Chinese feminists' identity construction in transnational social spaces in the UK: Negotiating liminality between gender, Chinese identity, and mobility

Francesca Ceccato

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Languages and Cultures

Lancaster University

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

School of Global Affairs

March 2025

Abstract

Title of the thesis: Chinese feminists' identity construction in transnational social spaces in the UK: Negotiating liminality between gender, Chinese identity, and mobility

Author's name: Francesca Ceccato

This study examines the processes underpinning the construction of feminist identities among Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK and advances the concept of transnational Chinese feminist liminality to understand such processes. This concept refers to an "in-between" condition shaped by navigating conflicting social, cultural, and political positions across Chinese and transnational feminist contexts, capturing the dynamic, tension-filled space through which identities are continually negotiated and re-articulated amid cross-border mobility and shifting geopolitical forces. It is situated within the contexts of China's recent socio-political changes—including intensified state control over feminist grassroots mobilisation and rising nationalist anti-feminism and misogyny—and transnational mobility. This research positions transnational mobility as a transformative space for identity construction and seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of an underexamined aspect of Chinese feminism by exploring the interplay between transnational mobility, China's socio-political changes, and feminist identity formation. Drawing from the principles of constructivist grounded theory methodology, this study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation with 30 Chinese feminist students in the UK. These methods enabled a contextually grounded exploration of feminist identity formation, conceptualised as a fluid, situated, and interactional process. Through views and lived experiences of Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK, this study identifies three pathways to feminist identity construction: individualised, collective and cosmopolitan. The research findings contribute to three key areas of scholarship. First, they provide new insights into the current state of Chinese feminism by moving beyond nation-state paradigms. This study offers an original understanding of Chinese feminism through the lens of transnational mobility, while also highlighting how diverse feminist identity formations shape feminist mobilisation in the UK. Second,

they advance transnational feminist scholarship by demonstrating how intersectionality and socio-political and cultural specificities shape Chinese feminist experiences. This challenges monolithic portrayals of feminism and foregrounds the intersectional and transnational lived experiences of Chinese feminist students in the UK. Third, they extend the understanding of feminist identity construction by highlighting the complexity of the multiple forces at play in transnational contexts. The findings demonstrate how transnational mobility and the influence of ongoing geopolitical shifts foster critical reflection, negotiation, and the re-articulation of feminist identities.

Table of Contents

List of tables

List of figures

List of abbreviations

NGO non-governmental organisation

YFA Young Feminist Activists

ACWF All-China Women's Federation

GT grounded theory

CGT constructivist grounded theory

Acknowledgements

This thesis is the result of a five-year journey marked by formidable challenges and profound fulfilment. I would like to begin by thanking Lancaster University's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences for awarding me the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Research Scholarship (2019–2023). This scholarship gave me the opportunity and resources to undertake this research.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisors, Dr. Derek Hird and Professor Yang Hu. Since the beginning of this journey, they have believed in my abilities and the significance of my project. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and China's socio-political landscape influenced my research path, making it far from a linear one. Without the support of my supervisors through my project's detours, this thesis would not be as it is today, and for this, I will always be thankful. I owe so much of my academic and personal growth to their guidance. They have challenged my perspectives and encouraged me to broaden the way I look at the world, making this a journey for both academic and personal growth. The knowledge, skills, and experiences I have gained under their mentorship will stay with me throughout my life.

I would also like to thank Dr. Eva Cheuk Yin Li, who, as the external reviewer on my annual panels, has not only provided constructive feedback but also supported me through every step taken and obstacle overcome in conducting my research.

I am profoundly grateful to the feminists who participated in this research. Without their trust and willingness to share their stories, none of this would have been possible. Thank you for supporting this research and for allowing me the privilege of listening to your experiences.

A heartfelt thank you goes to my family and friends, whose unwavering support and encouragement have sustained me throughout these five years. I am particularly grateful to my parents, who have always stood by me and supported my choices unconditionally—non posso ringraziarvi abbastanza. To Bai Xue, with whom I shared my doctoral journey in Lancaster—thank you for helping me shift my perspective in difficult moments, for reminding me to see the bright side of things, and for the laughter and tears we shared along the way. To Enrico, who followed my research step by step

from Brussels. You have celebrated every milestone with me and always reminded me of the value of my work when I needed it most. To Chiara, who has been a steadfast presence in my life since the very first day of our Bachelor's degree in Venice. From those early years to this doctoral journey, you have always believed in me. To all the friends who have walked this journey with me—through words of encouragement, long conversations, and cherished shared memories—your support has been invaluable.

Lastly, a special thank you to James, who met me at a particularly critical stage of this journey and has been by my side ever since. Your love, patience, and constant encouragement have been a source of strength and reassurance, not just in the most challenging moments but every single day. Through every late night, every setback, and every achievement, you have been there—lifting me up, reminding me of my resilience, and helping me find beauty even in the hardest days. I am grateful for your unconditional support and love throughout the last years of this journey.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Word count: 74,098

Chapter 1

Introduction

The path that led me to research Chinese feminism has been anything but straightforward. It was a journey that unfolded not just through the challenges imposed by China's socio-political climate and the unforeseen global upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also through the opportunities that emerged from transnational Chinese feminist networks, particularly in the UK. This journey, rich with unexpected turns, has not only reshaped my research trajectory but also enriched my understanding of feminism in transnational contexts.

My initial interest in feminism in China stemmed from a desire to explore how it had evolved within the country's ever-shifting socio-political and cultural landscape. However, as my research developed, I encountered significant obstacles. In 2020, these challenges became more evident as I attempted to conduct fieldwork in China, where increasing restrictions on feminist mobilisation made engaging with participants difficult and, at times, impossible. In this research, I define feminist mobilisation as a broad spectrum of feminist activities spanning both digital and offline spaces, encompassing collective, organised efforts as well as individual, everyday practices that contribute to advancing gender equality. The tightening constraints on these activities in China not only reshaped feminist mobilisation but also influenced the trajectory of my study.

As a result, in 2022, my research took a new direction, one that was not simply born out of practical necessity but was also a reflection of my evolving interest in feminist identity construction. I shifted my focus to Chinese feminists in the UK—a context where greater space for expressing feminist views, combined with the experiences of transnational mobility, enabled for a rich exploration of how Chinese feminist identities were being shaped. This shift opened up a world of possibilities, offering a unique lens through which to examine feminist identity in transnational contexts.

Thus, the core of this chapter is about the evolution of my doctoral research, tracing how my original question led me to explore Chinese feminist identity formation in the UK. In particular, I became intrigued by how Chinese feminists navigated and redefined

what it meant to be both feminist and Chinese in such a context. Furthermore, as students in the UK, Chinese feminists in this research occupied a unique position amid significant social, cultural, and intellectual transitions, offering rich insights into the construction of feminist identities. Through their lived experiences, views, and interactions in these transnational contexts, I sought to answer the main research question: How do Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK construct their feminist identities? This question served as the foundation of my exploration, shedding light on an underexplored area within the literature—the construction of Chinese feminist identities in transnational social spaces in the UK.

In this chapter, I trace this journey. In section 1.1, I discuss the socio-political landscape shaping feminist mobilisation in China, including the increasing state censorship, nationalist anti-feminism, and misogyny. Against this backdrop, I explain how my pilot study and these external constraints led me to shift my focus to the experiences of Chinese feminists in the UK. This context sets the stage for the research questions that emerge in this chapter. In section 1.2, I introduce this study's empirical materials, and in section 1.3 its theoretical underpinnings. Section 1.4 highlights the contributions of this research to Chinese feminism, transnational feminism and feminist identity construction in transnational contexts. Section 1.5 offers an overview of the thesis structure, providing a summary of each chapter's content. Finally, some concluding thoughts end the chapter.

1.1 My journey to studying transnational Chinese feminists in the UK

In this section, I reflect on the evolution of my research focus, beginning with a description of feminist mobilisation in contemporary China and the challenges posed by the state censorship, nationalist anti-feminism, and misogynistic backlash. I then recount how my pilot study in 2020 revealed a trend where many feminists, often motivated by the desire to continue their feminist activities in safer environments, planned to move to the UK. This trend became a pivotal turning point in my research, prompting me to shift my focus to transnational Chinese feminists in the UK.

Throughout this journey, I aim to illuminate how Chinese feminists navigate shifting socio-political landscapes and how their mobilisation transcends national borders,

adapting to new contexts. In this section, the goal is to provide context for understanding why researching Chinese feminists' identity construction overseas, particularly in the UK, is crucial for gaining new insight into the current state of Chinese feminism.

1.1.1 Feminist mobilisation in contemporary China: changing contexts

Feminist identity construction is intrinsically linked to feminist mobilisation (Kelly, 2015). To examine how Chinese feminist students construct their identities in the UK, it is essential to first outline the evolving contexts of feminist mobilisation in China. Understanding these shifting dynamics provides insight into the broader landscape of feminist engagement and its impact on identity formation. This subsection explores these changes, highlighting key moments that have shaped contemporary Chinese feminist mobilisation.

One of the most pivotal moments was the 1995 Fourth World Congress on Women held in Beijing, which marked a turning point for feminist mobilisation in post-Mao China (Feng, 2018). The event sparked the proliferation of women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and opened up opportunities for Chinese feminists to establish transnational connections (Feng, 2018). By the end of 2000, China's Ministry of Civil Affairs registered 3,717 independent women's organisations, reflecting the growing recognition of diverse women's identities, interests, and social needs (Cheng, 2004). Over the subsequent decades, Chinese feminism evolved in response to changing socio-political dynamics, with the 2000s witnessing significant transformations (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024). What defined this historical period for Chinese feminism was the emergence of a new feminist sensibility, particularly since the 2010s, which rejected reliance on state approval and embraced innovative strategies to challenge patriarchal authoritarianism (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024).

This new feminist sensibility coincided with the rise of the Internet in China and found expression in the growing use of social media, which became vital tools for feminist organising during this time, offering new avenues for advocacy and participation (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024; Xiong, 2018). In a landscape where international platforms like Facebook and Twitter were blocked, domestic services such as Sina Weibo rose to prominence. Feminists capitalised on these platforms to engage the public and shape discourse on gender equality. One prominent example is Women's

Voices, an e-newsletter launched in 2009 to comment on current events from a feminist perspective (Xiong, 2018). In 2010, Women's Voices expanded to Weibo and eventually became Feminist Voices, the first Chinese social media account to identify with feminism explicitly. By publishing daily updates on gender-related issues, it grew into a vital platform for feminist discussions and awareness-building, accounting for more than 126,000 followers on Weibo in 2010 (Xiong, 2018).

Alongside this digital engagement, a group of activists in urban areas collectively referred to as the Young Feminist Activists (YFA) emerged in 2012 (Feng, 2018; Xiong, 2018). Comprising primarily college students, NGO workers, and volunteers, the YFA stood apart from earlier generations of feminists who had worked within state structures (Xiong, 2018). Instead, they adopted bold, highly visible strategies such as performance art to bring attention to issues like gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and violence against women. The YFA's debut action took place on Valentine's Day 2012, when three feminists dressed in "bloodstained" wedding dresses marched through Beijing's Qianmen Street to protest domestic violence (Xiong, 2018).

Between 2012 and 2015, the YFA organised over 40 campaigns, many of which became hotly debated public events (Xiong, 2018). One of their most influential actions was the "Occupying Men's Toilets" campaign in Guangzhou, which called for gender equality in public toilet facilities. The protest inspired similar demonstrations in other cities and eventually led to policy reforms addressing toilet gender ratios at local and national levels. Another high-profile action challenged victim-blaming rhetoric from Shanghai metro regarding sexual harassment. Feminists protested on the subway with the slogan "I can be slutty; still you can't harass me", sparking one of the most intense public debates on sexual harassment in China to date. In addition to these efforts, the YFA confronted gender discrimination in university admissions, shaving their heads in protest and launching online and offline campaigns that led to changes in some institutions' practices. Their involvement in domestic violence cases further showcased their commitment to gender justice, as they provided visible support for survivors during court trials and used performance art to amplify their message (Xiong, 2018).

The YFA's strategic use of social media played a critical role in amplifying their impact. In a context where direct protests against the government were heavily restricted, feminists relied on flash mobs and other brief public performances to

minimise risks under strict public security laws. These actions prioritised media coverage and public attention over large-scale participation, allowing feminists to influence broader public opinion despite official restrictions (Xiong, 2018).

However, the political environment began to tighten significantly after 2015, placing increasing pressure on feminist mobilisation. The detention of five YFA, also known as the "Feminist Five" in 2015, following their plans to protest sexual harassment on public transportation, marked a turning point (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024; Feng, 2018; Lü 2019; Wang, 2015; Xiong, 2018; Zhang, 2024). It triggered a wave of transnational solidarity, with petitions and support from global figures and organisations (Fincher, 2018; Lü, 2019; Wang, 2015; Zhang, 2024). The resonance of the "Feminist Five" arrest was amplified due to its occurrence just before International Women's Day and the twentieth anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Zhang, 2024). The Chinese government's response, which accused the feminists of being influenced by "foreign political forces" (*guowai zhengzhi shili*), portrayed feminist mobilisation as a threat to state stability (Zhang, 2024). This marked a significant shift in the government's approach to feminist movements and reflected an alarming resurgence in patriarchal nationalism (Zhang, 2024).

Offline actions were increasingly disrupted, and online spaces became a primary site of contention. Feminist Voices and other accounts advocating for gender equality faced repeated bans on Weibo, with some platforms even temporarily prohibiting the use of "feminist" (*nüquan*) in usernames (Xiong, 2018). These restrictions culminated in the permanent suspension of Feminist Voices' account in 2018, which had reached approximately 250,000 followers on Weibo and WeChat (Feng, 2018; Xiong, 2018).

Despite these challenges, feminist discourse found new momentum through the global #MeToo movement[1] since 2017 (Xue & Rose, 2022). On platforms like Weibo,

[1] The phrase "Me Too" was initially coined by Black social activist Tarana Burke in 2006 as a response to sexual violence (Oleszczuk, 2020). Yet, the movement truly gained global traction in 2017. Actress Alyssa Milano's tweet encouraging women to share their experiences with sexual harassment and abuse using the hashtag #MeToo came in response to the allegations against the film producer Harvey Weinstein. Milano's tweet highlighted the widespread nature of these issues, sparking a massive response (Oleszczuk, 2020). #MeToo became a social movement, having the potential to mobilise large groups of people united by shared experiences, helping to challenge the underlying biases and problems in society and drive real change (Luo & Zhang, 2022).

feminists initiated discussions on sexual harassment and gender inequality, creating what scholars have termed “Weibo feminism” (Xue & Rose, 2022). This form of digital feminist mobilisation has allowed feminists to adapt to increasing constraints on in-person organising while maintaining their visibility in public discourse. Xue and Rose (2022) understand “Weibo feminism” as a movement characterised by Chinese and global factors, which harmonically align with the present cyber-technological landscape, and often navigates the patriarchal censorship tactics employed by the state.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in China, online feminist campaigns continued to thrive despite physical isolation. In China, where the virus was initially detected, the outbreak intensified pre-existing gender inequalities (Zhang, 2023). These included a rise in domestic violence against women (Roesch et al., 2020), women being compelled to leave the job market (Dang & Nguyen, 2021), and an increased burden of unpaid care work (Song et al., 2021). The underrepresentation and stereotyping of women in mainstream media, particularly women frontline workers, sparked significant backlash and debates on social media during the early stages of the outbreak in China (Wu, 2020; Zhang, 2023). Amidst China’s stringent lockdowns, the zero-Covid policy, and the abrupt transition to full reopening, feminists actively challenged the state’s portrayal of women’s roles in pandemic management (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024). These critiques emerged in online spaces (Zhang, 2023) and extended into the auditory realm through podcasts (Xie & Li, 2024). An example is the “Anti-domestic violence little vaccine” campaign on social media, highlighting the innovative strategies feminists used to raise awareness about domestic violence and women’s rights (Bao, 2020). This example shows the increasing relevance of digital dimensions for Chinese feminist mobilisation in the current socio-political landscape in China.

However, online spaces are not without their challenges: they are increasingly fraught with a surge of nationalist anti-feminism, which has led to cyber harassment and the silencing of many feminists (Liu, 2024), contributing to a growing polarisation between feminists and anti-feminists in China. Liu (2024) identifies the rise of this new wave of anti-feminist and misogynist cyber violence with an event that occurred in March 2021 in Chengdu. A young woman filmed her disagreement with a man who refused to stop smoking at a hot pot restaurant and posted the video on Weibo. Initially, the video sparked widespread support, yet public opinion shifted after male nationalist blogger Ziwuxiashi discovered the woman’s involvement in feminism. The blogger publicly

accused the woman of disloyalty to China for allegedly supporting Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement[2] in 2014. Ziwuxiashi, who self-identifies as a rational intellectual defending national interests, helped spread these anti-feminist narratives across social media. He criticised Chinese feminism as anti-state, misrepresented feminist movements, and framed transnational collaborations as western interference. His anti-feminist campaign gained significant traction, aided by the structural inequalities within Chinese social media, where feminists were censored while harassment against them continued (Liu, 2024).

In response, some feminists shifted to alternative platforms inaccessible from mainland China, while others strategically aligned feminism with nationalist rhetoric, a phenomenon described as "pink feminism" (Han & Liu, 2024; Liu, 2024). These developments illustrate that, in addition to state restrictions on feminist activities, pervasive gender-based violence and rising nationalism have also served as key impediments to online Chinese feminist mobilisation (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024).

Despite facing significant obstacles, feminist mobilisation in China remains a dynamic and resilient force. Feminists continue to navigate the interplay of state censorship and shifting public opinion, leveraging digital platforms and innovative strategies to sustain their advocacy (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024; Xiong, 2018). One such strategy involves online boycotts, where feminists target brands that promote misogynistic advertisements or collaborate with celebrities known for disrespecting women (Han & Liu, 2024). These boycotts are also expressed through large-scale online *jubao* campaigns, a form of digital vigilantism (Han & Liu, 2024). These campaigns are well-organised and collective, with experienced feminists drafting complaint letter templates, circulating them online, and encouraging others to submit the letters to draw official attention (Han & Liu, 2024). Another notable strategy, as Yang (2022) highlights, is the use of sarcasm to voice grievances against misogyny, state propaganda, and censorship. For instance, during the pandemic, the hashtag #JiangshanjiaoDoYouGetYourPeriod# went viral, serving as a satirical critique of the

[2] The Umbrella Movement was a pro-democracy protest in Hong Kong that took place from late September to mid-December 2014, advocating for "genuine democracy" (Lee & Chan, 2018). The movement mobilised thousands of local participants. As the largest civil disobedience campaign in Hong Kong's history, it also marked the most significant occupation-based protest on Chinese soil since the 1989 student movement in Beijing (Lee & Chan, 2018).

VTuber Jiangshanjiao, who had been encouraged by the Chinese Communist Party Youth League on Weibo to spread "positive energy" (Yang, 2022).

The changing socio-political landscape described in this subsection has profoundly reshaped the construction of feminist identity. In response to this increasingly restrictive environment, feminists have adopted innovative and adaptive methods of resistance, particularly in digital spaces (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024; Xue & Rose, 2022). These strategies address the immediate socio-political constraints and reflect a broader transformation in how feminist identity is understood and expressed. Feminists in China negotiate identities shaped by local challenges and global movements like the #MeToo, navigating a transnational social space where local resistance and transnational dynamics converge. Understanding this fluid and dynamic process is crucial to examining how Chinese feminists redefine their identities across diverse socio-political and cultural settings.

