlfriend; Celia is about to move in with her (internal migrant) Hui Chinese Moslem boyfriend. Male and female migrants have relationships with Chinese partners but those who don't are reluctant to elaborate on their thinking.

Jade hints at the difficulties of cross-cultural dating for a woman when she says she is 'too picky': *'I don't want to be single for ever, and I don't think I'm going to find a boyfriend here, to be honest...'*. She refuses to elaborate, but likely she is limiting herself to the smaller pool of expat men who may share her preferences, or exercise the option of intimate relationships with Chinese women. The gender dynamics of cross-cultural dating need more research: the cultural and ethnic dynamics of intimacy is beyond

the scope of this study. But some of those with intimate Chinese relationships have interesting things to say about them, and show deeper connections with local Beijing life on account of them.

Marriage in particular involves formal familial connections and obligations, which can be tricky to navigate.

'The difficult bit is the beginning because you are always the outsider; you're the foreigner. I think any foreigner that would get involved in a relationship with a Chinese person, especially if it becomes serious, has to go through that initial barrier of integration into the local family ... I was lucky actually; it was relatively straightforward. A lot of my friends have got some very difficult stories; they weren't able to be together... But I've managed to get through that one pretty well...' [Kim].

Much depends on the Chinese partner's relationship with parents and broader family: Kim's wife manages the Chinese family on their behalf.

Ben's relationship with his Chinese girlfriend reveals some of the complexities of life in China he would not otherwise have encountered: China writ small. He reads the imprint on his girlfriend's personal life, and thus her relationship with him, of China's complex history. She grew up in one of the provinces; a second child of parents who could not afford the fine levied as a result of the one child policy, she was never told who her parents were although she had her suspicions. This long-term official deceit, he thinks, reverberates through their relationship as suspicion.

'... I guess there is some quite dark stuff going on from her past, which makes it very difficult. I fell in love with her, the sunny aspect of the character, but there are parts of her character, which are very, very hard to deal with, and she doesn't have an easy life at all ... So it's quite limiting. ... it limits what I can and can't do, where I can go, because I know that ... my girlfriend cannot deal with it...' [Ben]

This limits Ben's social encounters with other women. These are women he meets casually, platonically, as part of larger groups socializing in bars when his girlfriend is working; and includes his female Chinese language tutor. His girlfriend's feelings of jealousy and betrayal – which he thinks are partly personal to her and partly cultural – place large parts of the social scene on which he operates beyond bounds; and denies him personal space and time.

'I think partly it's personal issues, and also I think more generally the culture seems to be that people in a relationship have to be very, very close all the time in China, and that's certainly more than in the West, and I think personally also I tend to like to have quite a lot of space, and so that's probably particularly difficult for me to deal with. ... So I guess if she's working in the evening, and if I go out somewhere else, she will be worrying quite a lot about who I'm with, what I'm doing, and I can't really get used to this... and so in the long term, I feel like I don't know if it could really work...' [Ben].

Ben knows that his relationship will complicate his return to London. Would she go with him? Would he want her to? Can she overcome the difficulties of her childhood? Or is their relationship just a temporary arrangement while he is in Beijing? Many young migrants share these questions.

Mark reflects on the long-term implications of his relationship with a Chinese woman. What can it mean for the future?

'I've never had a serious girlfriend here, and I think deep down inside... I'm slightly wary of it... I think that I wonder what... I think it's very, very complicated. I think every situation is different. I think it might be great if I find a girl that I very much like here and I fall in love with, but then I feel like I would always want to move back home. I don't think China's a place that I want to necessarily spend the rest of my life in, and if me and a girlfriend had a great relationship here, that might not necessarily be the same in the UK, assuming she'd be willing to give up everything here and travel back to the UK with me; that's a huge thing to ask of anyone. I would never expect someone to do that. I think it's complex' [Mark].

He intends to defer these questions for later.

Celia reveals the other side of the gender dynamics in her relationship with a Moslem Hui who is also a migrant in Beijing. Albeit with some ambivalence, she sees him as her guide to the local scene.

'I've been here four and a half years all together but then some times... A lot of the time things will come up and I just don't really understand how it works or the best way to deal with it. I'm finding it less and less now and some times I know better than him. But a lot of the time it is just easier to have someone that can deal with things or maybe an interaction that I've had with someone that I've not really understood why it went that way and I'll talk to him and he can explain it a bit more, he can... I don't know'. [Celia]

He is keen to assert the expertise of being Chinese:

'... now when we took my parents to the market just there, I bought this comb for him and it was this really nice wood and she was going to do an engraving on it. So I write down his name in Chinese and she did the engraving and I was so excited about this. And then she gave it to me and it was, 'this is the worst engraving that I've ever seen, this is terrible, you've done a terrible job... you don't understand, you're a foreigner, you don't know about engraving, this is the way that I do it' and blah, blah, blah...'[Celia].

The tensions are obvious: rival migrants assert their understanding and navigation of the city, and Chineseness trumps foreignness.



1. forbiddencity\_bykirk\_Siang.jpg licensed under creative commons [CC BY 2.0](#)



2. By David\_Tubau licensed under creative commons [CC BY 2.0](#)

## BEIJING ATTRACTION

Why Beijing? It is useful to distinguish young migrants' early attraction to Beijing from their accounts of what the city offers as their life there develops. I will refer to their understanding of what the city offers as 'Beijing resources' because this is how they present them, and deal with them, later. This distinction between initial attraction and developing a life, distinguishes the impulse to move from the daily practice of migration, giving us a sense of how a city appeals from a distance and why it is chosen in preference to others. From the stories told by the young migrants it seems that early attraction to Beijing is a mixture of emotional pull and aspiration-in-the-making. Attraction often dates back to childhood impressions and these are characterized by their vagueness, their operation in a register of feeling rather than reason; and they give us an, albeit limited, sense of how China appears in the young British imaginary. A Chinese vase - a focus for stories in the childhood home - or an attraction to Kung Fu (Jeremy, Celia) are examples of China's lure. As Alex explains, China '*exerts a very strong pull*'. Edward's great-grandfather was a doctor in China and he thinks this explains its emotional resonance in his own biography.

'We've got some very nice china, it's from the 1920s or something, so in one room it's just full of this Chinese china. So certainly when I came to China, my grandfather, it was the only thing he mentioned, so his father was here, it's slightly repetitive. He was very much an itinerant man; he went everywhere, working in the seed industry. [Edward].

China's mystery is in part a consequence of its limited exposure in the UK media, as well as its (linguistic and cultural) inaccessibility. These difficulties feed the sense of it being a challenging, and as a consequence, worthwhile place to live, valorizing the idea of life as struggle. These conceptions are rooted in minimal knowledge of what life in China might entail. '*I knew very little about China ... So I had this vague notion of China ... being a young and ambitious place to go. You could go there and perhaps if you learnt the language it might offer opportunity*'. [Tim]. China is a little known prospect and this is part of its attraction.

China is understood to offer social distinction. It distinguishes young migrants from their less adventurous friends: '*...It's always nice to do something different just to make you different from everyone else*'. [Ali]. China extends the distinction of an elite UK education. Alex first went to China through connections with Oxford: '*I've graduated, China sounds very exotic, an interesting place to backpack and to travel to while I figure out what I want to do with my life*.' This is partly about the complex language skills required in order to live there: As Edward says: '*I'd studied Latin, I'd studied Greek...*' making Chinese a logical next step. Celia had studied Chinese at Edinburgh University, which also offered these particular forms of distinction in Japanese and Arabic. A number of graduates from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) have moved to Beijing in order to improve their Chinese. So China and Chinese offer particular forms of social distinction in producing the adventurous linguist: a graduate who is adept at learning complex languages with unfamiliar alphabets. Beijing sifts cultural interest from those seeking commercial opportunity:

'... Beijing (as opposed to Shanghai) is more like your PhD in Contemporary Chinese Literature students, who are not like the social climbers of this world, but they're interested in China... [Jasper]

Some young migrants are planning to return to education at postgraduate level: one left to begin her PhD in Social Anthropology at Cambridge during the research. China, and Beijing in particular, carries particular meanings and statuses. These young migrants see themselves in this city, not any city; it announces who they are. Even if their notions of it are vaguely formulated, it somehow speaks to them, and about them, and the (absence of) plans they develop around their lives in which intellectual and cultural interest have high value. Beijing offers a particular kind of prospect, and a particular impulse in the charting of a life in the absence of more focused plans. Beijing provides a socially acceptable and beneficial interlude. It produces a particular segment of the London middle class, as we will see.

The sense of Beijing as an impulse rather than a plan<sup>20</sup> makes it part of an uncharted journey with unknown destinations and outcomes: vaguely formulated expectations of benefit held in common among these young migrants: *'I had no definite plan of what I was going to do with this China knowledge and Chinese knowledge...'* [Alex]. *I wasn't particularly focused in terms of how I imagined this manifesting itself... I just got on a plane'* [Tim]. *'Me and my brother watched a lot of Kung-Fu movies so I guess... I didn't have any idea of what really I was getting myself in for.'* [Celia]. These are deliberately unconsidered moves, something they share with older migrants I have interviewed in Hong Kong and Beijing<sup>21</sup>: they are resistant to life planning, preferring to see where things lead. This heightens a sense of adventure into the unknown – itself a reason for moving to Beijing – as we will later see. At some level all migrants are explorers, or they wouldn't leave home in the first place.

Reasons for being in Beijing, as opposed to the impulse towards it in the first place are equally multidimensional and intersecting. There is rarely a single reason to migrate, or a single purpose to the practice of migration; rather migration makes sense through an assemblage of prospects and imaginings about a life. I have conceptualized these reasons as the resources young migrants think Beijing offers them, as this seems to be the way they think about it. This reveals the part this city plays in sustaining these lives, and thus begins to expose their relationship with it, as well as a rudimentary ontology of migration as specific forms of translocal mobility

Interconnected resources are separated in the following analysis in order to explore them more fully. In summary these are, adventure, 'The Beijing Party', transformation, proximity to a significant geopolitical nexus, the provision of particular kinds of work, and solutions to the difficulties and insecurities of London life. Conceptualising Beijing in terms of these six interconnecting resources, which emerged in my conversation with the young migrants, illuminates their understanding of this city and its capacities in shaping (their) mobile lives, answering the question, why Beijing?

20. Amit, Vered (2010) notes the importance of serendipity and improvisation in migration decision making in 'Serendipities, Uncertainties and Improvisation in Movement and Migration' in Collins, Peter and Gallinat, Anselm eds, *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: Writing Memory and Experience into Ethnography*, Oxford: Berghahn

21. See Knowles, Caroline & Harper, Douglas (2009) *Hong Kong: Migrant Lives, Landscapes and Journeys*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## ADVENTURE

The adventure of living in Beijing features prominently in young migrants' stories.