1.1.2 Being a feminist in 2020s China: regulatory institutions, feminist organisations, and legal implications

While the previous section outlined the changing contexts of feminist mobilisation in China, this subsection considers the broader structural and institutional landscape that shapes what it means to identify as a feminist in China today. These social aspects—especially regulatory institutions, the character of feminist organisations, and the legal ramifications of feminist activity—are central to understanding the risks that accompany feminist identification and the motivations behind transnational feminist trajectories.

State-affiliated institutions play a decisive role in regulating the scope and nature of feminist organising. The ACWF, while nominally representing women's interests, remains closely aligned with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) directives and rarely supports autonomous feminist mobilisation. Despite endorsing some progressive legal reforms—such as the 2016 Anti-Domestic Violence Law—the ACWF typically avoids confrontation with the state and focuses on issues considered politically safe (Feng, 2018).

Beyond the ACWF, the Chinese state tightly regulates the non-governmental sector, particularly in areas involving rights advocacy. The Foreign NGO Law of 2016

introduced stringent controls on funding and registration for civil society organisations, including those focused on gender equality. As a result, many previously active feminist NGOs have closed, downsized, or operated informally to avoid legal repercussions (Wang, 2024). These developments reflect the broader securitisation of civil society under President Xi Jinping, where feminist advocacy is often conflated with political dissent (Fincher, 2016).

Following these regulatory shifts, feminist organising in China has become increasingly fragmented and decentralised. While collectives like the YFA had visibility in the early 2010s, today's feminist networks are often informal, digitally mediated, and rooted in personal trust. Public-facing platforms like Feminist Voices—which once served as hubs for feminist discourse—were permanently shut down by authorities in 2018 (Xiong, 2018; Feng, 2018). In their place, smaller and more discreet online networks have emerged, using encrypted messaging apps, private WeChat groups, and even podcasts to share knowledge, organise events, and offer legal support (Xie & Li, 2024).

These newer formations are often fluid and adaptive, rather than institutional. They engage in issue-specific mobilisation—such as campaigns against domestic violence or online misogyny—without maintaining a stable organisational structure. This flexibility helps them remain resilient under state scrutiny but also contributes to precarity, as the absence of formal protections or funding makes sustained mobilisation difficult (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024).

In 2020s China, identifying as a feminist can carry legal and social consequences, particularly when such identification is expressed through mobilisation. The most widely reported example remains the 2015 detention of the "Feminist Five". They were held for over a month under the vague charge of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble"—a catch-all offence often used to suppress dissent (Lü, 2019; Fincher, 2018).

In June 2024, prominent journalist and #MeToo activist Sophia Huang Xueqin was sentenced to five years in prison, alongside labour rights advocate Wang Jianbing, under charges of "inciting subversion of state power". According to media reports and human rights organisations, the charges were based on their involvement in private gatherings where participants discussed issues such as feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and workers' conditions. Authorities alleged that they had published "inflammatory"

material, criticised the Chinese government in a virtual overseas forum, and facilitated online workshops deemed to promote dissatisfaction with the state (The Guardian, 2024). Their case underscores the increasing criminalisation of feminist and civil society mobilisation (Qiu et al., 2025). China's expansive national security laws enable the state to categorise peaceful assembly and expression as subversive behaviour (deLisle, 2010), thereby rendering feminist identification and mobilisation legally sensitive.

Beyond formal legal prosecution, feminists in China are increasingly subjected to administrative sanctions, digital harassment, and reputational damage. For example, on 31 March 2021, feminist activist Xiao Meili's decade-old Weibo account was permanently removed following her post condemning gender-based violence. This reflects a broader pattern of "account bombing", a form of coordinated reporting and platform-enforced suspension, which has become more prevalent in the context of escalating digital censorship (Shao & He, 2024). In addition to platform-based silencing, feminist voices are frequently targeted by nationalist influencers. Such accusations often result in the non-consensual exposure of personal information, intensified surveillance, and broader social marginalisation (Liu, 2024).

Although China's Civil Code (Article 1010) now includes clauses about sexual harassment, the vague language and lack of enforcement mechanisms severely limit its effectiveness for most survivors (Halegua & Dong, 2024; Wang, 2022). For instance, courts have consistently applied narrow definitions of harassment and imposed high burdens of proof on plaintiffs, making successful litigation rare (Longarino & Ren, 2021). Women who pursue sexual harassment cases under Article 1010 of China's Civil Code frequently encounter institutional inertia and social retaliation. A study by the Beijing Yuanzhong Gender Development Center found only 34 court decisions on sexual harassment from 2010 to 2017, with just two initiated by victims—and both dismissed due to insufficient evidence (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Consequently, feminist legal engagement tends to focus on raising awareness and exerting public pressure, rather than relying on judicial redress (Wang, 2022; Longarino & Ren, 2021).

Identifying as a feminist in 2020s China is to engage with a sociopolitical landscape marked by both heightened risk and strategic resilience. Feminist expression and organising are increasingly framed through the lens of national security, subjecting

feminists to legal sanctions, surveillance, and reputational attacks. Simultaneously, institutional support remains limited or complicit, and legal protections are frequently undermined by enforcement gaps and judicial conservatism. Against this backdrop, feminist mobilisation has become more dispersed, digitally embedded, and informal, allowing activists to navigate censorship while continuing to advocate for gender justice. Yet, this adaptability also entails precarity, as the absence of legal and institutional safeguards renders feminist identification both courageous and sensitive.

These dynamics illustrate not only how gender politics and authoritarian governance structures shape feminist identity in China, but also how they inform the transnational trajectories of Chinese feminists. For some of the feminists participating in this study, the constraints of legal risk, digital surveillance, and limited institutional support have shaped decisions to pursue mobility—whether by joining feminist networks abroad or by engaging in digital and transnational spaces that offer relative safety, visibility, and solidarity.

1.1.3 My pilot study and Chinese feminist students in the UK

China's socio-political context has shaped not only feminist mobilisation within the country but also the work of Chinese academics in the field of feminism and gender studies in contemporary society. Increasing restrictions on openly discussing and researching feminism in China have led to a noticeable decline in scholarly interest in these fields (Liao, 2020). My doctoral research trajectory reflects how these socio-political challenges extend even to overseas researchers studying Chinese feminism.

In the second year of my PhD in 2020, I was prepared to recruit participants for my research project, which aimed to explore the collaboration dynamics between NGOs working on gender equality issues and women's rights in Beijing. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 and its rapid global spread thwarted my plans to conduct fieldwork in China. While this might have derailed research reliant on interviews as a primary data collection method, I adapted my approach to focus on China's vibrant cyberspace, a unique domain for investigating feminist mobilisation online (Wang & Liu, 2021). This digital sphere offers significant advantages, such as access to a large population of netizens or online users (Xu, 2012).

Despite this adaptation, organising interviews proved to be a lengthy and challenging process. Participants frequently rescheduled or cancelled at short notice, and after two months of persistent efforts, I managed to conduct only two interviews. Further recruitment stalled due to the lack of willing participants and the demanding schedules of the few contacts I had established. Facing these difficulties, I considered either expanding my network or pivoting to a document-based analysis.

Over two months, I contacted 98 individuals, including feminist scholars, activists, and organisations' representatives. Of these, 70 responded, yet significant barriers persisted in establishing direct contact with potential participants. Through thematic analysis of my interactions, I observed that both China's socio-political environment—characterised by heightened state censorship (Feng, 2018; Mao, 2020; Wang & Driscoll, 2018), nationalist anti-feminism, and a misogynistic backlash (Liu, 2024)—and my positionality as a female European feminist researcher influenced participants' engagement with me. These dynamics often manifested as self-censorship, reflecting the dual role of being both the author of censorship, the self-censor, and the subject of censorship, the censored (Horton, 2011).

A notable insight emerged from the analysis: 19 feminists declined to participate in my study because they were planning to leave China. Particularly those affiliated with grassroots queer feminist groups, described Beijing and other parts of China as unsafe for continuing their feminist activities. In conversations, these feminists often mentioned plans to move their efforts to other cities or countries, particularly the UK, Germany, and the USA. When asked why they chose these destinations, they cited pre-existing Chinese feminist networks that would facilitate their feminist mobilisation overseas. Interestingly, 12 out of these 19 feminists framed their decision to leave China formally as an opportunity to pursue postgraduate studies overseas, which may also reflect the limited viable pathways for transnational mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The phenomenon of studying abroad among Chinese students is well-documented in the literature, often discussed in terms of a combination of push and pull factors: the competitive Chinese education system, the internationalisation of higher education, the global job market, shifting cultural values regarding self-fulfilment, and familial pressures (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018; Kajanus, 2015; Yan, 2009, 2013). While

transnational mobility often facilitates greater independence and personal agency (Kajanus, 2015), my pilot data points to a more complex picture: Chinese feminists who wanted to move overseas, including the UK, motivated by the desire to continue their feminist activities in safer environments while ostensibly pursuing higher education. Therefore, gender was not just a background factor but a primary motivation for educational mobility.

These preliminary insights from the early phase of my fieldwork suggest that contemporary feminist mobilisation in China extends beyond national borders and digital platforms. Chinese feminist students' transnational mobility becomes crucial to understanding the construction of Chinese feminist identity and illuminating the contemporary dynamics of Chinese feminism.

1.1.4 Transnational Chinese feminist students in the UK and my research questions

The challenges and insights from my pilot study in 2020 shifted my research focus toward transnational feminist connections between China and the UK. As I sought to explore the UK-based Chinese feminist network, I discovered an article highlighting the activities of Li Maizi, one of the "Feminist Five" (Jiu, 2021). In 2017, Li co-founded VaChina, a feminist society at SOAS University of London, alongside other Chinese feminists. This society, which remains active today, pioneered Chinese feminist mobilisation in British universities (Jiu, 2021). Learning about VaChina corroborated what my pilot study suggested: the Chinese feminist transnational mobility was already underway and played a critical role in the broader landscape of feminist mobilisation.

As part of my initial project, I connected with several Chinese feminists not necessarily belonging to an established feminist network in the UK and conducted interviews. I aimed to understand how Chinese feminists who moved to the UK support their counterparts in China. However, as my interviews progressed, it became increasingly clear that transnational Chinese feminists in the UK themselves warranted deeper exploration.

The insights I gathered from my interviews emphasised the critical role of transnational networks in sustaining Chinese feminist mobilisation. My participants

underscored the UK's importance as a site for fostering feminist solidarity and mobilisation beyond China's borders, shaping my decision to centre my research on the Chinese feminist scene in the UK. Notably, I observed that Chinese feminists in the UK articulated their feminist identities in multiple and diverse ways, shaped in part by their experiences of transnational mobility. This mobility, encompassing social, geographical, cultural, and political dimensions (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007), emerged as a pivotal factor in how Chinese feminists constructed their identities and mobilised feminism.

Building on the above context, identity construction became the central objective of my research, seeking to understand the processes underpinning feminist identity formation among Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK. This shift in focus led me to re-formulate the central research questions that guide my study.

At the heart of this study is the primary research question: How do Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK construct their feminist identities? Understanding this process is crucial to capturing the evolving nature of Chinese feminism, particularly in relation to China's socio-political landscape, as discussed in Section 1.1.1.

To extend this exploration, I developed two interrelated subquestions. First, How does transnational mobility influence the identity construction of Chinese feminist students in the UK? This question examines the role of transnational mobility in shaping feminist identities, particularly within a historical moment marked by intensified state censorship (Feng, 2018; Mao, 2020; Wang & Driscoll, 2018), rising nationalist anti-feminism, and misogyny (Liu, 2024) in China.

Second, What processes drive Chinese feminist students in the UK to identify in particular ways, and how do these processes shape their feminist identities? This question investigates the factors that contribute to the formation of feminist identities in transnational settings and the intersections between Chinese and feminist identities.

Together, these research questions form the foundation of my thesis, shaping my empirical analysis and theoretical framework. In the next section, I present this study's participants and methods.

1.2 Focal case

The term "Chinese feminists" encompasses a broad spectrum of individuals, reflecting diverse perspectives, lived experiences, and practices. My research specifically focuses on Chinese feminist students in the UK—a group that occupies a distinctive position within the broader landscape of Chinese feminism.

Historically, Chinese student mobilisation has played a significant role in social and political movements. For example, students were instrumental in the 1989 Beijing pro-democracy movement (Shi, 1990), demonstrating their capacity to drive social change (Weiss et al., 2012). Building on this legacy, this study centres on Chinese feminist students, recognising their potential to shape and engage with feminist discourse.

In this context, my focus on Chinese feminist students' transnational trajectories between China and the UK and their identity formation leads me to prioritise first-generation Chinese students who have moved to the UK for higher education. This focus ensures that the ongoing influence of China's social spaces remains central in shaping feminist experiences and identities.

By selecting first-generation Chinese feminist students as the focal group, I am engaging with a specific social class background that is deeply shaped by China's post-reform economic transformations. China's reform-era economic boom has led to the rise of a new urban middle class, whose members—particularly from metropolitan areas—now possess increasing spending power and cultural capital (Tomba, 2004; Xie, 2021; Zhou, 2008). This demographic forms the majority of outbound international students. The class characteristics and aspirations of this cohort of Chinese feminist students are therefore essential to how they understand and practice gender (Martin, 2022), including their gendered choices (Xie, 2021)—such as the decision to pursue higher education abroad.

The selection of the United Kingdom as a study destination is not incidental: while destinations such as Australia and New Zealand have grown in popularity, the UK remains a top choice for Chinese international students, reflecting its perceived prestige (Consoli, 2024). Consoli's research (2024) on the motivations behind Chinese students' choice of the UK, partially corroborated Tu and Xie's study (2020) on "privileged daughters": for some young Chinese women, studying in the UK represents a form of

gendered mobility, providing opportunities for greater autonomy and for negotiating gendered expectations shaped by their families and social background.

To capture Chinese feminist students' lived experiences, this study employs in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection, following Charmaz's (2014) qualitative approach. This method enables participants to articulate their experiences in their own words while providing insight into how their identities evolve over time and across different cultural contexts, particularly as they move between China and the UK.

In addition to interviews, participant observation serves as a supplementary method to gather data. Immersing myself in feminist exhibitions, workshops, and informal social events involving Chinese feminists in the UK enables a closer examination of the dynamics of feminist identity formation and mobilisation in real-time (Charmaz, 2014).

By integrating these two methodological approaches, this research captures both the individual, reflective experiences of the participants and the collective, dynamic processes of identity negotiation in transnational feminist spaces.

With these methodological foundations outlined, I now provide the theoretical perspectives underpinning this study.

1.3 Understanding Chinese feminist identity construction in the UK: theoretical perspectives

Understanding what it means to identify as a Chinese feminist provides critical insights into the broader dynamics of Chinese feminist mobilisation (Kelly, 2015). Building on this perspective, my research examines how Chinese feminist students navigate identity formation in transnational social spaces in the UK to illuminate an underexamined aspect of Chinese feminism and expand our understanding of its current state.

The research questions presented in the subsection 1.1.3 are central to understanding how Chinese feminists articulate their identities across borders, considering the impact of transnational mobility, social interactions, and broader cultural and political influences. To address these questions, I develop an integrated theoretical approach,

synthesising multiple perspectives to expand our understanding of Chinese feminism in transnational contexts.

To explore the dynamic nature of Chinese feminist identities, I frame gender—and by extension, feminist identity—as fluid and socially constructed, "done" through everyday interactions (Risman, 2004, 2017; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991). I link this understanding of gender and feminist identity to identity construction through a social constructionist lens (Goffman, 1959). This perspective enables the examination of Chinese feminist identity as an evolving process, influenced by social interactions and broader structural forces (Williams, 2013). Furthermore, intersectionality theory (Collins, 1990, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005) serves as a critical tool for unpacking the complexities of feminist identity formation, emphasising how gender, ethnicity, culture, and other dimensions of difference intersect to shape Chinese feminist students' lived experiences.

To ensure that this theoretical framework remains deeply attuned to my participants' lived experiences, I contextualise these perspectives (Collins, 1990, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Goffman, 1959; McCall, 2005; Risman, 2004, 2017; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991) within the historical, cultural, and socio-political specificities that define Chinese feminism. This contextualisation involves examining key historical and ideological factors, including women's roles during the imperial era, state-promoted social feminism, post-Mao gender discourse, and western feminist influences on Chinese feminist thought (Liu et al., 2015; Zhang, 2003). I also draw on work by Chinese feminist scholars based in the UK (Tu, 2018; Tu & Xie, 2020; Xie, 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2020), whose analyses of gendered identities within transnational social spaces (Faist, 2000) further underscore the fluid and evolving nature of Chinese feminism. Building on this understanding, I integrate a transnational perspective that challenges assumptions of a monolithic feminist experience and counters the notion of feminism as merely a form of cultural imperialism (Grewal, 2008). This perspective is particularly relevant to my second research question, as it highlights how feminist ideas evolve through transnational coalitions, conflicts, and interactions while also contesting dominant western knowledge systems.

Crucially, this study's transnational perspective on Chinese feminism is inherently linked to the transnational mobility of its participants. Understanding the transnational

spaces that Chinese feminist students navigate in the UK is fundamental to analysing their processes of feminist identity construction, particularly given the pivotal role of mobility in shaping gender identity (Lin, 2013). I approach mobility (Urry, 2007) as encompassing not only physical movement but also the lived experiences, cross-cultural interactions, and social networks that shape participants' transnational journeys between China and the UK. For example, the decision to pursue higher education overseas—and the associated geographical mobility—is a process shaped by interconnected factors, including family influences, social networks, and the broader socio-political contexts of home and host countries (Tu, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to conceptualise transnational mobility in a way that extends beyond geographical movement and incorporates individuals' interactions at different levels.

Rather than adopting rigid categorisations such as "migrants" or "immigrants", I intentionally distance myself from traditional migration theories, which often imply permanence (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007). Instead, by adopting the concept of mobility, I capture the fluidity and complexity of my participants' transnational experiences, which evolve across locations and over time (Nehring & Hu, 2022; Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007). This perspective establishes transnational mobility as a transformative site for identity construction, and crucial to understanding how and why Chinese feminist students self-identify as feminists.

By integrating theories on Chinese feminism, gender, identity construction, and transnational mobility (Collins, 1990, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Goffman, 1959; Grewal, 2008; Liu et al., 2015; Roberts, 2019; Tu & Xie, 2020; Urry, 2007), this thesis proposes a new concept that captures the processes through which Chinese feminist students in the UK construct their feminist identities in the contexts of China's socio-political landscape and their transnational experiences—transnational Chinese feminist liminality. By transnational Chinese feminist liminality, I refer to the "in-between" condition through which Chinese feminist students navigate, negotiate, and reconcile the often conflicting social, cultural, and political positions they encounter across Chinese and transnational feminist spaces. This concept highlights the tension-driven yet generative processes through which their feminist identities are continually reshaped through mobility and cross-border encounters.

In the following section, I discuss this thesis's contributions to existing literature.

1.4 Key contributions

Studying the identity construction of Chinese feminists in transnational social spaces in the UK contributes to three fields of study: Chinese feminism, transnational feminism, and feminist identity construction in transnational contexts. This section outlines these key contributions.