'I just want the adventure, I just want to get out and I want to learn the language wherever I go to sort of distance me again from... 'I'm going to be cultured and educated and all of that'...' [Darren]

'I didn't really know what I wanted to do with my life. And I wanted an adventure. I really enjoy travelling. I've always been quite adventurous ... I suppose. So, coming to China just seemed like a really fun idea, and here I still am, a year and four months later'. [Jade].

Adventure is inevitably an extension of the reasons for choosing Beijing as a destination in the first place - the imagining of a place and the living of it are evidently intertwined - and this involves thinking about the city as an open set of possibilities. Excitement, ferment, unpredictability, are some of the positive properties of adventure. Adventure is both an end in itself - a way of living - and it is an intermission, a placeholder in a life that might subsequently develop from it. Adventure buys time in which to formulate directions as opportunities emerge: and it stands in the place marked by uncertainty, providing it with a positive gloss. Adventure endorses deferred decision making on the bigger questions and directions in life; and it is a legitimate activity in its own right because it tests personal capacities and resilience, as opposed to being an inappropriate use (a waste) of time.

Adventure in these young migrants' narratives is both time out in the course of life and an alternative way of living a life : sometimes presented as a shift in culture between generations. For Jade it is time out from what potentially follows.

'People are settling down and stuff, and getting into serious relationships, which is really nice, but I just feel there's plenty of time for that and I'm not missing out that much, because it will not change. I look at my parents' life and I just see the life that my parents and everyone has at the moment, which is rapidly becoming... it's the same. So, I feel now, while I've still got this need for adventure, I should be doing it rather than sitting at home ... And I know that I will get it out of my system, and then go back and be really happy getting into the normal English life, but it's just a bit of an adventure, really.' [Jade]

The gap year - an elastic period of time with the emphasis on the gap not the year - provides the model for this *'time out'* thinking which acknowledges that time should be spent in future-directed activities of life building, even though it is not clear to Jade what this might consist in. She is concerned to identify the right time to reconnect with London; worrying about missed opportunities and CV (career) building while she is enjoying the Beijing adventure: evidence that quite conventional concerns shape life-making on the move too. Balancesheet thinking - weighing up credits and losses - are common conversational currencies.

For Chi, adventure opens onto a broader life-canvas, raising issues of freedom and alternative ways of living, which he sees as a break with conventional ways of thinking about the content and conduct of a life. He rejects what he sees as an illusive materiality and insists that he must follow his passion and become a writer.

'I just think young people value or prioritise freedom a lot more now than merely the achievements and more wealth, or things... Why not work and enjoy it at the same time. And I really think young people they... why even buy a house, what's the point in buying a house if you're sinking all that money into a mortgage, then what you going to do with it? You might as well just rent, or even just go and live in a shack or something, because you're working and what are you doing with that money? ...and it's not just about happiness, you know talk about ah, it will make you happy, being happy, happiness is temporary, it comes and goes. And we need to move beyond this conversation about happiness to more stable things like contentedness, satisfaction, meaningfulness, purpose, those things are much more stable and at the end of the day makes people feel

better than just merely being happy, which can be just an illusion. ...For me my purpose or what gives me meaning ... And my purpose is to try to make myself a better writer, but just something that moves you beyond the daily enjoyment of life. People like to enjoy life, of course, everyone likes to do that, but it doesn't mean anything. You know going for nice dinner, or buying nice shoes doesn't mean anything. Meaningless, really... what's more meaningful? Just asking that question, what's more meaningful is starting the journey towards finding it, and that's what's more important. You don't need an answer to that question just simply asking that question is the start of being enough' [Chi].

Chi is more likely than Jade to make Beijing his life, rather an interlude in it. He sees the building-blocks of a life where she sees a break from building a life: two quite different approaches to mobility with different rhythms of movement and settlement. Adventure works in these two different ways with different temporalities.

## THE BEIJING PARTY

The Beijing Party refers to the hedonistic possibilities of connections between young people around Beijing's geographically condensed social scenes in bars, coffee houses and music venues, discussed earlier: urban geography co-composes the Beijing Party. This is about particular forms of sociality involving drinking, drugs and casual sex. It is an aspect of adventure, but more routinized and embedded in a way of navigating the city. It raises the same issue of temporality as adventure: is the party a way of life or just an interlude in it? How long can a party last? When is the right time to leave? These are questions the young migrants ask.

'If you're ... doing a couple of years stint in China with the intention of likely going back and entering the real world, there's no sense of responsibility, no sense of career building, no sense of saving money, it's just about the adventure really and let the good times roll' [Alex].

Like adventure, the party distinguishes time spent in Beijing from what Alex characterizes as 'real life'. Real life, as Jade also suggests, has other locations: 'you'll have to go back to England or America and grow up and have a real life' [Alex]. In these locations judgment and accountability operate; actions count or can be counted or have to be accounted for. Drinking 'too much' and the 'hookup culture' of casual sex in 'a network of small places' [Alex] where serendipitous encounter is loosely orchestrated around bars and cafes, shape the Beijing Party.



798 Space gallery, January 2009 by Charlie fong. Own work. Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons - <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

## TRANSFORMATION

Urban and personal transformations are strong themes in the young migrants' conversations, suggesting close connections between migrants and the city, as migrants surf its energy to personal advantage. The connections migrants form with cities are layered in complex ways and can only be briefly considered here in connection with transformation.

It is not the fact of urban transformation which makes Beijing a resource in young migrants lives - all cities change all the time - but the speed at which things change that enervates them: *'... The pace of change is frightening here'. [Alex]*. This is a novel experience for Londoners, accustomed to a city where change is more gradual. Beijing's built fabrics visibly mutate as new buildings and transport infrastructures remerge in the routine pathways young migrants weave through the city: shops, cafes, bars and restaurants appear and disappear; fruit vendors' stalls make way for a new apartment block or subway line entrance. Less visible but equally important are the city's mutating social fabrics, the *'transformation in people's material ... everyday lives... they're not just buying like a sofa, they're buying their first sofa ever'*. Jasper is witnessing Chinese middle-class-formation-through-consumption: just one of many changes in Beijingers' lives. This is a city on the move: it carries the prospect of continuous emergence, of new social and built forms, of new possibilities and prospects for the urban prospector.

A city on the move, a city with architectural and social momentum, is the right place for people on the move: *'you're just carried along on this steam train' [Alex]*. Momentum is one of the connections between these migrants and this city; both have drive and energy. Beijing provides the dynamism nourishing mobile lives: *'it feels quite dynamic; it feels quite unstoppable and dedicated to improving itself' [Briar]*. As the city improves itself so, in their daily interactions with it and its challenges, young migrants improve themselves too. Just being in Beijing is, by this logic, beneficial in constructing lives.

Along with the speed of change, Beijing's intricacy is beneficial too. *'Getting to grips' with such a rapidly mutating and complex city - its language, its food, its culture, its 'visual sensory overload' [Mark] - develops personal capacities in what one of the young migrants characterises as 'the battle' with the unfamiliar. Beijing teaches 'perseverance' [Jeremy] in a crucible of personal struggles through which valuable lessons about life and the self can be learned; and this stands in stark contrast to the Beijing Party as a place of hedonistic escape from the city's challenges. '... If you keep pushing through things and try, you always get there. And I think that's a metaphor for my life here ... but it's about perseverance'. [Jeremy]*. Beijing builds personal resilience, and with it the potential for success.

In this rendition of Beijing resources the city serves as a basis for the long haul into the future, as opposed to the short termism of the adventure and the party: not time out from life, but the basis of a life in which long term strategies and resilience build resources for dealing with uncertain futures.

*'Or, you can come here with the idea that I want to build something here for the future, but I know to get it to that point, where it's something I can be proud of, I'm going to have to take the slow route. ... But if you're here for the long-term, which is the only real reason you should be here, then that's definitely something that's worth doing... if you can make it in China, you can choose any country in the world and you'd be fine, because it's the hardest place' [Jeremy]*.

If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere, is the mood music here, to cite Sinatra's hymn to New York. Beijing builds transferrable life and professional skills and success in the estimation of these young migrants.

It also extends their understanding of life through experience of other places. Leaving familiar comfort zones makes them more *'independent'* and *'mature'*: *'to pluck yourself out of leafy, privileged Oxford and put yourself in a crumbling Mao-era style apartment block in China [Alex] is a transformative experience. 'I feel a lot more grown up than I did, and I feel like it's expanded my horizons, expanded the way I think about things' [Edward].* Beijing provides the materials for building personal transformation; it builds character and knowledge of the world outside of formal education, and it develops the kinds of resilience required to succeed in the adult world. Beijing is a city on the move, which inflects its dynamism through the lives those who must navigate it on a daily basis.

The energy of Beijing's physical and social transformation also inflects its cultural scenes.

'It's a really energetic place to live. It feels very innovative. There's a lot happening amongst young Chinese people and foreigners as well in terms of design and fashion and, I don't know, and music and art and there just seems to be so much going on here. It's a really vibrant place to live' [Celia].

This is particularly important to these young migrants who lean towards the arts and culture industries and crave its opportunities. *'I think some people in the creative communities would love to compare it to Paris in the 1920s' [Alex].* Beijing is culturally dynamic and thus an appropriate place to live for those dynamic young people who want to shape their lives through culture.

In addition to grounding significant, mobile, social processes, Beijing is regarded as an important city among other cities, countries and regions; a city that matters, and where things that matter happen. Alex's declaration *'History is happening here'* is one of many statements asserting the significance of Beijing as the dynamic political capital of a country in the process of becoming a dominant economic and geopolitical force in an emerging global order that increasingly leans towards the east. This assessment of Beijing transcends its local offer with translocal significance, underwriting the advantages of speaking Chinese and having China expertise. In these hierarchies of city significance Beijing scores more highly than London.

'You feel living here now and I think especially so a few years ago, but now as well, you felt like you were at a place and a time where it mattered, where something was happening. That's a big, big reason why people come here, why people stay here, why people who come for one year end up by staying for ten years...' [Alex].

China's translocal significance deserves commentary: providing opportunities in writing, journalism, film, fashion, art and so on, around which these young eyewitnesses to history can develop their professional portfolios.

'One of the biggest reasons why I'm here is to advance my career, because China is growing in terms of world importance; media coverage is growing and growing, as it should be - I really do believe that more coverage on the Chinese should be... especially in the UK...' [Chi].

This leads directly to the employment resources the city offers.