1.4.1 Shedding light on an underexplored aspect of Chinese feminism

As previously discussed, in recent years, Chinese feminism has been shaped by a socio-political landscape marked by state censorship (Feng, 2018; Mao, 2020; Wang & Driscoll, 2018) and rising nationalist anti-feminism and misogyny (Liu, 2024). These dynamics have influenced Chinese feminists' identity construction and self-expression, often tied to online spaces, coded language, or underground networks (Mao, 2020; Xiong, 2018; Xue & Rose, 2022).

For Chinese feminists who move to the UK, identity construction becomes a multifaceted process as they engage with new cultural and socio-political contexts first-hand. While they may encounter greater opportunities for self-expression, their identity construction may remain shaped by enduring ties to China. The ways Chinese feminists craft their feminist identities in the UK reflect the negotiation between freedoms and constraints across both domestic and host societies. I conceptualise these negotiations through the concept of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, which describes the "in-between" condition that emerges as Chinese feminist students move between, and make sense of, multiple and often conflicting socio-cultural and political contexts. This concept foregrounds the tension-driven yet generative processes through which their feminist identities are continually shaped across borders.

This evolving nature of feminist identity construction underscores the importance of a transnational perspective (Mohanty, 2003). Rather than viewing Chinese feminism as limited by national boundaries, situating it within a transnational framework challenges methodological nationalism, which tends to confine social phenomena within national borders (Beck, 2007; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). By examining the transnational experiences of Chinese feminists who move overseas, this study explores how feminist identities are constructed and expressed beyond the nation-state paradigm.

1.4.2 Expanding transnational feminism: Chinese feminist experiences

A persistent challenge within transnational feminist scholarship is ensuring inclusivity and amplifying diverse voices (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991). This research addresses these gaps by examining how Chinese feminist students navigate their intersecting identities across the socio-political contexts of China and the UK, illustrating how cultural and socio-political specificities shape Chinese feminist identity and experiences.

Western-centric feminist frameworks tend to marginalise the experiences of non-western feminists (Crenshaw & Phillips, 1998; Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988; Yuval-Davis, 2006). This research engages with ongoing debates by rejecting dominant paradigms and highlighting how intersectionality and cultural and socio-political factors shape Chinese feminist experiences across borders. In doing so, it challenges the universalisation of feminist theory and demonstrates how feminist identity and mobility intertwine, creating diverse forms of transnational feminism grounded in specific historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts.

Furthermore, Chinese feminists' experiences reveal how socio-political and cultural factors not only influence feminist identity construction but also feminist mobilisation. This research underscores the importance of moving beyond western-centric paradigms and exploring the interplay between mobility, intersectionality, and shifting feminist identities to extend our understanding of transnational feminism.

1.4.3 Chinese feminist identity construction in transnational contexts: a perspective on the global

Examining feminist identity construction in transnational contexts sheds light on the ways ongoing geopolitical transformations influence contemporary society. In a world where the challenges of global interconnectivity are becoming more pronounced (Nehring & Hu, 2022), transnational mobility (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007) creates unique opportunities for individuals to engage with diverse cultural and socio-political environments. Chinese feminist students in this research experience the profound impact of these global forces, which shape their identities in distinct and often conflicting ways.

By exploring the identity construction of Chinese feminist students in the UK, this study highlights how participants' feminist identities are intricately tied to and shaped by ongoing geopolitical transformations. These changes are characterised by weakened transnational links, which are fuelled by rising nationalism, anti-democratic narratives, and growing anti-feminist sentiment (Nehring & Hu, 2022; Sanders & Jenkins, 2022). Such shifting global dynamics increasingly influence how feminist identities are negotiated across borders, highlighting both resistance and adaptation in the face of complex socio-political pressures.

With this theoretical foundation and the contributions of the study clarified, the following section provides an overview of the thesis structure, chapter by chapter.

1.5 Thesis outline

This thesis is structured into seven chapters, each contributing to understanding the construction of Chinese feminist identities in transnational social spaces in the UK.

Following Chapter 1, Chapter 2 (Literature review and theoretical considerations) provides a detailed review of the literature relevant to my research topic. I begin by tracing the history of Chinese feminism, identifying key gaps in the literature that this research seeks to address. Next, I locate Chinese feminism within relevant theoretical perspectives, emphasising its transnational dimensions. This context enables a discussion on the role of transnational mobility in shaping Chinese feminist identities. Finally, I explore the process of identity construction, connecting it to both Chinese feminism and transnational mobility. This chapter establishes the theoretical foundations and empirical focus for my analysis of feminist identity formation, laying the groundwork for the empirical chapters that follow.

In Chapter 3 (Research design and methods), I explain the rationale behind the design and choice of methods for this research. This chapter details the selection of participants, data collection methods, and analytical techniques used to explore the construction of Chinese feminist identities in the UK. It also highlights how the chosen methodological approach—specifically in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation—facilitates the collection of rich data that captures the complexity of feminist identity formation across different socio-political contexts.

Chapter 4 ("I Chinese Feminist": Relational processes shaping individualised Chinese feminist identities) explores the individualised construction of Chinese feminist identities in the UK. I examine the relational processes that drive some of my participants to understand and define themselves in an individualised way in the context of their transnational experiences. By unpacking Chinese feminists' transnational social interactions and relationships, I argue that individualisation is deeply embedded in social contexts. In doing so, this chapter provides new theoretical insights into the ways in which individualisation occurs in the context of transnational mobility, suggesting that it is a dynamic, relational, and context-dependent process.

Chapter 5 ("We Chinese Feminists": The rise of collective identities in transnational social spaces) shifts the focus to the development of collective identities in transnational social spaces. It examines how some Chinese feminist students in the UK come together to form a collective sense of identity, grounded in their shared experiences and the transnational networks they engage with. Drawing on theories of collective identity formation and transnational feminist mobilisation, I explore the processes that drive participants to construct a collective Chinese feminist identity. I argue that this collective identity is the result of an ongoing negotiation of local and transnational experiences, continuously shaped by interactions within and across cultural and socio-political spaces. This chapter provides a valuable framework for understanding the construction of collective feminist identities, making a significant contribution to the literature.

In Chapter 6 ("I Cosmopolitan Feminist": The emergence of "reluctant cosmopolitanism"), I explore the emergence of a cosmopolitan feminist identity among Chinese feminist students in the UK. Drawing from my participants' partial sense of non-belonging to both China, their country of origin, and the UK, their host country, I argue that "reluctant" cosmopolitan feminist identities emerge. I demonstrate that a commitment to cosmopolitanism may emerge from a reluctant stance towards both one's home and host countries. By defining this form of cosmopolitanism as "reluctant cosmopolitanism", this chapter contributes new insights to the literature on cosmopolitan identity construction in transnational contexts.

Chapter 7 (Conclusions and discussion) summarises the key findings and reflects on their contributions to Chinese feminism, transnational feminism and feminist identity

construction in transnational contexts. It also discusses the implications for Chinese feminist practice and gender equality policymaking in the UK, defines the limitations, and suggests potential avenues for future research.

Closing thoughts

This chapter has journeyed through the evolution of my doctoral research, from my initial reflections on feminist mobilisation in China to the decision to focus on the construction of Chinese feminist identities in the UK. China's socio-political landscape, shaped by state censorship and rising nationalist anti-feminism, has presented significant challenges for feminist mobilisation, resulting in a dynamic, often fraught, environment for feminism in China.

My pilot study opened my eyes to the possibilities of exploring Chinese feminists who left China to pursue their feminist activities overseas. The UK, in particular, offers a space where Chinese feminists can express their identities while remaining influenced by their experiences in China.

These insights led me to focus on how Chinese feminist students in the UK navigate identity construction, examining how their transnational trajectories between China and the UK shape their evolving feminist identities. This exploration provides a valuable opportunity to understand how Chinese feminists negotiate their identities and feminist mobilisation in the context of transnational mobility.

At the heart of this research lies a theoretical framework that situates Chinese feminism within a broader transnational feminist discourse. This approach underscores that the experiences of Chinese feminists cannot be fully understood within the confines of China's national borders but must instead be viewed as part of a transnational conversation about feminist identity, mobility, and China's shifting socio-political context. With this in mind, the next chapter will dive deeper into the theoretical framework, exploring the key concepts that underpin this study.

Chapter 2

Literature review and theoretical considerations

In Chapter 1, I argued that the trend of many Chinese feminists planning to move to the UK, as observed during my pilot study, is partly tied to China's recent intensification of control over civil society and grassroots mobilisation (Feng, 2018; Mao, 2020; Wang & Driscoll, 2018) and to rising nationalist anti-feminism and misogyny (Liu, 2024). This trend revealed the necessity of understanding the construction of feminist identities by focusing on its increasingly significant transnational dimension. This chapter presents my literature review and theoretical framework, exploring my primary research question—how Chinese feminists in transnational social spaces in the UK construct their feminist identities—through three theoretical dimensions. First, it examines feminism as the foundational lens through which my participants explore identity, focusing on the theoretical underpinnings of Chinese feminism and its interaction with transnational feminist theories. Second, it considers transnational mobility as the context that shapes the lived experiences of Chinese feminists in the UK, highlighting how mobility and transnational networks influence their identity construction. Finally, it theorises identity construction as the dynamic process through which my participants negotiate, redefine and articulate their feminist identities in transnational social spaces.

To engage with these three components—Chinese feminism, transnational mobility, and identity construction—I proceed as follows. First, section 2.1 examines Chinese feminism theoretically, tracing its trajectory from historical origins to the present and locating Chinese feminist identity's construction beyond binary understandings of gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991). I contextualise this perspective in the scholarship on Chinese feminism, which I see as emerging from a constant and intricate negotiation between transnational influences, and China's past and present (Liu et al., 2015; Wesoky, 2016). I also engage with Chinese feminist scholars based in the UK (Tu, 2018; Tu & Xie, 2020; Xie, 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2020) whose works examine how gendered identities are negotiated and reshaped within transnational social spaces (Faist, 2000). This body of work reinforces the inherently transnational character of Chinese

feminism, enabling me to highlight its ongoing evolution and the shaping influence of China's socio-political context.

Second, given the transnational characteristics of Chinese feminism and feminists' trend to move to the UK, in section 2.2, I turn to the concept of transnational mobility (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007). It is particularly relevant in my study, where some Chinese feminists appear to resort to transnational movements to circumvent China's restrictive political and socio-cultural conditions. My participants' roles as transnational actors are discussed in the context of Chinese feminism, which amplifies the significance of their mobility and their adaptation within new socio-political settings. Approaching (transnational) mobility through Roberts' (2019) and Urry's (2007) fluid and multifaceted conceptualisations not only enables me to understand Chinese feminists' experiences as both physical and ideological movements—shifting between China and the UK, and between different political, cultural, and feminist ideologies. It also allows me to acknowledge the structural precarity underpinning international student mobility, which Nehring and Hu (2021) conceptualise as "fragile transnationalism"—a condition in which mobility is made possible yet simultaneously constrained by global inequalities, state regulations, and volatile political climates. This understanding enables me to establish transnational mobility as a transformative—yet structurally fragile—space for identity construction.

In section 2.3, I theorise my approach to identity through a social constructionist perspective (Goffman, 1959), locating it within the shifting context of Chinese feminism and transnational social spaces shaped by mobility. Social constructionism (Goffman, 1959) highlights identity's fluidity and its creation through lived experiences and social interactions. This perspective resonates with the experiences of Chinese feminists, whose identities are shaped by local and transnational forces, including mobility pressures, cultural adaptation, and feminist engagement beyond state boundaries (Mohanty, 2003). To unfold the intersection of Chinese and feminist identities in my participants' identity construction, I further draw on intersectionality theory (Collins, 1990, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005). Its focus on the interconnectedness of social identities has proven to be adaptable across diverse global contexts (Cho et al., 2013), including China (Nordin & Brown, 2022; Sun, 2023). Using an intersectional lens is necessary to examine the intersection of Chinese and feminist

identities (among other categories) in relation to the transnational mobility of Chinese feminists in the UK.

Finally, in Section 2.4, I develop the concept of transnational Chinese feminist liminality to capture the identity tensions experienced by Chinese feminist students in the UK as they construct their identities within fragile transnational contexts (Nehring & Hu, 2021; Tu & Xie, 2020). Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) notion of liminality as a generative "in-between" space, this concept explores how Chinese feminists negotiate these tensions across three interrelated scales of identity construction—personal, collective, and global. It draws on theories of individualisation (Jamieson & Simpson, 2013; Yan, 2013, 2017, 2021), collective identity formation (Melucci, 1989, 1995), and cosmopolitanism (Hannerz, 1990; Nussbaum, 1997) to illuminate the multifaceted and tension-driven nature of feminist identity construction in transnational settings.

This chapter concludes by summarising my theoretical choices, showing that the integration of feminist, transnational mobility, and identity-focused frameworks offers a comprehensive foundation for understanding how Chinese feminist students navigate and negotiate their identities in response to the socio-political and cultural landscapes of both China and the UK.

2.1 Chinese feminist identities: a transnational intersectional perspective

To understand how China's socio-political and cultural context has led to the trend of feminists moving to the UK, shaping Chinese feminist identities in transnational contexts, we must first examine how Chinese feminism is framed in this study.

The conception of feminism in China is notably intricate, shaped by historical legacies of women in the imperial era, state-promoted social feminism, post-Mao gender discourses, and western perspectives on women's rights (Liu et al., 2015; Zhang, 2003). Defining terms such as "woman" and "feminism" has been particularly challenging within this blend of influences, and these definitions have become subjects of intense theoretical debates in China and overseas (Barlow, 1993, 1994; Min, 2007; Zhu & Xiao, 2021). For example, the terms *funü*, *nüxing*, and *nüren* all translate "woman" with different nuances (Barlow, 1994). *Funü* is commonly associated with the Maoist state's rhetoric of the communist woman (Barlow, 1994). In the 1980s, *nüxing*

emerged to replace *funü*, identifying women as sexed subjects and reflecting a feminist push to detach female subjectivity from state-driven discourses (Barlow, 1994). Simultaneously, the term *nüren* appeared as a general descriptor for female subjects (Barlow, 1994). These terminological distinctions underscore feminist efforts to break away from the state's agenda for women's empowerment and self-realisation (Barlow, 1994).

The 1990s saw the emergence of "travelling feminism", a wave of western feminist thought that reached China under the concept of *jie gui* or "connecting with the international track" (Min, 2007). This engagement extended beyond ideology to include issues of translation (Min, 2007). Scholars debated terms like *nüquan zhuyi* ("women's power or rights+ism") and *nüxing zhuyi* ("femininity+ism") (Min, 2007). During the 1980s and 1990s, three groups significantly shaped feminist discourse in China: the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), women's studies scholars and activists in mainland China, and the US-based Chinese Society for Women's Studies (Min, 2007). While *nüquan zhuyi* emphasised equal rights between men and women, it often neglected gender discourse. Conversely, *nüxing zhuyi* introduced the concepts of gender and sexual difference, reinterpreting Marxist women's theory to reconstruct the subject of women (Min, 2007).

Acknowledging these debates, this study adopts a contextualised approach that bridges transnational feminist theories and Chinese-specific contexts to understand Chinese feminist identity construction. In doing so, I do not impose a universalising interpretation of feminism but rather enable a multifaceted analysis of my participants' articulations of their feminist identities. This approach considers Chinese feminist identity as both a result of "doing gender" through everyday social interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991) and the reflections of localised, historically rooted debates and practices that have shaped feminist thought in China. By integrating these complementary perspectives, I aim to balance transnational feminist frameworks with the particularities of Chinese feminism, ensuring an intersectional and transnational analytical approach.

"Doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991) beyond binary categorisations provides a compelling perspective to analyse how Chinese feminists in the UK may reimagine their identities outside of static, culturally defined roles. Understanding

gender not as a fixed trait but continuously constructed through discursive practices and interactions (Risman, 2004, 2017; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991) invites us to consider how Chinese feminist identities in transnational contexts may be reshaped through lived experiences, negotiations, and tensions with Chinese and western discourses on gender. This view encourages moving beyond rigid definitions of "Chinese feminism" or "woman" to focus instead on the fluid identities shaped by both specific Chinese socio-political contexts and the distinct environments of the UK.

Understanding gender in this research also needs to be contextualised within the literature on international student mobility, particularly studies that explore how gendered identities are negotiated across transnational spaces. A key contribution in this area is Mengwei Tu's (2018) in-depth study of the transnational "one-child generation", which examines how young, highly educated Chinese migrants in the UK experience mobility in relation to family expectations, educational aspirations, and evolving gender norms. Tu (2018) highlights the emotional and moral dimensions of transnational life, showing how gendered responsibilities and intergenerational obligations continue to shape the experiences of this supposedly privileged group. Her work reveals that migration does not necessarily equate to emancipation; instead, it involves complex negotiations of classed and gendered expectations tied to both Chinese and British socio-cultural contexts.

Tu's later research with Xie (2020) further illuminates how gender shapes the experiences of Chinese women pursuing education and professional opportunities abroad. Tu and Xie's (2020) study of Chinese female professionals in the UK—who initially migrated for higher education and later established their careers—situates the socioeconomic mobility of these so-called "privileged daughters" within the dynamics of intergenerational relationships and transnational social spaces. Their findings show that, despite achieving geographical mobility and significant upward social mobility, these women's life choices remain closely tied to parental expectations and obligations in China. This work underscores how gendered responsibilities continue to circulate across borders, revealing a more nuanced and relational understanding of transnational mobility among relatively elite cohorts.

Extending this perspective to a student context, Zhang and Xu (2020) demonstrate that Chinese female students in the UK cultivate new gendered dispositions that

function as transnational cultural resources. These resources, they argue, become distinctive assets through which women negotiate and articulate both global and gendered identities.

Building on this emergent body of work, Fran Martin's (2022) ethnography on Chinese female students in Australia adds a critical dimension by foregrounding the structural constraints that shape their aspirations for self-actualisation. Martin demonstrates how young women's educational dreams are tempered by racialisation, gendered vulnerability, and the neoliberal restructuring of higher education, which collectively complicate narratives of autonomy and empowerment through overseas study. Although approaching the topic from a different angle, Xie (2021) complements these insights through her analysis of highly educated, middle-class urban women in China. She shows how their attitudes towards marriage, childbearing, career, and aspirations for a "good life" are shaped both by global neoliberal ideals of individual success and by enduring Confucian notions of family order and gender hierarchy. Xie's work demonstrates that engagement with global capitalism does not simply enable middle-class women's personal aspirations; it also reproduces conservative gender and family norms.

These scholars provide crucial insights into the lived complexities of gendered mobility and identity formation. However, what remains underexplored is how feminist identity, as a political and self-reflexive stance, is formed, contested, and reconstructed in these transnational contexts. My study contributes to this gap by focusing explicitly on Chinese feminist students in the UK—not simply as gendered subjects, but as agents engaged in the active (re)construction of feminist identities across multiple cultural and socio-political terrains. Through engaging critically with the work of Tu, Xie, Zhang and Xu, and Martin, I situate my analysis within this rich scholarly conversation while extending it to examine how feminist identities emerge from the tensions and negotiations of transnational experience and feminist discourses.

Framing these complex negotiations through a transnational intersectional perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how Chinese feminist identities are both situated and in flux. While the literature highlights the significance of mobility, gender, and familial responsibility, my approach builds on this by centring feminism as an explicitly political and situated identity. Intersectionality in this study encompasses

shifting power relations across spatial, generational, ideological, and national contexts. In this way, Chinese feminist identities are analysed as simultaneously shaped by individual agency, structural constraints, and transnational flows of ideas, responsibilities, and affective ties.