## EMPLOYMENT RESOURCES

Beijing provides work opportunities not available in London in the arts, media, culture industries and education: only three of our study participants work in the corporate world. And Beijing salaries provide a viable adult life in meeting the costs of accommodation and socialising around Gulou.

For recent graduates they do rather well. Ollie and Mark are senior editors with a well-known Beijing listing magazine. Alex and Chi are successful writers and China-watchers who publish regularly in high profile UK/China news media outlets. Celia is the communications coordinator for an NGO dealing with sustainable communities. Ben, Melissa and Briar teach English in different contexts including one of Beijing's universities: Darren teaches English in a private school. Edward is a freelance teacher of Latin and Greek to *'an aspiring (Chinese) demographic'* in search of new forms of social distinction. Teaching English has low status in migrant job hierarchies, as it is often a starter or a filler job, taken until better opportunities arise. It is also the most informal and creates the visa problems discussed earlier. James does English voice-overs for Chinese Central Television (CCTV) and Chinese radio. Harry is a journalist for a foreign news agency. Jeremy is an independent entrepreneur working in fashion. Kim is a marketing and communications director for one of the big international consulting firms: Ali is his trainee, and Tim is in marketing for a well-known international school franchise. Jack works in a wealth management company. Jade is in branding and media, having moved rapidly between several interesting possibilities, including film.

Beijing provides material for the writers in the group.

'You step out your front door, walk down the street anywhere in the city and there's a hundred interesting stories to be heard, which are a goldmine for an inquisitive mind and for a journalist and a non-fiction writer.' [Alex].

Celia insists that she couldn't have got this level of NGO work in London.

'After I graduated if I'd stayed in the UK I wouldn't have been able to get a job with my degree in languages, so I'm really lucky that I got this opportunity. Because ... they wanted someone who could speak Chinese, or understand Chinese and English, ... So through my Chinese language skills I've been able to get experience in this whole other sector... especially the development sector it is so difficult to get into in the UK and in the West in general'.

Jade was able to move from one interesting opportunity to the next, working sequentially as an educational consultant, a DJ, a PA to an interior designer and now for a media company working on brands for TV commercials: *'And now here I am, learning about Chinese media, and I'm really enjoying it...'* Edward has created work for himself *'with an aspiring demographic'* by drawing on his elite classical education.

'And then I spent the first bit here studying Chinese, ... I put up some advertisements and people started finding me, and I started getting people, especially for Latin; Latin's in big demand here.... the rich Chinese, they are obsessed with American education ... a lot of them, they want to send their children to school in the States when they're about maybe 14, 15, and at a lot of these ridiculously expensive American schools, Latin is compulsory... I also teach philosophy, and people also ask me to teach random things, and if I'm interested, I do, so I teach Chinese history even, just because it's good for me to learn Chinese history - so, a real random mix.... there are lots of things you can just do if you're a foreigner here. If you're a foreigner, you've got a reasonable degree, there are people wanting these sorts of things. ...this kind of tutoring is very interesting, but you can't do it forever, because you need to move on in life '

[Edward]

For Edward moving on involves doing a PhD. Jobs are important and Beijing provides them: *'What sealed it was the fact that there was a good job going in Beijing.'* [Ben].

A good job is about satisfying work and future prospects; but it is also about income, or the kind of everyday life income can buy.

'I've never had as much disposable income as I do now'... [Tim].  
Heck, I have a cleaner who comes once a week; it feels rather colonial.  
I mean, I'm 28 and I can afford someone to come once a week to clean the apartment, that's something that would never have happened back in London' [Alex].

Beijing provides a viable adult life, particularly compared with London, and this takes us to the final resource Beijing supplies: an alternative to London's difficulties and insecurities. Comparison with London underscores the significance of sending cities in casting migrant lives, an area migration studies overlooks or underestimates.

## REACTING TO LONDON'S INSECURITIES

Comparisons between London and Beijing are calculations around the kind of life that can be lived in each city in jobs, income and lifestyle. The young migrants' friends who were making a viable life in London work in the financial and legal services in which the city specializes and draws young people from Beijing and Hong Kong to London too. But in the arts and creative sectors London compares poorly with Beijing in not providing enough interesting work; for its restricted access to work via internships; for its slower rates of career progression; and for providing wages that don't match the cost of living, thus restricting the kinds of life that can be lived. These are perhaps the problems facing this generation of young people throughout the UK, exacerbated in London by housing costs. Alex summarises these circumstances.

'... the cost of experimenting and interning in London is prohibitive...I'm an English Literature graduate, who has a vague conception of working in journalism, which is hugely competitive in London. And I ... knew I would have an unpaid internship for a matter of several months - I've had friends who've had unpaid internships for a year - and then if I'm lucky find a job I don't particularly enjoy. Whereas China seemed like a new frontier ... if you understand it and speak the language, it's a very easy and comfortable place to live. ...So that is another big reason why I'm living here and not in London, because I can afford quite a nice place to live and have a quality of life as a freelance writer which would be unimaginable back in London; I'd have to wait until I was 40 to be living the quality of life I am now' [Alex].

Beijing has fast-tracked Alex's career and his life. Harry explains that many young Londoners cannot afford to work as interns, particularly given the cost of London living.

'...If you want to get a job in the media, and you don't have some kind of family connections, basically you're going to have to intern for free or very low pay, I imagine for quite a long time in London, and not everyone can afford that. Coming to Beijing, you can live here much more cheaply, and certainly, as a freelancer I have that economic advantage in being here that I wouldn't have had in London... it's very problematic in Britain that there's the system in place of unpaid internships, and given that situation, I can imagine, like myself, that other people would think of moving here... it's just economic rationality' [Harry].