Adopting a transnational contextualised approach to Chinese feminist identities reveals their dynamic and multifaceted nature. Methodological nationalism, which confines social phenomena within nation-state boundaries (Beck, 2007; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), risks essentialising Chinese feminist identities as fixed within China and, therefore, homogeneous. This narrow approach obscures the influence of transnational factors, such as colonial legacies, global feminist discourses, and neoliberal economic transformations (Mohanty, 2003; Ong, 1999). Hence, by embracing a transnational perspective, my study goes beyond the uniformity of gendered experiences and cultural imperialism (Grewal, 2008). This transnational perspective emphasises the fluidity of Chinese feminist identities in the context of globalisation and critiques dominant western knowledge frameworks (Grewal, 2008).

Building on this understanding, the mobility of Chinese feminists to the UK can be seen not merely as a geographical shift but also as an identity-shaping journey that complicates and enriches what it means to be a "Chinese feminist". In moving across national, socio-cultural and political boundaries, these feminists encounter and negotiate multiple, often conflicting discourses on gender, power, and identity (Mohanty, 2003). This transnational experience reveals how mobility can serve as a transformative site for identity work, where conventional notions of "Chinese" or "feminism" are neither fully abandoned nor fully retained but instead continuously renegotiated.

In this context, the trend of Chinese feminists moving abroad, which emerged in my pilot study, indicates a rupture that destabilises fixed categories and creates openings for new configurations of identity in transnational social spaces. It signifies a process of reimagining identity that not only resists essentialist constructions of gender but also engages critically with the cultural and political dimensions of being "Chinese" in a transnational context. These configurations are shaped by the interplay of Chinese socio-political conditions, encounters with transnational feminist discourses, and the lived realities of being Chinese feminists in the UK.

In light of this framework I have built, my study explores how transnational social spaces serve as arenas for constructing feminist identities that do not adhere strictly to either Chinese or western paradigms but instead emerge from a negotiation of both. This negotiation enables us to see feminist identities uniquely situated within and shaped by specific spatial and temporal contexts. Specifically, transnational contexts, the historical moment marked by China's heightened control over feminism and rising nationalist anti-feminism and misogyny, and the global spread of feminist discourses. This study aims to understand these evolving identities as outcomes of negotiation, where Chinese feminists in the UK navigate and reconfigure what it means to be both feminist and Chinese in a transnational context.

2.1.1 A history of transnational Chinese feminism and feminist mobilisation

The transnational dimensions of Chinese feminism can be traced back to its origins in the early twentieth century with anarcho-feminist He Yin Zhen (Liu et al., 2013). After moving to Japan, He Yin Zhen examined the interplay of patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, and gender oppression as global issues (Liu et al., 2013). This period marked the beginning of Chinese feminism's engagement with transnational feminist movements.

During the Republic of China period (1912–1949), Chinese feminism was significantly shaped by transnational influences amid a time of political, social, and cultural changes (Edwards, 2010). Key to this influence was the introduction of women's suffrage, which gained traction through the mobilisation of both Chinese intellectuals and overseas Chinese women (Edwards, 2010). Transnational educational exchanges also played a crucial role, as Chinese women studied abroad in Europe, the US, and Japan, absorbing western feminist ideas on suffrage and women's rights. These women returned to China with new strategies for integrating women into the national modernisation project. Debates around women's education and workforce participation were also central to this period, as transnational feminist discourse highlighted gender equality as essential for China's progress, linking women's rights to broader nationalist and anti-imperialist movements (Edwards, 2010)

Following the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, feminism in China was closely tied to the socialist revolution through state-led initiatives, particularly under the ACWF, which functioned as the party-guided women's

movement (Zheng, 2010). The ACWF, classified as an NGO since 1993, was instrumental in supporting class struggle, rather than gender equality per se while symbolising state feminism (Wu & Feng, 2018; Zheng, 2010). Its campaigns promoted women's legal rights and economic empowerment, contributing to key socialist policies such as the Marriage Law (1950) and the active participation of women in agricultural and industrial production (Shen & Li, 2011). Despite its alignment with government agendas (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012), the ACWF maintained a transnational character by engaging with international women's movements and participating in global conferences (Edwards, 2010).

The market reforms initiated in 1978 marked a major turning point, as growing gender inequality spurred feminist movements independent from the state, responding to restrictions on women's liberation. During this period, academic discussions on feminism gained traction (Shen & Li, 2011; Zheng, 2010), leading to the establishment of research centres within universities. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was a watershed moment, revitalising transnational dialogues on feminism and connecting Chinese feminists with international networks, especially through NGOs (Feng, 2018; Woodman, 2018). The conference is considered a landmark event in Chinese feminist history, as it challenged and disrupted the ACWF's monopoly on feminist agendas, legitimising women's NGOs that raised new demands and formulated fresh feminist visions (Zheng, 2010).

In the 2000s, technological advances allowed feminist mobilisation to expand into digital spaces, particularly on platforms like Weibo (Feng, 2018; Wang & Driscoll, 2018). Digital feminism blossomed, notably through initiatives like Women's Voice (2009), later to become Feminist Voice (2010), which leveraged social media to engage women in campaigns for gender equality. In 2012, this shift also marked the rise of the YFA, who initiated visible street campaigns in diverse urban areas (Feng, 2018; Xiong, 2018).

However, this momentum was curtailed by the government's increasing control over civil society. In 2015, the detention of five YFA, known as the "Feminist Five", underscored the increased risks for feminists in China (Xiong, 2018). In 2016, the Foreign NGOs Management Law restricted foreign funding and required advocacy NGOs to form party cells (Han, 2018). Alongside the suppression of street feminist

mobilisation, online feminist channels like Feminist Voice were also banned in 2018. These political changes also reduced academic and public engagement with feminist issues in China (Liao, 2020; Mao, 2020).

Despite these state-imposed restrictions, Chinese feminism has persisted, though increasingly dispersed due to limited resources and government surveillance (Mao, 2020). Recent developments reveal the emergence of new forms of Chinese queer feminism that critically engage with the conservative, male-dominated gay political landscape (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017; Zheng, 2015). Since 2012, feminists have gradually adopted a political stance that transcends conventional sexual and gender categories, cultivating an approach that is more fluid and inclusive (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024; Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017; Zheng, 2015). Central to this shift is the formation of transnational alliances that connect Chinese feminists in China and across the world (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017; Zheng, 2015).

This historical overview of transnational Chinese feminism and feminist mobilisation highlights the significant role of transnational connections and digital spaces in shaping their trajectories. It also reveals that much of recent scholarship has focused on feminism and feminist mobilisation in relation to the state, either through collaboration with government policies on women's equality or as resistance to oppressive governmental structures (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024; Feng, 2018; Mao, 2020; Wang & Driscoll, 2018). As a result, independent grassroots efforts existing beyond state control have largely been side-lined (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024). In their anthology on Chinese feminist activism, Engebretsen and Zeng (2024) challenge this binary framework. They focus on independent grassroots feminist organising and highlight the significance and challenges of maintaining transnational connections within China's contemporary socio-political context.

However, a gap remains in the literature on transnational Chinese feminism, particularly in relation to the experiences of feminists who have moved beyond China's national borders. In this context, I argue that the current wave of transnationalisation in Chinese feminism marks a significant historical transition, distinct from earlier phases. While the transnational dimensions of Chinese feminism in the early 20th century were characterised by intellectual exchanges through figures like He Yin Zhen (Liu et al., 2013) and the influence of suffrage and education movements (Edwards, 2010), and

mid-20th-century feminist state engagements prioritised global socialist solidarity via institutions like the ACWF (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012), the contemporary phase is defined by decentralised feminist networks (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024). This new form of Chinese feminism diverges sharply from past top-down, institutionalised models, emerging in response to three key factors: the expansion of digital technology, increasing state control, and the rise of nationalist anti-feminism and misogyny (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024; Liu, 2024).

Rather than relying on centralised leadership or formal organisations, Chinese feminists engage through fluid, grassroots networks that leverage social media, online platforms, and transnational communities to foster solidarity across borders (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024). This shift to a decentralised approach allows feminists to bypass traditional state and institutional gatekeepers, creating a more inclusive and intersectional form of feminism that is adaptable to rapidly changing global and local contexts (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024).

In this research, I argue and will demonstrate that Chinese feminism transcends national borders by forging alliances within transnational feminist networks while navigating the digital and geopolitical constraints of an increasingly restricted domestic (and international) environment. This distinctiveness emphasises the importance of studying Chinese feminists overseas, particularly in the UK, where their experiences offer critical insights into how transnational mobility reconfigures feminist identities and enriches the transnational feminist discourse (Mohanty, 2003). By situating this research within historical transitions, we can better understand the evolving modes of Chinese feminism and position it in a transformative period with both theoretical and practical implications for its transnational dimensions.

In the following section, I explore how transnational mobility intertwines with Chinese feminism, offering new perspectives on its transnational dimensions.

2.2 Conceptualising transnational mobility for Chinese feminist students in the UK

To understand the construction of Chinese feminist identities in transnational social spaces in the UK, it is necessary to engage with the concept of transnational mobility as it specifically relates to international education. The participants in this study all moved

to the UK to pursue higher education. As such, transnational mobility here is not conceptualised through the lens of permanent migration, but rather as education-driven, classed, and time-bound movement shaped by global neoliberal regimes and personal aspirations (Tu, 2018; Martin, 2022). Chinese feminist students' mobility is entangled in a particular social and political infrastructure that frames international study as both a form of cultural capital and a path to upward mobility—but it also produces new vulnerabilities and exclusions.

I understand these students as navigating transnational social spaces, in line with Faist's (2000) conceptualisation of sustained cross-border interactions and affiliations. Yet, their position within these spaces is not one of full autonomy or privilege. Instead, it is conditioned by shifting policies, uneven access to resources, and emerging forms of immobility. Drawing on Nehring and Hu's (2021) concept of "fragile transnationalism", I recognise that the very infrastructures enabling international student mobility are precariously held together by nation-state interests, immigration regimes, and global inequalities. This fragility has been particularly evident during global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed how quickly transnational mobility can be interrupted, restricted, or politicised, leaving mobile individuals—including students—in a state of transnational limbo.

Thus, this study approaches transnational mobility not as a straightforward or stable process but as a contingent and often precarious condition. It is shaped by participants' aspirations and access to mobility capital (Brooks & Waters, 2011), but also by institutional and geopolitical forces that can enable, disrupt, or reshape those movements. This conceptualisation is essential for understanding how transnational mobility influences participants' feminist identity construction. Their journeys from China to the UK—and the experiences accrued along the way—are central to how they come to see themselves, and how they engage with feminist ideas and practices.

Building on this conceptual framing, I now turn to how these dynamics of transnational mobility materialise in the everyday lives of Chinese feminist students in the UK. This part of the section extends the discussion beyond abstract formulations of mobility to examine how it is lived, negotiated, and made meaningful across different geographies and temporalities. In this sense, mobility is not merely a structural condition or theoretical category but a dynamic and spatial process through which

feminist identities are forged, reworked, and reimagined. This lens allows me to analyse how my participants respond to—and sometimes resist—the constraints and possibilities of "fragile transnationalism".

This section explores the role of mobility as a key dimension of the transnational social spaces my participants navigate. Mobility is not merely a backdrop but an active force shaping how they construct their identities. Through the lens of transnational mobility, I aim to illuminate how Chinese feminist students inhabit and negotiate these spaces, and how the dynamics of interaction across time and space contribute to their identification as feminists.

To capture the complexity of my participants' experiences, I intentionally move beyond the concept of migration. The term "migration", while widely used, does not encompass the full spectrum of mobility, as it often carries political connotations, implying permanence (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007). Mobility, by contrast, foregrounds the complexities of movement by addressing its temporal and spatial dimensions, and its lived experiences within and beyond nation-state policies (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007). These characteristics are particularly relevant to Chinese feminists in this study, as their mobility is not simply about crossing borders: it is also an ongoing process of engagement with multiple contexts and cultural flows, which influence their feminist identities in fluid and dynamic ways.

Mobility captures the multi-directionality, non-linearity, and fluidity of movement, revealing how individuals navigate changing circumstances throughout their lives and how their experiences differ and evolve across locations and over time (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007). This perspective is particularly useful for illuminating the contingent and multifaceted trajectories of Chinese feminists as they move from China to the UK. For instance, this theoretical lens drove me to consider that Chinese feminists who moved to metropolitan areas in the UK such as London, Birmingham, or Manchester encountered diverse opportunities to engage with Chinese feminism, including access to grassroots Chinese feminist organisations, large Chinese communities and robust academic networks (Machum, 2015). These metropolitan hubs can provide fertile ground for cross-cultural feminist dialogue and collaboration, enabling Chinese feminists to critically reassess and redefine their feminist practices in light of transnational discourses.

Virtual spaces highlight how mobility can extend beyond physical relocation, allowing individuals to cultivate transnational networks that bridge geographic divides (Urry, 2007). Thus, virtual connections and interactions can enable the exchange of feminist knowledge and practices on a transnational scale. This perspective helps me acknowledge that Chinese feminists who live in smaller urban centres in the UK can face limited access to offline feminist networks. In these contexts, digital platforms and social media may become vital tools for sustaining connections with feminists in China and elsewhere.

The dynamic nature of individuals' mobility (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007) allows me to view Chinese feminists' current locations in the UK not as fixed endpoints but as part of an ongoing journey. This positionality drives me to consider that some Chinese feminists might aspire to return to China, hoping to apply the feminist knowledge and strategies developed overseas. Others could envision further relocations to new countries, seeking to engage with diverse feminist ideas in varied socio-cultural contexts.

This fluid forward-looking perspective on Chinese feminists' mobility reflects how transnational actors can continuously negotiate their identities within evolving political, cultural, and social landscapes (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007). These negotiations underscore the reciprocal influence between geographic locations and feminist self-identifications, illustrating that mobility is as much about transformation and possibility as it is about physical movement (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007). For example, some of my participants describe how engaging with feminists in the UK lead them to reinterpret their understandings of gender equality and reshape their feminist identities and approaches to feminist mobilisation. As I will discuss in my empirical chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6), such transformations and possibilities are evident in Chinese feminists' articulations of feminist identities, linking their transnational journeys between China and the UK to the evolution of their feminist identities and activities.

By examining these diverse and context-specific trajectories, transnational mobility can illuminate Chinese feminists' lived experiences and challenge traditional notions of migration as linear or destination-oriented (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007). It captures the intricate interplay between space, time, identity, and interactions that defines their journeys. This framework extends our understanding of transnational Chinese feminism,

highlighting how mobility fosters both transformation and the continuous redefinition of feminist identities.

2.2.1 Chinese feminist students' transnational mobility (in the UK): filling the gaps

Transnational mobility within Chinese communities overseas has been widely studied, often with a focus on their cultural and social formations, such as the development of Chinatowns (Mu & Pang, 2019; Shi, 2005; Yu, 2020). However, only two studies have specifically explored transnational Chinese feminists overseas.

The first is Han's (2022) recent study, which explores the academic dependency in feminist knowledge production and the contested positionality of Chinese feminist scholars. Han (2022) classifies these scholars into three categories: scholars based overseas, returnees, and locally educated academics. Han's (2022) findings highlight that both overseas and domestic feminist scholars are mindful of their positionalities within the publication process but are also influenced by the dominant political and economic structures governing knowledge production. Despite its relevance, Han's research does not exclusively focus on Chinese feminist scholars overseas but rather employs them to examine feminist knowledge production about China.

The second exception is Chen's (2019) historical study of Kang Tongbi, who pioneered early forms of Chinese women's organising in Canada and the USA through the Chinese Empire Ladies Reform Association between 1903 and 1905. Chen (2019) highlights how political mobilisation enabled early Chinese feminism to rise for reformist and revolutionary causes. Yet, such politicised approach also constrained the independent development of women's movements and organisations (Chen, 2019). While this historical example illustrates how Chinese feminist thought and mobilisation have previously traversed borders, my study shifts the focus to contemporary, grassroots forms of Chinese feminism in the UK, where feminist practices emerge from everyday experiences rather than formal political movements.

Although these two studies are valuable, they highlight the broader lack of contemporary perspectives on Chinese feminists beyond China. Wang and Cao's (2019) article in *ChinaFile* hints at the potential for Chinese feminists to build a transnational movement, identifying an emerging community in the United States. Specifically, the article (Wang & Cao, 2019) discusses how many feminists, following the 2015

detention of the “Feminist Five”, relocated in the US and formed feminist networks. Despite facing limited recognition, these feminists’ efforts play a significant role in sustaining and expanding the feminist movement, including supporting the #MeToo movement in China (Wang & Cao, 2019). However, this empirical development remains largely unexplored in the academic literature and has not yet extended to other regions, such as the UK.

The UK’ colonial legacy and historical linkages with China (Edwards, 2010) suggests its potential in studying transnational Chinese feminist identity construction. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the UK’s imperialist expansion in East Asia played a pivotal role in introducing western feminist ideas in mainland China (Edwards, 2010; Wang & Barlow, 2002), for instance, through the education of Chinese women in British missionary schools and universities (Davin, 1992; Zhou, 2023).

In the contemporary era, I argue that the legacy of British colonialism, particularly in shaping mobility policies and overseas networks (Chan, 1996; Parker, 1998), shapes perceptions of the UK as a destination for education, professional opportunities, and feminist engagement. For instance, my insights on the trend of moving abroad revealed some feminists’ appeal of joining already established Chinese feminist communities in the UK, which they perceived as offering a supportive environment to explore transnational feminist ideas.

One indicator of the UK’s appeal as a site for such exploration is the growing number of Chinese international students moving there. When discussing transnational mobility to the UK for higher education—such as that undertaken by the participants in this study—we are referring to a specific demographic shaped by socioeconomic privilege and particular aspirations. The group of Chinese international students in western countries primarily comprises middle-class students whose families view overseas education not merely as a means of academic advancement, but as a strategic investment in social mobility and global positioning. A privately funded international degree is thus framed as an educational commodity that enables the accumulation of cultural and mobility capital (Martin, 2022).

While numerous studies have explored the experiences and motivations of Chinese international students in western countries (e.g. Martin, 2022) and the UK specifically (e.g. Tu, 2018), little attention has been paid to how members of this transnational,

educated social group engage with feminist ideologies or participate in feminist mobilisation beyond China's nation-state boundaries.

Despite the underrepresentation of this landscape in the existing literature, Jin and Ni (2021) document in the *Made in China Journal* how Chinese feminist students in the UK have actively participated in campaigns addressing anti-Chinese racism. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 precipitated a surge in racist violence against Chinese communities in the UK. In response, a collective of Chinese feminist students initiated the campaign "ChineseAgainstRacistVirus", which involved social media advocacy and a public protest in London's Trafalgar Square (Jin & Ni, 2021). Later that year, the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement[3] following the death of George Floyd inspired the group to organise a second campaign, "Chinese4BlackLives", as an act of solidarity (Jin & Ni, 2021). Jin and Ni (2021) reflect on the marginalisation experienced by Chinese feminist students in the UK and how this condition influences the intersection of their identities in a transnational political space.

Building on Jin and Ni's (2021) observations, this study explores how mobility enables Chinese feminist students in the UK to redefine their feminist identities beyond the constraints of China's socio-political landscape (Feng, 2018; Liu, 2024; Mao, 2020; Wang & Driscoll, 2018). This unique context provides fertile ground for the development of evolving feminist identities that reflect the distinctive challenges and possibilities of transnational life (Mohanty, 2003). Such challenges and possibilities include navigating cultural hybridity, balancing divergent societal expectations, and engaging with feminist networks that offer new perspectives on gender equality and mobilisation (Anthias, 2012; Mohanty, 2003).

Having discussed Chinese feminism and transnational mobility, we can now turn to the third body of literature: identity construction.

[3] On 13th July 2013, policeman George Zimmerman was acquitted in the killing of Trayvon Martin, an African-American teenager in Florida, USA (Ince et al., 2017). This decision became a pivotal moment in US race relations, following months of protests over Martin's death. Shortly after the verdict, the phrase "Black Lives Matter" first appeared on Facebook, marking the beginning of a central movement in American culture. The movement aims to highlight issues impacting Black Americans, from racial injustice to police brutality to healthcare disparities (Ince et al., 2017).

2.3 Theorising Chinese feminist identity construction

Exploring identity construction is essential for understanding how my participants negotiate, redefine and articulate their feminist identities in transnational contexts. This section contributes to building the theoretical foundation to address my research question: What processes drive Chinese feminist students in the UK to identify in particular ways, and how do these processes shape their feminist identities? To address this question, it is necessary first to examine how Chinese feminist identity is conceptualised and constructed in transnational contexts.

In this research, I locate my understanding of Chinese feminist identity in the context and theoretical background of changing feminism in China and transnational social spaces shaped by mobility. Central to this exploration is the social constructionist approach (Goffman, 1959), which conceptualises identity as fluid and continually shaped by interactions and broader societal contexts (Williams, 2013).

This section first explores the social constructionist perspective on identity (Goffman, 1959), framing it within the context of this research. It then employs intersectionality theory (Collins 1990; Crenshaw, 1991) to construct a theoretical framework for understanding the interplay between Chinese and feminist identities.

2.3.1 The social constructionist perspective in Chinese feminist identity construction

Adopting a social constructionist perspective (Goffman, 1959), this study views identity as neither fixed nor absolute but as a product of subjective experiences deeply embedded in social structures and interactions. Social constructionism prioritises context-specific knowledge over universal truths, emphasising the meanings that participants assign to their realities rather than the researcher's predetermined interpretations (Goffman, 1959; Lincoln et al., 2018). It acknowledges the interplay of subjective and objective realities, setting aside the latter to focus on the processes through which identity becomes significant in people's lives (Goffman, 1959; Lincoln et al., 2018).

This approach provides a valuable framework for investigating the identities of Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK. My participants' experiences of transnational mobility introduce a multiplicity of cultural, social, and

political encounters, offering fertile ground for identity construction as they negotiate their positions within and across different environments (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007). In this context, participants' self-identifications as feminists highlight the fluid and contingent nature of identity (Goffman, 1959; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991).

In China, feminist identity is shaped by a specific socio-political context in which state-sanctioned forms of feminism—tied to governmental agendas—affect how individuals perceive and express feminist ideas (Feng, 2018; Liu, 2024; Mao, 2020). As Tu & Xie (2020) note, negotiating gender across national boundaries often involves engaging strategically with both global discourses and local constraints.

Class also mediates these processes. Access to overseas education typically presupposes certain socio-economic resources, which shape how participants encounter and interpret feminist ideas. Fran Martin's (2018, 2022) research on Chinese female students in Australia demonstrates how classed resources influence not only the feasibility of mobility but also the cultural capital and social networks through which subjectivities are formed. In my study, class intersects with nationality, gender, and political context in shaping how Chinese students in the UK negotiate their feminist identities.

From a social constructionist standpoint, Chinese feminist students are understood as active agents who engage in processes of self-identification within multiple socio-political frameworks (Feng, 2018; Liu, 2024; Mao, 2020; Wang & Driscoll, 2018). Even under structural constraints, identity is not wholly predetermined but is continuously shaped through everyday interactions, political engagements, and transnational experiences. This aligns with West and Zimmerman's (1987, 1991) notion of "doing gender", where gender is an ongoing accomplishment situated in context. For Chinese feminist students in the UK, interactions extend beyond immediate surroundings to encompass broader cultural and political narratives, particularly—but not limited to—those related to gender and feminism. These interactions create a multifaceted terrain in which feminist identity is continually negotiated, co-created through engagement with external structures as participants make sense of their positionalities.

The temporal and spatial dimensions of identity are also central to this perspective (Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959). Individuals' identities are intertwined with the spaces

they inhabit—from local communities to national political arenas—and with the temporal rhythms of life, such as the transformative period of studying abroad (Hu, 2016; Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Temporality shapes identity through personal time, or how individuals experience their lives over time, making these spatial and temporal factors especially significant during major life transitions like transnational mobility (Hu, 2016). I regard transnational mobility as a temporally transformative process that disrupts and reshapes participants' understandings of themselves (Hu, 2016; Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007), compelling them to navigate between continuity with Chinese roots and adaptation to new socio-cultural and political contexts.

By bringing Goffman's (1959) social constructionism into dialogue with West and Zimmerman's (1987, 1991) "doing gender", and integrating insights from Tu (2019), Tu & Xie (2020), Xie (2021), Tu (2019), Zhang & Xu (2020), Martin (2018, 2022), Urry (2007), and Roberts (2019), this study develops a framework that situates Chinese feminist identity construction at the intersection of gender, Chinese identity, class, and political context. This approach extends debates in Chinese feminism and gender studies by showing how feminist identities are not only mediated by state and social narratives within China but are also reshaped through classed, transnational experiences that span—and transform—both Chinese and UK contexts. To further understand participants' identity construction, I also employ an intersectional lens (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991), which illuminates how different aspects of their identities intersect across these multiple contexts.

2.3.2 Intersecting Chinese feminist identities: gender and Chinese identities

An intersectional approach is integral to my theoretical framework, as it enables an in-depth examination of the multiple, intertwined social structures and processes shaping identities (Anthias, 2012; Collins 1990; Crenshaw, 1991). This subsection adds theoretical elements to explore my central research question: How do Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK construct their feminist identities?

Intersectionality theory is indispensable to address this question, providing the analytical tools necessary to unpack the interwoven dimensions of feminist identity construction. Without it, the multidimensional nature of these processes would be difficult to fully grasp. This intersectional approach allows me to explore how my participants' gendered expectations tied to their Chinese identities intersect with their

feminist beliefs, potentially creating moments of tension and self-reflection. These moments reveal the internal and external processes—such as navigating cultural norms, confronting societal expectations, and engaging with transnational feminist networks—that influence identity construction. Thus, I view intersectionality not as a fixed state but as a dynamic social process (Hu, 2016), crucial for understanding the fluidity of Chinese feminist identity. This perspective highlights how my participants' evolving self-definitions emerge through their ongoing interactions with social structures, personal experiences, and transnational connections. These processes, in turn, illuminate the ways participants negotiate their identities as both feminists and Chinese in the contexts of China and the UK.

The term intersectionality was introduced by Collins (1990) and Crenshaw (1991) to address the overlapping systems of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age that simultaneously influence individuals and generate unique experiences of social inequality. Originally grounded in Black feminist thought in the United States, the concept has since evolved through the contributions of scholars worldwide, who have enriched its theoretical dimensions and applied it to diverse fields of study (Cho et al., 2013; Purkayastha, 2012). This broad applicability is exemplified in its adaptability to different cultural contexts, such as China, where it has proven to be a valuable analytical tool (Nordin & Brown, 2022; Sun, 2023). For instance, Sun (2023), in tracing the history of intersectionality's circulation in China, highlights the emergence of research on its localisation as a recent development, with significant progress occurring only after 2005 and substantial milestones reached since 2016. Nordin & Brown (2022) adopt an intersectional approach to explore Chinese identity in the context of anti-Asian racism and the #StopAsianHate movement, considering transnational settings, including the UK. In relation to my own research, intersectionality theory provides a way to explore how my participants' feminist identities are shaped by gender and Chinese identities in the context of the transnational social spaces they inhabit.

I regard the intersection of Chinese and feminist identities not simply as a point of convergence but a site of negotiation, tension, and transformation (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, Chinese feminists in the UK may find their traditional cultural expectations in conflict with feminist ideals, especially in relation to gender roles and family dynamics (Tu & Xie, 2020). In my study, some participants expressed tension

when navigating these competing demands, especially when engaging with feminist mobilisation in the UK, where gender equality is more openly advocated. These identities can clash or complement each other, shaping Chinese feminists' understandings of what it means to be both Chinese and feminist. These intersections are further complicated by the transnational spaces my participants inhabit, which bring additional layers of cultural expectations, feminist discourses, and identity negotiations.

Discussing feminist identity requires grounding it in discourses on gender equality. In identifying as feminists, individuals not only acknowledge and reject gender inequalities but also develop alternative visions for gender relations (Aronson, 2017). To understand how feminist identities intersect with other dimensions, it is essential to frame gender as a central category of analysis. In the following subsection, I illustrate my understanding of gender in Chinese feminist identity construction.

2.3.2.1 Gender identity in Chinese feminist identity construction

To understand the role of gender in my participants' feminist identity construction, I draw on Risman's (2004, 2017) theory of gender as a social structure. This theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding gender's pervasive influence on identity construction.

According to Risman (2004, 2017), gender shapes society at three interconnected levels: the individual, where socialisation instils gender norms and influences identity and behaviour; the interactional, where people "do gender" through social expectations and power dynamics in relationships; and the institutional, where systems like workplaces, families, and laws embed and perpetuate gender inequalities. Viewing gender as a dynamic yet deeply entrenched structure highlights the interplay between personal experiences, social interactions, and structural forces in shaping or challenging gender inequalities (Risman, 2004, 2017; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991).

Risman's (2004, 2017) perspective on gender is especially crucial because it enables me to capture the interactional dimensions of feminist identity construction through my participants' "doing gender" in their everyday lives (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991). Specifically, it illuminates how gender norms and social expectations emerge through participants' interactions with individuals as well as different cultural and socio-political systems in both the UK and China. Such interactions shape my participants'

feminist identities, while accounting for their fluidity and diversity (Goffman, 1959; Risman, 2004, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991).

In my study, these levels of gendered influence (Risman, 2004, 2017) are further complicated by the transnational contexts in which they arise and interact. For instance, some participants may describe navigating gender expectations within traditional Chinese family structures, even as they develop feminist practices in the socio-cultural environment of the UK. Moreover, "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991) can involve negotiating contrasting cultural expectations between home and host countries, reflecting the complexities of identity construction in transnational spaces. In the Chinese context, Risman's (2004, 2017) theory remains applicable and useful as it offers a nuanced understanding of how gender roles and expectations are embedded in both China's and the UK's social structures, manifesting through participants' social, cultural and political interactions.

While feminist identities are deeply influenced by gender (Risman, 2004, 2027; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991), they do not exist in isolation. Chinese feminists' experiences of navigating feminist discourses are also shaped by their Chinese identities, which bring additional dimensions to their gendered interactions. But what constitutes "Chinese identity" in the context of Chinese feminists' experiences? The following subsection addresses this question.

2.3.2.2 Chinese identity in Chinese feminist identity construction

The concept of "Chinese identity" is multifaceted and has been explored through historical, cultural, national and transnational lenses in academic literature. Historically, events from the late 19th to early 20th centuries, particularly those involving cultural humiliation and modernisation efforts, played a critical role in shaping modern Chinese identity, highlighting the intertwining of national consciousness with historical experiences (Wang, 2012). Nationalism has also been pivotal in shaping Chinese political identity, especially in the contexts of territorial integrity issues in post-revolutionary China (Dirlik, 1994) and globalisation (Lee, 2014). Culturally, Chinese identity is constructed through narratives of history, tradition, and cultural pride, playing a relevant role in Chinese nationalism (Callahan, 2006). The state's role in constructing identity is also evident in educational materials, where discourse analysis

of textbooks reveals efforts to instil a sense of national pride and continuity among young learners (Schneider, 2014).

For Chinese individuals overseas, transnational interactions foster dynamic processes of identity negotiation, as individuals navigate the interplay between traditional Chinese values and the cultural contexts of their host countries (Mu & Pang, 2019; Vertovec, 2009). In this context, Chinese identity often manifests as an ethnic identity shaped by racialisation (Bao, 2022). Research on Chinese heritage language learners abroad further underscores the fluidity of identity in transnational settings, where cultural affiliation and self-perception evolve in response to new environments (Schneider, 2014). Collectively, these perspectives illustrate that Chinese identity is a complex and dynamic construct, shaped by historical experiences, cultural narratives, and transnational interactions.

In this study, I build on these perspectives and understand Chinese identity as a fluid, context-dependent construct, evolving as Chinese feminist students interact with multiple and diverse individuals and cultural and socio-political transnational contexts (Goffman, 1959). While my participants may express a connection to their Chinese roots, I see this connection as transforming over time, shaped by personal lived experiences and shifting social, political, and cultural forces.

By understanding Chinese identity as dynamic and context-dependent (Goffman, 1959), I consider that it can be tied to traditional cultural practices, such as family values and rituals (Charles et al., 2008; Honko, 1995), or more politically defined, reflecting China's socio-political history and the Chinese Communist Party's ideologies (Han, 2013). Moreover, it can also be understood through an ethnic lens in the context of a foreign country (Bao, 2022). These diverse interpretations of Chinese identity may not be necessarily distinct in Chinese feminists' accounts: they may be interwoven, giving rise to tensions and contradictions.

As Chinese feminists navigate the fluid boundaries of Chinese identity in transnational contexts, they continually negotiate what it means to be both Chinese and feminist. These negotiations make Chinese feminist identity construction a dynamic, tension-filled process. The following section will propose a concept to empirically capture and understand the tensions in Chinese feminist identity construction in transnational social spaces in the UK.

2.4 Transnational Chinese feminist liminality: capturing and understanding the tensions in Chinese feminist identity construction in the UK

To examine how Chinese and feminist identities intersect in transnational social spaces in the UK, I have developed a framework grounded in three key theoretical dimensions: Chinese feminism, transnational mobility, and identity construction. This framework emphasises the fluid, dynamic, and multifaceted nature of identity formation, as well as the tensions inherent in the identity-building process.

I propose the concept of transnational Chinese feminist liminality to capture and understand the tensions shaping identity construction among Chinese feminist students in the UK. By transnational Chinese feminist liminality, I refer to the condition of being situated "in-between" multiple, and often conflicting, social, cultural, and political positions that arise from inhabiting both Chinese and transnational feminist spaces. It describes the lived process through which Chinese feminist students negotiate identity tensions shaped by mobility, gender, and the multifaceted meanings of their "being Chinese" under fragile global conditions. This liminality is simultaneously transnational—rooted in cross-border movement and exposure to global feminist discourses—and feminist, in that it centres the negotiation of gendered identity within unequal structures of power and recognition. It captures a dynamic and tension-driven space of transformation, where identities are continually redefined through encounters and contestations across socio-cultural and geopolitical boundaries.

Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) theorisation of liminality, this concept frames transnational experience as a transformative site of negotiation where difference and hybridity interact. For Bhabha, liminality is not a static phase of transition but a generative space of enunciation in which cultural meanings are re-signified through processes of translation, displacement, and encounter. Within this liminal terrain, the boundaries between cultures, identities, and epistemologies are neither erased nor harmonised but continually rearticulated through tension.

While Bhabha's (1994) theorisation of hybridity and the "third space" similarly emphasises negotiation, contestation, and the re-articulation of cultural meaning, my decision to foreground liminality is intentional. Hybridity and the "third space" often

describe the discursive grounds or eventual outcomes of intercultural contact—spaces where new identities can emerge—whereas liminality highlights the processual and often unstable experience of inhabiting an "in-between" position (Bhabha, 1994). Liminality draws attention to the suspension of fixed identities, the uncertainty of transition, and the heightened tension that accompanies attempts to navigate competing cultural logics. This distinction is crucial for understanding transnational Chinese feminists, whose identity work is not merely hybridising but marked by oscillation and negotiation.

Furthermore, liminality offers conceptual flexibility by recognising degrees and intensities of "in-betweenness". Not all forms of cultural or ideological between-ness are liminal; liminality emerges specifically when individuals encounter situations where fixed identity anchors are destabilised, contested, or rendered temporarily inoperative. For this reason, transnational Chinese feminists are not continuously in a liminal state. Rather, they move in and out of liminality depending on context—such as moments of negotiating British socio-cultural norms, confronting racialised stereotypes, engaging with Chinese gender expectations, or navigating geopolitical tensions. This situational character makes liminality especially suited to analysing the dynamic, tension-driven processes through which identity is formed and reconfigured across transnational spaces. By foregrounding these temporal, contextual, and structural dimensions, the concept of transnational Chinese feminist liminality captures the contingent and fragile conditions under which feminist identities are articulated in the UK.

In the context of Chinese feminist students in the UK, liminality therefore denotes this generative "in-between" condition—between Chinese and British cultures, between inherited gender norms and emergent feminist ideals, and between belonging to China and cosmopolitan aspiration. It is in this liminal space that identity is actively constructed through ongoing negotiation and tension. Capturing such tensions, the concept of liminality helps us understand not only the uncertainty of transnational life but also its productive potential: the creation of multiple and diverse nuanced forms of feminist identities that transcend binary and simplistic divisions between East and West, tradition and modernity, or local and global.

Underpinning the concept of transnational Chinese feminist liminality are two theoretical pillars that together illuminate how these tensions unfold in participants' identity construction.

First, Tu and Xie's (2020) study on gendered mobility offers a foundation for understanding how transnational movement generates new spaces of negotiation. Their analysis of highly educated Chinese women in the UK demonstrates that mobility is both enabling and constraining: it opens pathways for self-realisation and social advancement while reproducing intergenerational continuities of gender norms. As Tu and Xie observe, these "privileged daughters" achieve geographical and social mobility through education and professional success, yet remain "pulled back" by enduring familial gendered expectations rooted in China.

Transposed into the context of Chinese feminist identity construction, this insight captures the micro-level tensions inherent in transnational life. My participants—who articulate explicit feminist consciousness—experience a similar oscillation between mobility and rootedness. Within the liminal space of transnational feminism, the negotiation between inherited gender norms and newly encountered feminist ideals becomes an ongoing process of identity construction. Tu and Xie's findings (2020) thus help conceptualise the "pull" as a defining feature of transnational Chinese feminist liminality—a condition in which feminist identity is forged through simultaneous pull and push forces.

Second, Nehring and Hu's (2021) notion of fragile transnationalism situates these micro-level negotiations within the broader macro-structures of mobility, inequality, and governance. They conceptualise transnational social spaces as precarious and contingent formations, sustained by global hierarchies of power and uneven access to resources, mobility, and recognition. Transnationalism is tied to nation-states' ethical commitment to cosmopolitan ideals crafting social solidarities (Beck, 2006), yet this commitment is persistently undermined by tightening border regimes, racialised exclusions, and shifting geopolitical tensions.

For Chinese feminist students in the UK, this fragility magnifies the complexity of identity work. Their access to transnational mobility and participation in global feminist discourse is continually shaped—and at times constrained—by visa regimes, racialised stereotypes, and nationalist narratives. These structural contingencies do not merely

frame identity construction but constitute its very conditions: the boundaries of belonging, visibility, and legitimacy are constantly redefined through institutional and cultural negotiation.