Even for those with elite educational credentials who come from comfortably well off middle class families, interning is expensive and uninteresting, making it difficult to leave the parental home, should young people be fortunate enough to have a family base in London where they can live free. This is exacerbated when parents divorce and struggle to house themselves on divided housing equity, circumstances which applied to one or two of the study participants.

'... After graduating, I lived with my father for a little bit, and it wasn't very easy ... a lot of people my age feel as though it's not really the sort of life you want to be living if you're in your twenties living at home...So all my money was going on rent, and then for a while I had a few different jobs, really, always entry level, so at one point I was earning enough to live reasonable comfortably. At other times, I was just about getting by...'  
[Ben].

Jack is particularly aware of the cost of London housing. His work in wealth and asset management involves advising Chinese parents of students intending to move to the UK on how to buy property. The parking of Chinese assets in London is one of the factors boosting house prices beyond local wages; and this makes London unaffordable for Jack and his friends in Beijing. Instead they exploit the unevenness of urban opportunity in casting their lives translocally.

Finding interesting work in London is a slow process, as Alex hinted in his reference to being 40 before he had the sort of job he wanted. Chi is reluctant to '*toil in obscurity*'; he is impatient for opportunity

'I'd gotten published here and there, and I didn't want to toil in an obscure local newspaper for a pittance, and I didn't want to work on some trade publication. I wanted to make my own destiny ...trying to freelance in London on the money that pays for articles is impossible, it's too expensive'. [Chi].

Ironically, in contrast to London where opportunity is narrowly structured by financial capital, the political centre of Chinese Communism provides an alternative to the difficulties and uncertainties of London life. It offers suitable jobs, opportunities for career development, shorter progression times, acceptable wages and lower living costs. Beijing offers a viable adult life in which young migrants can live independently. This is what Ben means when he talks of the freedom Beijing offers.

'I feel there's quite a lot of freedom in Beijing. First of all, circumstances are pretty comfortable. As I say, live in a nice flat, live with friends, I quite like my job, and I have spare time to do other things. I... through the bar, through football, through friends of friends, I know quite a wide range of foreigners. I think that the expat community here is actually... it's quite good, there are quite interesting people, so I feel like there's quite a good social life here...'.

The young migrants' stories suggest an arts and cultural industries brain drain of London talent in response to a narrowing of opportunity; something UK policy makers should address.

## FUTURES

The young migrants share a reluctance to think about the future. Alex, who thinks he may leave Beijing in the long term, puts it well: *'I think I'm fed up with planning; I did the whole plan my thing in the early 20s, life throws at you what it will'*. Celia, whose life is complicated by a Chinese partner, says: *'I don't really have a long-term plan'*. Despite their lack of firm plans, most of the young migrants see themselves as temporary Beijing residents: *'I think for me China's a four or five-year part of my life'* [Mark]. Temporariness is complicated for the China-watchers who, in moving back to London would separate themselves from their material, as well as for those with Chinese partners. Thus the group divides into those who think they will return to London and those who plan to move on elsewhere. Only Jeremy plans to stay: Beijing suits his maverick entrepreneurship, but this doesn't mean others won't stay too, just that they don't currently plan to.

Jade is confident about returning to London: *'I'm not a long-term China expat... I'm definitely going to go home. My family want me to go home, like, tomorrow...'* Jack intends to return to London too:

*'The size, the pace, the lights, the ability to do things at any time, and do a variety of things, the multiculturalism, the melting pot, yes, I love London, and it's my favourite city in the world....I'll be back.... I was in Bloomsbury [while studying at LSE] and then moved to Angel and then Brick Lane... Yes, I loved London, I don't have a bad thing to say about it, all my best friends are still there'*. [Jack]

But intention is not always realized; and even those who are certain about returning, quickly reveal their ambivalence, and with it the prospect of lingering in Beijing.

Their ambivalence takes a number of forms. The first is deferral, which describes those who will return to London, but not yet; in fact they have compelling reasons to stay. Alex and the other journalist China-watchers are in this group: if they give up Beijing they will have to recast their eyewitness to history role and the living it furnishes. In this group too are those with Chinese relationships.

*'Meeting my boyfriend has made Beijing a more long-term possibility but again it's not somewhere I want to settle down. Things like the healthcare are quite a big issue, pollution. I think there's not enough green space. A lot of it is, I don't know, hutong areas that's just a small part; mostly it is big roads, traffic and I don't think it's a really great place to settle down, it's not a great place to bring up a family either. As a young person there's a lot of opportunities and it's a fun place to be but I think that's the same with large cities all over the world'* [Celia].

Celia's ambivalence and deferral is connected with her relationship. Its failure will free her to develop other plans; its success will present further difficulties over the appropriate place to rear children, and the danger that she and her Chinese boyfriend do not agree about their future. Celia speaks about settling, as part of a mobile translocal life.

Ideas about settlement are implicit in earlier comments separating Beijing life from 'real life' and pondering when to return to London. Tim's ambivalence is expressed in job and relationship terms.

*'And I had in the past talked about moving somewhere else with my (Chinese) girlfriend, but I think Beijing is big enough now that there are enough opportunities here that you can do your two years of experience in a global company with international standards. Hopefully the idea is that that can then be transferred and that experience can then be valuable in, for example, the UK or a UK-branch of an organisation. Going back to the UK is... I would like to do it. I'm certainly not against going back to the UK. It depends on what opportunities arise... I don't think she's (girlfriend) overly keen on the UK.'* [Tim].