Within this fragile transnational landscape, Chinese feminist liminality emerges as the site where feminist identity is actively crafted through tension. The instability that Nehring and Hu (2021) describe—marked by fluctuating borders, racialised hierarchies, and the conditional nature of belonging—does not simply constrain Chinese feminist students; it also compels them to negotiate and redefine what it means to be both Chinese and feminist across multiple, and often conflicting, socio-cultural and political terrains. Inhabiting this liminal position requires a continual balancing of autonomy, mobility, and belonging. It is precisely within this fragile "in-between" that feminist identity is made and remade, as participants engage in ongoing processes of translation, adaptation, and contestation. Through these negotiations, Chinese feminists in the UK craft situated feminist identities that both reflect and respond to the structural fragilities of transnational life.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives position transnational Chinese feminist liminality as a conceptual bridge linking micro-level practices of identity construction with macro-level structures of transnational precarity. This liminality is not a passive condition but an active process of identity construction—one that unfolds through continuous negotiation between structural constraint and personal autonomy, socio-cultural inheritance and feminist transformation.

To analytically capture the complexity of this process, I focus on three interrelated pathways of Chinese feminist identity construction: the individualised, collective, and cosmopolitan. These three pathways are not arbitrary analytical categories but empirically grounded manifestations of transnational Chinese feminist liminality itself. They capture how feminist identity construction unfolds across interconnected scales—personal, communal, and global—each shaped by specific configurations of tension: between autonomy and the influence of relational networks at the personal level; between solidarity and diversity within feminist collectives; and between global aspiration and national attachment in cosmopolitan engagement. Together, these pathways provide a comprehensive framework for examining how Chinese feminist

students in the UK construct their identities, negotiating the tensions embedded in their liminal positionality within fragile transnational contexts.

2.4.1 Tensions in individualised feminist identity construction

The individualised dimension of transnational Chinese feminist liminality captures how participants negotiate tensions in their feminist identities as they navigate between personal autonomy, the influence of relational networks, and the conditions of transnational mobility. This dimension foregrounds the liminal position through which Chinese feminist students in the UK move between relational expectations and newly encountered feminist discourses, engaging in a continual process of negotiation and re-evaluation of gender norms within a new cultural and social environment.

To analyse this process, I draw on the concept of individualisation (Jamieson & Simpson, 2013; Yan, 2013, 2017, 2021), which provides a valuable lens for understanding this pathway. A key step in this analysis is distinguishing individualisation from the broader ideology of individualism. Individualisation refers to a set of diverse social processes in which individuals de-anchor from collectivities and create spaces for themselves (Jamieson & Simpson, 2013). Instead, individualism indicates ideas, philosophies, or beliefs that emphasise the importance and value of the individual and their unique identity (Jamieson & Simpson, 2013; Lukes, 1973).

While the scholarship on individualisation, particularly in western contexts (Bauman, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991) often contrasts individualisation with collectivist values, in China, the trajectory of individualisation has taken a different course (Hansen & Svarverud, 2010; Yan, 2009). Besides being a product of modernisation and globalisation, individualisation in China is also shaped by the enduring influence of traditional culture and the state's active role in individuals' everyday lives (Hansen & Svarverud, 2010; Yan, 2009). More recently, Yan (2021, 2023) has identified neo-familism, nationalism, and materialism as key forces shaping new forms of individualised identity and belonging in China.

Importantly, individualisation in China does not dissolve familial influence; rather, family relations remain central in shaping identity. Yan's (2013) analysis demonstrates that urban young people negotiate individualised identities through inter-family

relations, often under parental guidance, highlighting that familial ties continue to operate as moral and practical resources in identity construction.

Building on this, I argue that family expectations continue to structure their sense of identity, even across geographical distance (Tu & Xie, 2020). Yet, within the liminal space of transnational life, these expectations are not simply reproduced but reconfigured through participants' exposure to new feminist and social environments in the UK. Within this expanded relational field, a key tension arises between the ongoing influence of participants' social relationships and interactions—family, peers, and community networks—and their evolving understandings of gender and Chinese identity.

At the same time, Nehring and Hu's (2021) concept of fragile transnationalism illuminates how these negotiations unfold within unstable transnational conditions. The fragility of transnational connections—particularly intensified by geopolitical shifts and nationalist discourses—renders participants' social relations both more complex and more "fragile". These broader instabilities subtly reshape how participants relate to others and to themselves, reinforcing the liminal condition through which their feminist identities take form.

Against this backdrop, this discussion highlights individualised feminist identity as an ongoing, tension-driven process situated within transnational Chinese feminist liminality. Participants' identities are crafted not through the resolution of competing influences but through their navigation—across relational, socio-cultural, and political boundaries that remain fluid and contingent. This understanding lays the foundation for the following section, which examines how these negotiations extend beyond the individual level into collective feminist formations.

2.4.2 Tensions in collective feminist identity construction

The collective dimension of transnational Chinese feminist liminality captures how participants negotiate the tensions inherent in forming shared feminist identities across transnational boundaries. Within this liminal condition, collective identity emerges in the "in-between"—where solidarity and recognition are constantly redefined through interaction and negotiation. Collective identity thus becomes a dynamic process

grounded in shared experiences of mobility, marginalisation, and feminist aspiration, yet shaped by diverse positionalities and uneven access to visibility and voice.

Existing literature on collective identity formation offers valuable insights, particularly in social movements and transnational contexts. For example, Snow and McAdam (2000) highlight the role of shared meanings, emotions, and symbols in uniting diverse individuals into cohesive groups, while Polletta and Jasper (2001) emphasise the relevance of narrative and storytelling in forging collective identities. Melucci's (1989, 1995) conceptualisation of collective identity as a dynamic and interactional process aligns closely with the notion of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, which understands identity-making as an ongoing negotiation of meaning across cultural, social, and political borders.

Collective identity, therefore, emerges not only through the creation of internal solidarity but also through differentiation from external "others"—institutions, publics, or ideologies that misrecognise, marginalise, or challenge the legitimacy of the group (Melucci, 1995; Taylor & Whittier, 1992; Yang, 2009). Within transnational Chinese feminist liminality, this dynamic takes on a dual dimension: Chinese feminists in the UK must simultaneously distinguish themselves from dominant western feminist discourses and from nationalistic narratives that seek to constrain or delegitimise their identity. This "in-betweenness"—between partial inclusion within global and local feminist spaces and exclusion from full recognition in both western and Chinese contexts—defines the collective as a liminal formation. It is within this contested terrain that Chinese feminists generate forms of solidarity that are both grounded in shared experiences and open to difference, embodying the transformative potential of the liminal space.

These complexities point to the need for a transnational analytical frame that can account for both solidarity and difference across borders. Lyons' (2010) theorisation of cross-border organising and trans-ethnic solidarity provides such a lens, capturing how feminist alliances are formed in the "in-between" spaces of transnational mobility. Her work shows that solidarity is a negotiated process—one that mirrors transnational Chinese feminist liminality, as collective belonging is continually reshaped through dialogue and difference. For Chinese feminist students in the UK, such collectivity is an

evolving relational practice shaped by the tensions between shared experiences and the diverse trajectories of transnational life.

Within the framework of fragile transnationalism (Nehring & Hu, 2021), these negotiations acquire an added layer of complexity: racialised or geopolitical discourses mediate access to feminist spaces, shaping who can participate, speak, or be heard. Such fragilities do not merely restrict collective engagement; they constitute the very conditions under which it occurs. For Chinese feminists in the UK, participation in feminist collectives is marked by both possibility and precarity—they inhabit a liminal position between inclusion within feminist networks and exclusion from dominant cultural and institutional spaces, between empowerment through collective solidarity and marginalisation within broader transnational hierarchies. This structural instability transforms collective identity into a process of continual negotiation, in which belonging must be actively remade within fragile transnational conditions.

The tensions at the core of collective feminist identity construction thus operate across three interrelated dimensions: first, between the pursuit of in-group solidarity and the need to gain recognition and legitimacy within broader social and institutional contexts; second, between inclusion and limited recognition in marginalised transnational feminist spaces; and third, between transnational and national participation in feminist mobilisation. Through these tensions, transnational Chinese feminist liminality becomes visible as a collective practice—a space where solidarity is built not despite fragility and difference, but through them.

2.4.3 Tensions in cosmopolitan feminist identity construction

Having outlined individualised and collective pathways of identity construction, I now turn to the formation of cosmopolitan feminist identities. Distinctively from the previous pathways, the cosmopolitan dimension of transnational Chinese feminist liminality captures how participants negotiate the tensions in engaging with global feminist ideas while negotiating their feminist identities within uneven structures of mobility, race, and culture. Within this liminal condition, cosmopolitan identity does not signal the transcendence of national and cultural boundaries but rather their continual negotiation.

Existing scholarship on cosmopolitanism provides a rich foundation for understanding identity formation in diverse cultural contexts. Hannerz (1990) defines cosmopolitanism as a worldview characterised by an openness to cultural diversity and the ability to engage with different cultural settings. Nussbaum (1997) extends this idea by framing cosmopolitanism as an ethical stance rooted in global citizenship and universal human values. These conceptualisations have been expanded in subsequent studies that explore the role of globalisation, migration, and transnational mobility in shaping cosmopolitan identities (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Delanty, 2006; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002). These contributions highlight the multifaceted nature of cosmopolitanism, demonstrating its dual role as both a cultural orientation and an ethical framework.

However, critical scholarship has challenged traditional cosmopolitan frameworks, highlighting their limitations in addressing power dynamics and exclusionary practices (Calhoun, 2002; Werbner, 2008). These critiques underscore the need to move beyond idealised notions of cosmopolitanism to capture its more complex manifestations in real-world contexts.

Building on this critical literature, I argue that Chinese feminists' experiences in engaging with the British cultural and socio-political environment reveal a form of cosmopolitanism that does not stem from a deliberate embrace of cultural diversity (Hannerz, 1990; Nussbaum, 1997). Instead, I suggest that cosmopolitan feminist identities may emerge from a partial sense of non-belonging—an absence of place-based attachment (Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2006) to both China and the UK. Such partial non-belonging captures the logic of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, where the absence of fixed attachments becomes a generative space for rearticulating what it means to be both Chinese and feminist within unstable transnational terrains.

Extending this understanding, the cosmopolitan pathway represents the global expression of that liminal condition. Here, participants inhabit the "in-between" space between the ideals of global feminism and the culturally situated meanings of being Chinese and feminist. This position gives rise to two key tensions. First, a tension of belonging, as participants navigate simultaneous attachment and detachment from both Chinese and British socio-cultural contexts. Second, under fragile transnationalism (Nehring & Hu, 2021), the infrastructures that enable transnational movement also

delimit the extent to which Chinese feminists can inhabit cosmopolitan positions. Their mobility is thus both enabling and precarious, exposing them to new feminist ideas and solidarities while simultaneously reminding them of the limits of global inclusivity.

Taken together, these dynamics illuminate the cosmopolitan dimension as a vital expression of transnational Chinese feminist liminality. It foregrounds how encounters across borders amplify the tensions of belonging, recognition, and mobility that characterise all pathways of feminist identity construction. In this sense, transnational Chinese feminist liminality offers a unifying conceptual frame through which to understand Chinese feminist identity under fragile transnationalism—as a layered, tension-driven process bridging the micro-dynamics of lived experience with the macro-contingencies of global mobility. This conceptualisation provides a critical foundation for the empirical analysis that follows in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, where these theoretical tensions become visible in participants' narratives and everyday practices of identity construction.

Conclusion

This chapter has established the theoretical and conceptual foundation for understanding how Chinese feminist identities are constructed in transnational social spaces in the UK. By addressing my central research question—how Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK construct their feminist identities—I have engaged with three dimensions: Chinese feminism, transnational mobility, and identity construction. Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for exploring how feminist identities are shaped by both transnational lived experiences and the broader socio-cultural and political contexts of China and the UK.

First, I have traced the trajectory of Chinese feminism, highlighting its historical evolution and interaction with transnational feminist theories. I have framed Chinese feminist identity as dynamic and fluid, challenging binary understandings of gender and drawing on the theory of "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991). Situating this within the historical and socio-political specificities of Chinese feminism, I have argued that Chinese feminist identity is shaped by an ongoing negotiation between transnational influences and China's past and present (Liu et al., 2015; Wesoky, 2016). I further examined this transnational dimension through the works of Chinese feminist scholars based in the UK (Tu, 2018; Tu & Xie, 2020; Xie, 2021; Zhang & Xu, 2020).

These scholars provided crucial insights into the lived complexities of gendered mobility and identity formation. This discussion underscored the necessity of adopting a transnational perspective, particularly in light of the trend of moving abroad observed in my pilot study, as discussed in Chapter 1.

Next, I have examined the role of transnational mobility in shaping the identities of Chinese feminist students in the UK. I have conceptualised mobility not merely as physical movement between China and the UK but as a transformative process that fosters identity negotiation (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007). By situating these discussions within my case study, I have demonstrated how mobility serves as both a structural and experiential factor in the construction of feminist identities.

Finally, I have examined identity construction through a social constructionist lens (Goffman, 1959), recognising the fluidity of identity as shaped by lived experiences, social interactions, and cultural and political contexts. I have drawn on intersectionality theory (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991) to explore how Chinese and feminist identities intersect and influence each other in transnational social spaces in the UK. I adopted Risman's (2004, 2017) theory of gender as a social structure to illuminate the pervasive influence of gender on (feminist) identity construction. Chinese identity was understood as an umbrella term—a dynamic and context-dependent construct and subject to constant renegotiation (Goffman, 1959).

Building on this theoretical foundation, I develop the concept of transnational Chinese feminist liminality to capture the identity tensions experienced by Chinese feminist students in fragile transnational contexts. Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) notion of liminality as a generative "in-between" space, this concept explores how these students negotiate tensions across three interrelated pathways of identity construction—individualised, collective, and cosmopolitan. Informed by theories of individualisation (Jamieson & Simpson, 2013; Yan, 2013, 2017, 2021), collective identity formation (Melucci, 1989, 1995), and cosmopolitanism (Hannerz, 1990; Nussbaum, 1997), it highlights the fluid, dynamic, and tension-laden nature of feminist identity formation, in which these pathways interact and evolve rather than remaining fixed or separate.

Having established my theoretical framework, in Chapter 3, I turn to the research design and methodological approaches that underpin this study. I demonstrate how the

theoretical insights and empirical findings outlined in this chapter have informed my methodological choices and overall research strategy.

Chapter 3

Research design and methods

This research project examines the processes through which Chinese feminist students self-identify as feminists in transnational social spaces in the UK. This chapter illustrates the qualitative research design I employed to answer the question: How do Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK construct their feminist identities?

I used grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 1968, 2010) as the overarching qualitative research methodology to address this question. Specifically, I adopted a constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), utilising in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary research method and supplementing my interview data with participant observation. Although the broad research question I sought to address served as a guiding parameter, I also allowed the data to inform the research process. At various stages of my research journey, significant findings from the data prompted methodological adjustments, steering me toward more specific analytical pathways. Key decisions that shaped the focus of my thesis on the identity construction of Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK were driven by both the data and a deliberate rationale. As the research unfolded, my data revealed participants' emphasis on the individualised, collective and cosmopolitan dimensions of their feminist identities, particularly at the intersection of Chinese and gender identities. This focus emerged from my aim to understand how participants navigate and negotiate their feminist identities in the transnational contexts of the UK, as their host country, and China, as their place of origin. The constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) provided the tools necessary to identify these emerging themes and refine the research process. Through this approach, I was able to continuously adapt my focus to ensure that the data remained central to shaping my theoretical understanding and the study's objectives.

This chapter elucidates the rationale behind the methodological choices made in this study and provides a detailed explanation of the methods employed. In section 3.1, I explain the reasoning behind adopting grounded theory as my overarching

methodological approach, particularly its constructivist variant. Drawing from the constructivist grounded theory approach, I developed a research design that centred on in-depth semi-structured interviews, supplemented with participant observation, demonstrating that these methods align with my research objectives. In section 3.2, the discussion of the research design covers the sampling strategy—snowball sampling—and provides an overview of my sample. I then introduce my participants in detail. At this stage, in section 3.3, I explain how I implemented my data collection. In section 3.4, I detail the processes of coding and analysis. Finally, in section 3.5, I reflect on my positionality and power dynamics that may have influenced my interactions with participants and data interpretation and illustrate how I addressed these challenges. Every step of the way, I weave in my ethical and positionality considerations, as they are not a stand-alone component in my research but rather an integral part of my methodological approach, shaping both the research process and the knowledge produced.

3.1 Using grounded theory to study Chinese feminist identity construction

The choice of grounded theory (GT) was directly shaped by the research questions, which focus on how Chinese feminist students construct, negotiate, and make sense of "gender", "feminism", and "Chinese" across transnational contexts. Because these questions aim to uncover processes of meaning-making rather than evaluate predefined variables, an inductive methodology was required—one capable of generating concepts from participants' lived experiences. My participants' interpretations must be situated within the cultural context of China, given that culture plays a crucial role in shaping gender (Epstein, 2007; Risman, 2004, 2017) and, by extension, Chinese feminist identity. Against this backdrop, qualitative research provides the necessary tools to explore how individuals understand concepts in diverse cultural settings (Nyman et al., 2013). GT, in particular, supports the development of analytic categories that emerge through constant comparison across cases, contexts, and interpretations. This alignment between research questions and methodological approach forms the basis for my adoption of GT in this study.

Developed by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s in the USA, GT originally emerged from studies on dying in hospitals (Charmaz, 2014). Since then, it has evolved

significantly, giving rise to several distinct methodological schools grounded in differing ontological and epistemological assumptions. The major traditions include the Glaserian (or "classic") GT, Straussian GT, and Constructivist GT (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Birks & Mills, 2015). Classic GT (Glaser, 1978) emphasises the emergence of categories from data with minimal researcher influence and adopts an objectivist stance. Straussian GT (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) offers more structured and procedural coding techniques, which Glaser critiqued for the risk of imposing analytic frameworks onto data. Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), developed by Charmaz (2006, 2014), moves away from assumptions of analytic neutrality by positioning data and analysis as co-constructed through interaction and placing reflexivity at the centre of knowledge production.

Beyond these dominant approaches, GT has also expanded to include newer variants such as Critical Grounded Theory (Kempster & Parry, 2011; Oliver, 2012) and Transformational Grounded Theory (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015). These approaches extend GT into critical and emancipatory domains. Selecting a GT approach therefore requires alignment with a broader philosophical standpoint—whether positivist, interpretivist, constructivist, or critical—which influences the role of the researcher, the purpose of the literature review, the flexibility of research questions during analysis, and the type of theory generated (Sebastian, 2019).

Debates across these traditions—particularly concerning emergence versus interpretation, the role of coding structure, and the epistemological status of theory—are central to justifying my adoption of CGT. Given the culturally situated and interpretive nature of the concepts examined in this research, an approach that acknowledges researcher involvement rather than assuming analytic neutrality is essential (Clarke, 2005; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Despite their differences, all GT approaches share a common goal: to generate new knowledge by systematically collecting and analysing data related to real-world social processes (Hesse-Biber & Flowers, 2019).

This foundational exploratory aspect of GT proved particularly valuable in China's rapidly shifting socio-political context, marked by increasing state censorship (Feng, 2018; Xiong, 2018) and nationalist anti-feminism and misogyny (Liu, 2024), and further complicated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. These dynamics and unpredictable circumstances required me to remain flexible and responsive to emerging findings, leading to adjustments in my research goals as I sought to capture the lived experiences of Chinese feminists in this shifting socio-political landscape. For instance,

GT's flexibility prompted a shift in focus to the Chinese feminist scene in the UK, where I found a more conducive environment for data collection. This iterative process enabled me to navigate these challenges while maintaining alignment with the study's broader objectives.

Another central principle of GT—theoretical sampling—also shaped the research design. Theoretical sampling involves using initial analytical insights to guide the selection of additional data sources with the objective of refining and extending the developing theory by addressing gaps or emerging questions (Charmaz, 2014). In this study, theoretical sampling was informed by early findings about how participants understood "feminism" and "Chinese" differently based on their transnational experiences between China and the UK. These differing understandings led to the identification of distinct feminist identities, including individualised, collective, and cosmopolitan identities. Using a social constructionist perspective (Goffman, 1959), I explored the ways in which these identities were constructed within the context of Chinese feminism and the participants' transnational mobility. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, I sought participants with a range of experiences, including both feminists who were and were not involved in grassroots Chinese feminist activities in the UK. This broad approach ensured that the evolving analysis was grounded in a diverse set of relevant perspectives.

I used GT's memo-writing (Charmaz, 2014) as a tool for documenting reflexivity throughout the research process, recording my reflections on data interpretations, methodological decisions, and the influence of my positionality on my understanding of participants' narratives. For example, while analysing interviews, I reflected on how my assumptions about "feminism" and "Chinese" shaped initial coding decisions. This prompted me to re-examine participants' statements about these concepts, considering their unique cultural and transnational contexts. Memos also helped me trace the development of key analytical categories, such as "cosmopolitan feminist identity", and examine how the data and my perspectives influenced these categories. By systematically engaging in memo-writing, I built an analysis that was both critically self-aware and deeply connected to participants' lived experiences.

While CGT offers clear advantages for this project, it is not without limitations. Its emphasis on co-construction has been critiqued for potentially reducing analytic distance or heightening subjectivity (Kelle, 2005). These critiques underscore the need for transparency and methodological rigour—addressed here through systematic memo-

writing, constant comparison, and repeated returns to participants' narratives to ensure that categories remained grounded in empirical evidence. At the same time, CGT's flexibility, reflexive orientation, and sensitivity to context make it particularly well suited to studying transnational feminist identities situated within rapidly changing cultural and political environments.

Given the suitability of GT methodologies for my research, the next subsection elaborates on why and how I employed CGT.

3.1.1 Employing constructivist grounded theory: in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation

Before outlining the specific methods used, it is important to clarify why the constructivist variant of grounded theory was chosen over Glaserian or Straussian approaches. As discussed earlier, classical and Straussian GT assume a degree of objectivity and apply structured analytical procedures that are less compatible with research examining culturally situated concepts such as "feminism", "Chinese", and "gender" identity. CGT, by contrast, acknowledges the interpretive work of both researcher and participant and treats data as produced through social interaction. This stance aligns closely with my theoretical framework and with the relational processes through which my participants construct their feminist identities across transnational contexts. CGT therefore provides the most coherent philosophical and methodological foundation for the design of this study.

Given my study's engagement with socio-political changes in China, the evolving landscape of Chinese feminism, and my participants' transnational mobility, CGT provides a suitable framework for exploring how identities are shaped through interaction with shifting social, cultural, and political contexts. Its suitability to transformative identity processes aligns with my theoretical framework, which conceptualises gender as fluid (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991), transnational mobility as a transformative site of identity construction (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007), and identity as socially constructed (Goffman, 1959). CGT's adaptability enables a nuanced examination of my participants' evolving feminist identities. Through this approach, I can explore how Chinese feminist students understand and negotiate gender, feminism, and Chinese identity within the context of transnational mobility. Furthermore, CGT enables me to trace how meanings and actions emerge through the interaction between participants and myself as the researcher within the distinct cultural and socio-political context shaped by transnational mobility.

Building on CGT, I developed a research design combining in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The in-depth semi-structured interviews I conducted, detailed in Appendix 1, employed a biographical approach to exploring my participants' narratives. This format was chosen because I aimed to understand how my participants' feminist identities evolved over time and space, particularly in relation to their experiences of transnational mobility from China to the UK. Therefore, I invited participants to recount their journeys from China to the UK in a chronological order, allowing them to share their stories in a natural, storytelling manner. Moreover, the semi-structured format, aligned with CGT, offered flexibility, enabling me as the researcher to guide the conversation while also leaving room for participants to introduce unexpected insights (Charmaz, 2014).

These unexpected insights led me to observe that Chinese identity was often intricately woven into participants' descriptions of their feminist identities. As I explored deeper these narratives, I discovered that the intersection of these two identities led to the emergence of two distinct identity types: an individualised Chinese feminist identity and a more collective form of Chinese feminist identity. However, a smaller group of participants partly distanced themselves from their Chinese identities and instead identified as cosmopolitan feminists. This analysis helped me identify three key conceptual categories that formed the empirical foundation of this thesis: "I Chinese Feminist" identity, "We Chinese Feminists" identity, and "I Cosmopolitan Feminist" identity.

However, as the interviews progressed, it became evident that while these in-depth conversations provided rich, nuanced narratives, they were somewhat limited in capturing how identity construction unfolded through everyday interactions. This limitation became especially clear when reflecting on the moments between interviews, where I had the opportunity to observe my participants in less formal, more natural settings. Waiting times between interviews, joint activities like attending events and exhibitions, and casual conversations created invaluable opportunities for me to witness the lived experiences of my participants. These interactions, which unfolded outside the structured interview context, provided additional insights into the subtleties of identity formation in situ. It became apparent that identity construction was not merely a verbal process but one that also manifested through embodied actions and the broader context in which my participants moved.

In parallel, CGT emphasises the researcher's reflective and interpretive role in constructing meaning through communication and interaction with participants (Charmaz, 2014). Guided by this, participant observation proved to be an ideal method for my research, enabling me to capture actions and processes as they occurred organically. Charmaz (2006) frames participant observation as a method to examine not just actions, but also the conditions that shape those actions—whether they support or suppress specific intentions. This focus on the dynamic interaction between participants and their environments was crucial, offering insights that were not captured through interviews alone.

Immersing myself in the participants' environments allowed me to observe feminist identity construction in more dynamic, contextual settings. By participating in social activities, attending events, and observing interactions in real-time, I was able to capture how participants' feminist identities manifested in group settings and informal gatherings. This was particularly significant as it provided a contrast to the verbal accounts shared in interviews. I found that these moments of participant observation, when combined with the reflective stance promoted by CGT, were particularly key to defining one of my central empirical categories: the "We Chinese Feminists" identity. This category was not just based on what participants articulated, but also on the shared experiences I observed.

By pairing participant observation with semi-structured interviews, I enriched my understanding of feminist identity as a fluid, situated, and interactional process. The combination of both methods enabled me to capture a more holistic view of how identities are lived in practice and situated in personal, social, cultural and political contexts. This approach deepened the analysis by providing critical context to the interview data and allowing me to see how identities were enacted and negotiated in everyday interactions.

3.2 Sampling strategy and participants' characteristics

The sampling strategy for this research was guided by clear criteria to ensure relevance to the study's objectives. First, participants needed to be born and raised in mainland China and be the first generation within their families to move overseas.

Second, they were required to self-identify as feminists. Focusing on first-generation mobile individuals allowed for an exploration of how participants' feminist identities evolved in relation to their deep-rooted connections to China and the influences of their upbringing there.

To further refine my recruitment criteria, I prioritised participants who moved to the UK as students. This decision not only facilitated access to first-generation mobile individuals—a central criterion for this study—but also underscores the crucial role of student mobilisation in driving political and social change (Weiss et al., 2012). Students are often at the forefront of social change, yet feminist students, despite their critical role in fostering transformation and continuing feminist organising, have frequently been overlooked in academic literature (Li, 2018; Šadl & Ferko, 2017). My research, focusing on Chinese feminist students in the UK, aims to fill this gap by exploring how their unique positionality as transnational students shapes and informs their feminist identities.

The UK offers a particularly compelling context for studying Chinese transnational feminist students for three main reasons. First, my pilot study revealed a notable pattern of feminist transnational mobility, with 19 feminists choosing to move overseas—particularly to the UK—to continue their feminist activities within already-established Chinese feminist networks. While they formally framed their decision to leave China as an opportunity to pursue postgraduate studies overseas, their transnational mobility appeared to be significantly influenced by gender-related factors. This finding underscored the UK's potential as a rich research setting for exploring the dynamics and evolution of these Chinese feminist networks among Chinese feminist students. Second, evidence of transnational feminist organising can be seen within British universities, where feminist student societies operate through student unions (Šadl & Ferko, 2017). One prominent example is the VaChina feminist society, founded in 2017 within the SOAS University of London Students' Union, which became a focal point for Chinese feminist organising on UK campuses (Jin & Ni, 2021; Li, 2018; Zhang, 2019). Despite its significance, this organisation and its contributions to feminist movements remain underexplored in scholarly literature, making it a valuable focus for my research. Third, the sheer number of Chinese international students in the UK underscores the importance of this group. In the 2021/2022 academic year, the UK hosted 679,970 international students, with Chinese students forming the largest group at 151,690

(Universities UK, 2024). In the context of my research, the prominence of Chinese students becomes even more significant when considering how geographical distance from China often reduces familial pressures related to traditional gender expectations (Tu & Xie, 2020). This distance creates opportunities for students to critically reflect on their gender identities and develop feminist perspectives, as acknowledged by many of my participants.

Against this backdrop, all of my participants were either students at the time of our interviews or had been students in the UK. All self-identified as feminists from mainland China, advocates for gender equality, and active participants in feminist activities in the UK. They were enrolled across a broad range of academic fields, including social sciences, business, finance, linguistics, law, and art. Reporting these fields in broad disciplinary categories captures the different shades of feminist identity shaped by their intellectual environments. These academic backgrounds informed how participants engaged with feminist ideas: some encountered feminist theories through formal coursework—particularly those in the social sciences—while others developed their feminist perspectives primarily through mobilisation, digital communities, or lived experience. Their forms of engagement were equally diverse, spanning digital mobilisation on social media, participation in offline events such as street demonstrations, involvement in academic research, and engagement with feminist art.

My previous attempts to access Chinese feminists in mainland China highlighted the challenges posed by China's socio-political environment. As described in Chapter 1, this socio-political context and my positionality as a female European feminist researcher influenced and complicated my participant recruitment. Using a snowball sampling strategy in China, I encountered substantial barriers when reaching out to my contacts—Chinese feminist activists and scholars. These barriers in my interactions with participants included self-censorship (Horton, 2011) and a reluctance among my contacts to participate in my research. One prominent obstacle in my interactions was state censorship, rendering the collection and analysis of data sensitive and risky for me, the researcher, and my participants (Wang & Liu, 2021).

The ethical dilemmas posed by the sensitive nature of Chinese feminism continued to influence my approach. When I built my research design to study Chinese feminists in the UK, I faced significant ethical concerns tied to the sensitivity of the topic and its

political implications. One major concern was whether I would be able to recruit participants at all. The socio-political risks associated with Chinese feminism—both for the participants and for myself as a researcher—added a layer of uncertainty to the feasibility of my study. My previous challenges in reaching out to Chinese feminists in mainland China not only heightened these concerns but also informed my approach in the UK. For instance, I became increasingly aware of the importance of safeguarding participants from potential repercussions while fostering trust and creating a supportive research environment. I was mindful that participants' self-censorship, distrust, or reluctance to engage could stem not only from their lived experiences in China but also from uncertainties about how their narratives might be represented or interpreted in a transnational context. This required me to remain reflexive and adaptive, constantly reassessing the ethical implications of my methods to ensure participants' comfort and safety.

Despite my previous experience, I adapted a snowball sampling strategy and applied it in the UK, where neither my contacts nor I faced the constraints of censorship first-hand, allowing for greater opportunities to connect with Chinese feminists. Snowball sampling (Marshall, 1996) is particularly useful for recruiting "hidden" or "hard-to-reach" populations. Faugier and Sargeant (1997) and Sadler et al. (2010) emphasise the efficacy of utilising social networks and snowball sampling to facilitate recruitment in such contexts. In contrast to my previous attempts to contact Chinese feminists in China, the snowball sampling strategy in the UK proved more effective.

The snowball sampling process began by contacting Chinese feminists in mainland China whom I had previously attempted to interview. Specifically, I reached out to the ones who had expressed their intention to leave the country, often due to the restrictions imposed on feminist mobilisation. These contacts mentioned their plans to move to the UK, where they had pre-existing feminist networks. I asked for their help in introducing me to their UK-based feminist networks. These networks were primarily made of Chinese feminists who moved to the UK to pursue their undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. As these initial contacts connected me with their networks, I was introduced to other Chinese feminists, who not only became participants in my study but also facilitated further introductions, thereby expanding my reach within the UK-based Chinese feminist networks.

This approach had a significant implication for the study: it created a transnational focus by emphasising the experiences of Chinese feminists who were born and raised in China, as opposed to centring on individuals of Chinese roots who were born or grew up in the UK. By starting from my trusted contacts in mainland China, I ensured a foundation of trust and authenticity in my sampling and traced the continuity and transformation of feminist networks as they transcended national borders. This allowed me to capture how Chinese feminist identities adapt and evolve within transnational contexts, offering nuanced insights into the broader Chinese feminist community's transnational dynamics.

Furthermore, I mobilised personal contacts for recruitment. I reached out to Chinese PhD researchers in the UK with whom I had established personal relationships, seeking their help in recruiting potential interviewees for my research. Through these academic connections, I interviewed Chinese feminist PhD researchers in the UK, whose doctoral projects often focused on Chinese feminism. These participants not only provided valuable insights but also introduced me to other PhD researchers, who became additional interviewees. While my initial intention was to include participants from a broader range of academic levels—such as Chinese lecturers and early-career researchers—my attempts to engage these groups did not yield responses. As a result, my recruitment through academic contacts remained largely within the PhD environment. This focus, however, provided a unique perspective on how feminist identities and ideas are shaped within an academic cohort actively engaged in research, often at a formative stage in their intellectual and professional development.

To complement my recruitment channels, I also turned to social media platforms, such as WeChat and Instagram, to connect with Chinese feminist communities in the UK. I reached out to social media accounts of Chinese feminist organisations in the UK with which I was already familiar with. These platforms enabled me to expand my network further, recruiting interviewees from a broader circle of feminists and community members. Additionally, participants I recruited through these social media channels helped facilitate further introductions to other Chinese feminists. This strategy enabled me to explore the transnational dynamics of Chinese feminism in the UK from a more diverse range of lived experiences, ensuring a richer, more comprehensive understanding of Chinese feminist identity construction.

By drawing on these three recruitment channels—contacts from mainland China, those within UK academia and those made through social media—I successfully expanded my feminist network and recruited 30 participants for this research. The adoption of snowball sampling, which facilitated the development of trust between myself as the researcher and my participant pool, was crucial. Without this method of network-building, reaching and interviewing Chinese feminists in the UK would have been significantly more challenging.

I obtained a sample of 30 Chinese feminists aged 21 to 31, 24 identifying as female, 4 as male, and 2 as non-binary. Although I made efforts to achieve gender balance in my research, it proved difficult to find Chinese feminist students identifying as men or non-binary. As a result, the majority of my sample consists of women. While the unifying characteristic of the sample was participants' self-identification as feminists and their status as first-generation mobile individuals, the sampling approach introduced qualitative diversity into the participant pool. Although no single stance or perspective can be considered fully representative of the group, common themes and shared insights emerged from their varied lived experiences. All interviewees had moved from mainland China to different parts of the UK—England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland—for educational purposes. Specifically, 5 were undergraduate students, 11 were pursuing taught master's degrees, 11 were PhD candidates, and 3 were prospective PhD applicants. By prospective PhD applicants, I refer to individuals who were either in the process of writing doctoral project proposals or planning to apply for PhD programmes or had submitted a proposal and were waiting for a response from the universities while working or taking a gap year in the UK. For detailed individual profiles, see Table 1 below.

Transnational mobility from China for higher education is a costly endeavour, with individuals who are able to move often selected based on their social and economic positioning (Guo, 2010). In focusing on Chinese feminist students in the UK, this research intentionally targets a group that typically comes from socio-economically privileged urban backgrounds (Martin, 2022; Tu, 2018). While not all Chinese international students in the UK have such advantages (Kajanus, 2015), data from this sample suggest that most interviewees grew up in urban environments with access to substantial economic and educational resources. Many participants reported that their parents held positions such as government officials, university lecturers, medical

professionals, or business owners. This indicates that these families possess the social, cultural, and financial capital necessary to support their children's transnational mobility (Kajanus, 2015; Zhang & Xu, 2020).

Table 1

List of Participants

Part. no.	Pseudonym	Age at the time of the interview	Gender	Area of origin	Occupation	Area of residence	Year of arriving in the UK	Relationship/marital status	Field of study
1	Eleanor	29	Female	Sichuan	PhD student	Midlands England	2018	In a relationship	History
2	Rose	28	Female	Shaanxi	PhD student	North-West England	2017	Single	Politics
3	Mary	28	Female	Shaanxi	PhD student	North-West England	2017	Single	Education
4	Jane	29	Female	Beijing	Data-analyst	Greater London England	2017	In a relationship	Politics
5	Isabel	21	Female	Jilin	BA student	Wales	2019	Single	Finance
6	Charlotte	23	Female	Beijing	Volunteering in charities	Greater London	2017	Single	Social sciences

						England			
7	Julie	23	Female	Shandong	MA student	South-West England	2021	In a relationship	Social sciences
8	Jennifer	22	Female	Jiangsu	MA student	South-West England	2021	Single	Social sciences
9	Nicky	26	Female	Zhejiang	PhD student	South England	2011	Single	Social sciences
10	Steve	23	Male	Shanghai	MA student	South-West England	2021	Single	Social sciences
11	Allison	30	Female	Hubei	MA student	North-East England	2020	Single	Social sciences
12	Nina	29	Female	Sichuan	PhD student	South England	2018	In a relationship	Social sciences
13	Jasmine	26	Female	Hubei	PhD student	North-West England	2018	Single	Social sciences
14	Angela	24	Female	Hunan	MA student	Greater	2019	Single	Social

						London England			sciences
15	Alex	22	Non-Binary	Sichuan	BA student	Greater London England	2019	Single	Fine arts
16	Sam	21	Non-Binary	Beijing	BA student	Greater London England	2019	Single	Fine arts
17	Claire	27	Female	Shandong	PhD student	Midlands England	2021	Single	Philosophy
18	Olivia	26	Female	Sichuan	MA student	North-West England	2021	Single	Finance
19	Kate	25	Female	Shandong	MA student	Midlands England	2021	Single	Engineering
20	Elisabeth	23	Female	Liaoning	MA student	North-West England	2021	Single	Business
21	Jason	21	Male	Shaanxi	BA student	Greater London England	2020	Single	Social sciences

22	Pippa	22	Female	Henan	BA student	North-West England	2020	In a relationship	Management
23	Lydia	22	Female	Shandong	MA student	North-West England	2021	Single	Management
24	Carol	28	Female	Sichuan	PhD student	Scotland	2017	In a relationship	Education
25	Leo	30	Male	Jiangsu	PhD student	North-West England	2016	In a relationship	Linguistics
26	Susanne	31	Female	Beijing	PhD student	South-East England	2012	Married	Social sciences
27	Virginia	25	Female	Shandong	PhD student	Northern Ireland	2020	Single	Education
28	Chris	26	Male	Jiangsu	Unemployed	Greater London England	2016	Single	Social sciences
29	Rachel	23	Female	Henan	MA student	Greater London	2021	In a relationship	Design

						England			
30	Ella	24	Female	Henan	MA student	Greater London England	2018	In a relationship	Law

Although my participants are students or prospective PhD applicants, this does not imply that the broader Chinese feminist community in the UK consists exclusively of international students. By focusing on a small sample of Chinese feminists in the UK who are students, this study intentionally limits its examination of feminist identity construction to participants within this specific group. This research leverages the distinctive position of students, who are frequently promoters of social movements, and active participants in shaping societal change. Feminist students, in particular, are vital agents of social change, driving the evolution of feminist movements and ensuring the ongoing vitality of feminist organising (Li, 2018; Šadl & Ferko, 2017).