In this group who are deferring decisions about the future too, are those who think Beijing has more to teach them.

'I think my mum would like me to come back at some point. I don't think she'd be happy if I never came back to Britain, but at some point I plan on going back to the UK anyway, probably. I would be happy to work for a British newspaper, or whatever, so I'm not threatening never to come back, or anything like that. I want to do a good enough job in China, I think. I still feel like there's massive room for me to be a better reporter here and do better stuff, so when I'm satisfied with that then maybe I can head back... But I would say that reporting in China is about ten times more difficult, probably, than reporting in the UK, because you have an extremely closed political system, and people who are connected to politics in any way don't want to talk. Whereas, in the UK often you have the opposite, and political parties will be generous with information so they get to spin the stories the way they want to. The political scene is so different, I just don't know if it would translate in any way.' [Harry]

The future is complicated by connections the young migrants have forged with Beijing in developing a life. The ambivalence of deferred departure is a testament to the young migrants' affection for Beijing and the life it offers: they are happy and might stay, even though they don't intend to.

A second form of ambivalence centres on timing: on identifying the 'right' moment to return. The right moment is shaped by anticipation of as yet unknown opportunities in both cities. It is shaped by a need to return with something from Beijing that will improve prospects in London. Transferability of job-credit in skills and experience is important to them, and further evidence of a need to make time count for something, rather than waste it. Although Jade thinks this is the right calculation, she is unsure how to make it.

'I go from being really worried that I'm missing out on the vital work experience of running up the ranks in England, to being really enthusiastic about being up on China; having China knowledge. And I'm kicking myself for not learning Chinese: I'm going to start learning Chinese again' [Jade].

These are difficult judgments in translocal navigation. Jack is focused and instrumental: he has identified a niche he can transfer to London in securing Chinese capital in safer places. He can advise wealthy Chinese clients in London investment opportunities from either city, but must balance the impulse to return with building suitable contacts and experience in Beijing first.

'I just thought, if I don't leave now I might never, ever leave.... and I still intend to go back, this feels like a temporary leave of absence. At first I just thought two or three years, but now I'm starting to think it's going to be a little bit longer, I'll see how that goes' [Jack].

In calculating the right moment to leave Jack acknowledges the lure of Beijing comforts that could make it impossible.

The third form of ambivalence among intending returnees follows from the second. A failure to recognize the moment of return could result in getting 'stuck' in Beijing. Even padded with the comforts and benefits of a good job and salary, this, it seems is undesirable.

'... There is always a risk of being stuck a little bit. And I've talked to other people who think you have to find a way to get out, and some people get stuck and can't get back to their home country that they want to, because they're earning a good salary here, but because they haven't been building up the experience, if they went back to London, they maybe would have trouble' [Edward].

Not getting stuck involves developing experience and skills which transfer to London and other places, as much as timing. Transferable skill is a concept the young migrants will have picked up during their university education: it is a term used by universities in dealing with students, specifically in promoting instrumentalism in student learning and

job market preparation. Tim is working out what this might mean for him.

'... Amassing experience in a role which is transferable. So at the moment I would like a job in a marketing agency, a relatively large UK-based agency, and what entices me to that is that there's an ability to transfer somewhere else. The job that I've had so far has been enjoyable, to save money, and have a good time, but it's quite nuanced and I don't think if I were to go to the UK similar equivalent positions exist. So it's about a soft landing for me to an extent'. [Tim].

Ambivalent returnees may remain in Beijing for longer than they intend. They may never leave. Migration is a lifelong project and these young migrants are in its early stages.

The same reasoning applies to those who intend to move elsewhere. In this group are those who neither want to stay in Beijing (or China) nor want to return to London. This group intends to stay on the migrant road in search of further opportunities. Darren, who is adamant about not returning to London, falls into this category.

'But then after some point it just became the norm ... there was just no way I was ever going to go back to the UK and I came into some trouble a little while ago and even then I came very, very close but I don't know why, I still decided...' [Darren].

With his Singapore Chinese girlfriend, Darren plans to buy a hotel on an Indonesian island and profit from the massive growth in Chinese tourism. This is underpinned by his experience and contacts in Beijing. Jasper is thinking about starting a family and a better quality of life.

'I think career-wise probably I will always have something to do with China; this is where my skills and experience are. I don't want to live here for the rest of my life...in a few years I'll probably want to live somewhere with a better quality of life. I also wouldn't raise kids here... Partly the environment, partly the education system (international bubble) ...My girlfriend is the editor for a magazine that caters to ex-pat families here; and the kinds of things that she writes about, people that she meets are so detached from the rest of Beijing... She's Canadian Chinese... Maybe next up would be somewhere in Asia with a slightly better quality of life... Hong Kong, Singapore ... and then go back to North America or London, I suppose' [Jasper].

Canada and London are '*I suppose*' Jasper's default option.

Other versions of staying on the road are about ambition. Chi wants to move to New York.

'A writer once said that London is New York's waiting room. It's just bigger and more glamorous than London. I love London; I think London's the greatest city in the world, but I've never been to New York, so I can't really fully say what it's like. But I'd like to... it's just glamorous. Hastings boy, boy from Guilin, made it to New York - that's pretty cool, if that were the case. But I'd have to make myself, my name valuable enough so that a media company in New York would go through the rigmarole of hiring an international person, because the visa stuff and everything - America's difficult... I really like new experiences and seeing new stuff and living... I'd quite like an international life, where six months of the year I'll be in London, and then three months in Thailand, and then three months in New York, something like that, and I'd have holes everywhere that I can bolt to whenever. That would be great. Beijing does wear you out; it's a fun place to live, but it's not the easiest place to live.' [Chi].

Chi talks a mobile life: but we don't know whether, or how, he will live it. He also has an implicit hierarchy of cities that express his route through life. Those who plan to stay on the migrant road set out different versions of life, routes and temporalities of mobility.

## CONCLUSIONS

Uneven development - manifested in differential opportunities between places - is one of the forces driving migration generally; and the young migrants in this study are no exception. The uneven development at issue here is of micro, not macro circumstances: small differences that accumulate to differences in the life than can be lived. Despite the insistence of the British Club of Beijing when I approached them looking for contacts that these are not migrants but expats; they are migrants in the classic sense - people searching for opportunities to improve their lives. They are as much migrants as the African's moving across the Mediterranean into Europe. Some of the young Londoners are improperly documented, something they also share with those Africans who manage, against the odds, to make it. Aside from this they are, of course, completely different from Africans and even from each other. They are privileged young people from comfortable middle class circumstances and none of them have to migrate in order to survive.

There is no apparent generational shift in the ways in which these young migrants think about their lives: jobs, relationships, pleasure and families are concerns they probably share with their parents. Their notions of time are structured by ideas of beneficial activity in self-development; time must count for something and not to be wasted. Any time out from these concerns is an interlude, briefly extending a youthful and more carefree life. The young migrants think about their lives in terms of personal progress; particularly when it comes to jobs, they believe they must find something to specialize in and move towards greater responsibility and reward - a career - and yet this doesn't quite fit their experience of work.

These somewhat conventional concerns are built into their conceptions of migration as an assemblage of resources. These are mostly utilitarian: the frivolity of The Beijing Party is time-limited, so too is adventure, but even this has benefits in self-development, building resilience and the ability to take risks. They see the social dynamism of Beijing as developing their personal dynamism, a sort of symbiosis; it challenges their capacities in endurance, coping with change and living through linguistic and cultural difference. Learning and living Chinese is seen as an asset in being able to translate China as it rises in global significance. Beijing offers better jobs than London, and their experience there will transfer to London and beyond. Most importantly, they are reacting to London's insecurities by moving to a city in which they can secure a more livable life, if only temporarily. Ironically given the tone of UK press coverage, communist China provides what they experience as freedom and a good life, things denied to them in London.

These young migrants are accumulating assets they hope will be useful, developing personal portfolios of capacities that they hope will position them for the future. Reared in a metricized competitive education system, they are skilled at gaining advantage over others, and this has provided them with elite educational credentials. They know that in the current landscape things have changed and they need to find new ways to get ahead: as labour market conditions toughen, they seek new forms of social differentiation that offer competitive advantage; the very mechanisms generating social stratification - a layering of social differences. Their conceptions of migration as leveraging resources for current and later use are instrumental and future facing; they are building futures in uncertain times, despite their denial of planning and fear of over-directedness. They appear confident, but they are deeply anxious about the future, unsure how to navigate the ordinary landscapes of everyday life.

The young migrants are the beneficiaries of comfortable middle class circumstances and elite education. But neither of these things guarantees their future. They see that structures of opportunity in London support only some forms of middle class aspiration, but in arts and the culture industries new forms of completion for fewer openings and more forms of exclusion have become the norm. In these anxiety-inducing circumstances they must navigate new uncertainties and find new routes to the lives they want to live. These require new forms of social distinction differentiating them from competitors and Beijing may - it remains to be seen - provide this.

Their anxieties about navigating shifting social landscapes arise from what we might think of as shifts in UK middle class formation, processes which are particularly amplified in London: the crucible of UK opportunity and increasingly un-navigable labour and housing markets, which are absorbing global capital and highly skilled labour. These shifts in what it means to be middle class in the UK have structural underpinning in the stagnation of middle class wages, in the gap between wages and property prices – to be middle class was, until recently, to be able to own property – the rising cost of private education and labour markets skewed towards the jobs which support financial services at the expense of other opportunities, creating a brain drain of highly educated, creative youth. Sociologists<sup>22</sup> have argued that London was a city of and for the middle classes by the 1990s,<sup>23</sup> but now it is a space made by and for the raw wealth and power of global capital drawn to the epicentres of financial capital. London has changed and its class structures have shifted accordingly. These shifts in the class structure have eroded the advantages these young migrants might have expected from their success in the education system: the shift from university to the job market is particularly problematic. They are anxious about navigating this new landscape in which former privileges seem not to guarantee the future, and they must seek satisfying work, family and a comfortable lifestyle by other means. These young people are the navigators of globally calibrated insecurities driving them from London to Beijing.



798 Space gallery, January 2009 by Charlie fong. Own work. Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons - <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

22. See Atkinson, Rowland and Burrows, Roger (2015) 'A New City For Croesus? Wealth-Elites, Space and Power in London', *Theory, Culture and Society*, forthcoming.

23. Butler, Tim. with Robson, Gary. (2003) *London Calling: The Middle Classes and the Remaking of Inner London*, London: Berg