This study should be regarded as one facet of the broader spectrum of transnational Chinese feminism. Focusing on Chinese feminist students in the UK does not preclude their active engagement in broader feminist networks and activities, such as participation in feminist NGOs, grassroots feminist initiatives, and digital feminist mobilisation. My participants' involvement in multiple and diverse feminist activities underscores the interconnectedness of various modes of feminist mobilisation within transnational contexts, rather than positioning them as separate or isolated niches. This research thus captures one of several emerging realities in transnational social spaces, distinguished not only by its participants' context of transnational mobility but also by their multifaceted engagement with wider feminist movements.

3.3 Data collection

Data collection for this study took place between 2022 and 2024 and involved multiple methods to ensure a comprehensive approach. A total of 68 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted between June 2022 and September 2024. Of these, 52 interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams, while 16 were conducted in person. The interviews typically lasted between one and two hours. Conducting most of the interviews online aligned with participants' preferences, as it addressed logistical challenges, such as the geographical dispersion of participants across various cities in the UK, and time constraints related to their busy schedules. Additionally, I conducted two participant observations at official Chinese feminist events in June 2022 to complement the insights gathered through interviews. Beyond these observations, I also participated in approximately 10 informal offline feminist discussions with Chinese

feminists between 2022 and 2024, which provided valuable contextual insights and enriched my understanding of their perspectives.

To gain a good understanding of my target participants and my research field and context, my data collection began with participant observations. My first participant observation took place in June 2022 when I visited the "Voiceless Rise Up: the #MeToo in China" exhibition, held in Muirhead Tower, on Birmingham University campus (documented in Figure 1). The second was an interactive workshop titled "Sexual Assault, an act from "Our Vaginas, Ourselves: Screening & Workshop", which was organised by the UK-based Chinese #MeToo movement and conducted online in the same month (documented in Figure 2). I reached out to the UK-based Chinese #MeToo movement via their official Instagram account (metooinchina_exhibition_uk), which I was already familiar with. This account is managed by a collective of Chinese feminists in the UK. When I requested a guided tour of the exhibition, I was connected with one of the exhibition's organisers in Birmingham and provided with their mobile number to finalise the details of my visit. On my arrival in Birmingham, I spent the day with this organiser, who also invited me to join the interactive workshop scheduled for the following day.

Figure 1

"Voiceless Rise Up: the #MeToo in China" exhibition (Birmingham Poster)

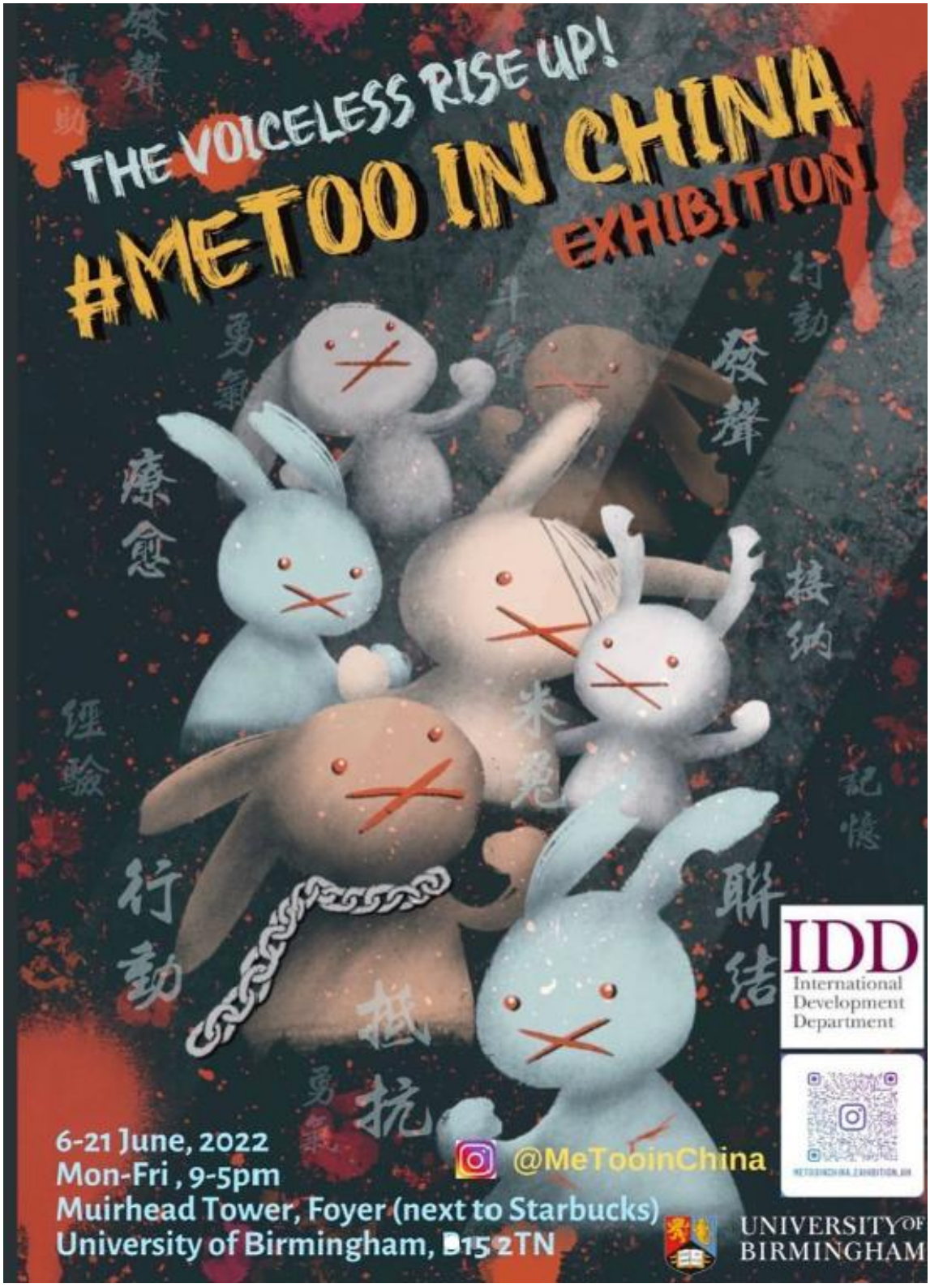


Figure 2

"Sexual Assault, an Act from "Our Vaginas, Ourselves: Screening & Workshop" (Poster)

Although my initial aim in attending both events was to understand the dynamics of communication between Chinese feminists in China and the UK, the notes I took during these observations became instrumental in re-shaping the entire study. Participating and observing in these events provided valuable insights into the organisation of the Chinese #MeToo movement in the UK and the community of Chinese feminists involved (Iacono et al., 2009). For instance, my observation at the exhibition in Birmingham highlighted a strong emphasis on participants' lived experiences as a minority group in the UK, including encounters with racism. This prompted me to shift my focus to Chinese feminists in transnational social spaces in the UK. Beginning my fieldwork with participant observation also facilitated deeper engagement and connection with the UK-based Chinese feminist community.

As mentioned in the previous section, I employed snowball sampling to expand my pool of participants, using three channels. When I reached out to potential participants, I typically exchanged emails or messages on social media to introduce myself and learn more about them, ensuring alignment with my recruitment criteria. Once this was established, I provided the Interview Protocol outlining indicative questions (see Appendix 1), the Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 2), and the Consent Form (see Appendix 3). This step aimed to ensure participants were fully informed about the general scope of the interview and my study, enabling them to make an informed decision about participating in the research. However, not all the Chinese feminists contacted via snowball sampling ultimately agreed to participate in interviews. Some preferred to remain as contacts with whom I exchanged ideas on Chinese feminism but did not feel fully comfortable being interviewed. As discussed in Chapter 1, feminism in China is often considered a sensitive topic (Xiong, 2018), which may have influenced their decision not to be formally interviewed.

Although participants in this study live in the UK, certain themes related to their identifications in transnational social spaces added sensitivity to the interview context. Reflexivity was essential at this stage of the research process, as balancing the ethical imperative to protect participants while maintaining the integrity of the research presented significant challenges. For instance, I had to carefully consider how my questions might be perceived by participants, particularly given the political sensitivities surrounding Chinese feminism. This required crafting questions that avoided leading participants into politically charged discussions while still allowing them to share their

experiences on their own terms. My reflexive stance also helped mitigate potential discomfort participants might feel about discussing topics that were tied to their lived experiences in both China and the UK.

Building on my ethical considerations and in line with the principles of CGT (Charmaz, 2014), my interviews were designed with broad, open-ended, and non-judgmental questions. Examples of such types of questions are: If and how has the way you identify yourself evolved (as a feminist from China living in the UK)? How did you come to this understanding? (see Appendix 1 for further details). This approach allowed flexibility in discussing Chinese feminism, accommodating the sensitive nature of the topic and the comfort levels of the participants.

More specifically, the interview questions were intentionally designed to explore how participants understood their identities as both Chinese and feminist in the context of their experiences of transnational mobility, particularly in relation to China, their place of origin, and the UK, their host country. This transnational focus on participants' identities allowed me to gain insights into the socio-cultural and political processes that influenced their self-identification as feminists. Examples of these questions are: How do you understand being a feminist from China in the UK? and in China? How do you understand your "being Chinese" in the UK? (see Appendix 1 for further details). During the interviews, it emerged that two participants had broader histories of transnational mobility, having lived in other countries before moving to the UK. This insight highlighted the need to consider the role of multiple experiences of transnational mobility in shaping participants' identities. As a result, my questions in these cases extended beyond lived experiences in China and the UK to encompass their broader transnational trajectories.

Before starting the interviews, I offered participants the freedom to pause the session at any time. Despite my attention to the sensitivity of the interview topics and the preparatory measures I implemented, including the Interview Protocol (see Appendix 1), there were instances when interviews were paused for various reasons. In such cases, I promptly paused the session and only resumed after receiving explicit consent. I also strictly honoured the requests of interviewees who shared information confidentially and asked for it to be excluded from my research. Furthermore, I re-contacted some interviewees to seek clarification on their responses, either through text messages on

social media, video calls, or in-person meetings. This follow-up process was essential to ensure accuracy, fill in gaps in my understandings, and resolve any ambiguities in their answers.

All interviews were conducted by me in English, given the participants' generally high levels of English proficiency, and the interview setting in the UK. As I am also a fluent Chinese speaker, some interview sections were conducted in Chinese, depending on the participants' preferences. This linguistic flexibility aligns with Rolland's (2023) methodological considerations regarding interviews conducted in two languages shared by the researcher and participants—in this study, Chinese and English. Although my research design was organised in English, I gave my participants the option to switch to Chinese when they deemed it appropriate during the interviews. Using one's first language can impact self-expression and, consequently, data generation and analysis (Rolland, 2023). My participants, however, expressed a preference for articulating their feminist identities primarily in English. One possible reason for this choice may be the public discomfort surrounding the term "feminism" (*nüquan zhuyi*) in China (Xiong, 2018). This discomfort may encourage participants to use English when discussing their feminist identities. Additionally, several participants noted that discussions of gender were also often met with discomfort in China and that their feminist knowledge and vocabulary largely developed after arriving in the UK, primarily through the use of English. Ivaz et al.'s (2019) research shows that using a foreign language rather than one's native tongue can create emotional distance, facilitating the discussion of sensitive topics. This insight might also explain participants' preference for English when addressing potentially challenging or deeply personal themes.

All interviews were audio recorded. The audio files were securely stored on the university server, OneDrive, and my laptop, all encrypted with password protection and accessible only for research purposes. After transferring the files, the original recordings were deleted from the recording device. Signed consent forms were stored on OneDrive and my laptop in password-protected folders. I served as the primary custodian of the data, with access restricted to my supervisors. The interviews were transcribed with careful attention to confidentiality, ensuring that no personal information identifying participants was included in the transcripts. Sections conducted in Chinese were translated by me. All participants' identities have been anonymised, and English pseudonyms were assigned to protect their privacy. Most participants introduced

themselves using English names or expressed a preference for anonymity by not wanting to be identified by their Chinese names. Both transcripts and analyses of the interview contents were stored in an encrypted folder on my laptop. The original audio files were deleted from the server.

As part of the formal ethics process, this study received ethical approval from the Lancaster University Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee (FASS-LUMS REC). This approval was not merely a procedural requirement but rather an integral part of the research design process. The sensitivity of the topic and the ethical dilemmas it posed required extensive deliberation during the ethics application stage. This included reflexive consideration of how my own positionality and potential power dynamics could shape the research process and outcomes. I included detailed strategies for managing confidentiality, minimising risks to participants, and addressing the political sensitivities of the research topic. This proactive approach ensured that the study upheld the highest ethical standards while enabling participants to engage with the research in a safe and respectful environment.

3.4 Data analysis

At this stage of my research, I had a set of data consisting of interview transcripts, observation notes, and reflective notes gathered through participant observation and interviews. My data analysis started following the first participant observation and interview. This early engagement with the data allowed for iterative refinement of subsequent interviews and enabled the testing of emerging themes and categories. The ongoing nature of the analysis enhanced the focus of subsequent data collection and helped mitigate data redundancy to some extent (Neuman, 2014).

To identify key themes, I adopted GT principles, beginning with a thematic analysis approach (Charmaz, 2014). Thematic analysis served as a foundational step in systematically organising and understanding the data. I carefully read through my dataset, identifying and recording emerging themes that captured recurring ideas, patterns, and perspectives shared by participants. At this stage, the individualised, collective, and cosmopolitan dimensions of participants' feminist identities emerged as central themes, reflecting strong emphasis by participants. This process laid the groundwork for more specific coding, enabling me to analyse the data in a structured and conceptually meaningful way.

Coding was a central component of my analysis, allowing me to uncover and emphasise implicit views, actions, or processes by systematically separating, organising, and summarising data segments through labels (Charmaz, 2014). CGT does not adhere to a fixed coding pattern, and for this study, I employed a combination of initial and focused coding, complemented by a non-linear coding approach (Charmaz, 2014). Ultimately, I coded 68 interviews using a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014), ensuring that themes and categories evolved iteratively and remained grounded in the data.

Initial coding involved a close and attentive reading of the data while maintaining openness to all theoretical orientations emerging from the data itself (Charmaz, 2014). Thematic analysis played a pivotal role during this phase by guiding the identification of recurring themes and patterns within the interview transcripts and field notes. These themes were not merely descriptive but served as interpretative anchors for understanding participants' narratives. The iterative and systematic application of thematic analysis allowed me to identify three major categories of self-identifications among Chinese feminist students in the UK: "I Chinese Feminist" identity, "We Chinese Feminists" identity, and "I Cosmopolitan Feminist" identity. These three categories emerged from participants' reflections on their identities as feminists, shaped by their transnational lived experiences in the UK and their self-perceptions in the context of China. Specifically, "I Chinese Feminist" identity captured individualised feminist identities, "We Chinese Feminists" identity represented collective identities, and "I Cosmopolitan Feminist" identity reflected a transnational cosmopolitan feminist perspective.

The thematic analysis applied during initial coding not only facilitated the identification of these categories but also highlighted their fluidity. Participants often moved between these identifications depending on their specific experiences and contexts, underscoring the dynamic nature of feminist identity construction. These overarching codes provided a structured yet flexible framework for continuous data collection and guided the research questions toward a theoretical direction aligned with participants' narratives. Each of these three codes formed the basis of an empirical chapter in this study.

Through this analysis, it became evident that the exploration of how Chinese feminists construct and navigate their feminist identities in transnational social spaces in the UK was a critical research focus. The three types of self-identifications as feminists

primarily reflect the intersection of Chinese identity, gender identity and individualised, collective and cosmopolitan dimensions of identity. The decision to centre exclusively on these three intersectional axes was informed by the participants' emphasis on them. While the focus on gender identity is to be expected, given its significance in shaping feminist identities, the emphasis on Chinese identity may have been influenced by temporal and contextual factors. The data, collected between June 2022 and September 2024, coincided with a period marked by heightened racist violence against Chinese communities in the UK following the COVID-19 pandemic (Jin & Ni, 2021). This context, frequently highlighted by participants, likely shaped their perceptions of their Chinese identities and, consequently, their feminist self-identifications in these transnational social spaces.

By focusing on Chinese identity, gender identity, and individualised, collective and cosmopolitan dimensions of identity, I have intentionally narrowed the exploration of feminist identity construction on these three intersectional axes. This decision was made to maintain a clear and focused analysis, allowing for a deeper understanding of how specifically Chinese and gender identities interact in their individualised, collective and cosmopolitan identity dimensions and shape participants' feminist self-identifications. This focus enables us to understand the interplay of socio-cultural, political and gendered experiences, illuminating the perspectives of Chinese feminists in transnational contexts.

While centring the analysis on these three intersectional axes, I remain mindful that other factors, such as class, sexuality, ethnicity, and the urban-rural divide, also contribute to shaping feminist identities. Participants reflected on these dimensions to varying degrees, and I address their roles in identity construction as they arise in the specific cases discussed in my results chapters. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that identity formation is inherently multifaceted. The exclusion of these dimensions does not diminish their relevance; rather, it reflects the complexity of identity formation and the choices made during the research design phase. Each of these aspects could provide valuable insights into the broader spectrum of feminist identity construction. For example, class may influence access to resources and opportunities for mobilisation, shaping the ways individuals engage with feminism (Swank & Fahs, 2017). The urban-rural divide in China often results in differing feminist agendas and experiences based on geographical context (Machum, 2015). Most participants in this

study come from socio-economically privileged urban backgrounds, thus I intentionally excluded class and the urban-rural divide as primary intersectional axes to maintain clarity in the analysis.

Furthermore, while sexuality can profoundly shape personal experiences of marginalisation and feminist identity construction (Cornwall, 2006; Fetner, 2022), it did not emerge as a predominant element in Chinese feminist students' articulations of their feminist identities. Although some participants mentioned sexuality, it was not treated as a core intersectional axis, as it did not significantly influence their feminist identities in the context of this study. However, it is noteworthy that most of the participants identifying as men in my sample belong to sexual minority groups. This may suggest that heterosexual Chinese men are less likely to identify with feminism. Additionally, ethnicity plays a crucial role in feminist identity formation, as it can shape individuals' experiences of oppression and influence their engagement with feminism (Medjuck, 1990). My participants articulated multiple and diverse understandings of their Chinese identities. Consequently, I am careful not to generalise "Chinese" as a singular ethnic identity and used the term "Chinese identity" to encompass the broad spectrum of identities associated with "Chinese", including national, political, cultural, and ethnic identities, and discuss the specific implications of each.

Building on the theoretical orientation established by the three codes identified in my interviews, I advanced my analysis by transitioning to focused coding. Focused coding enabled me to refine initial codes, distilling them into conceptually significant themes (Charmaz, 2014). This stage of analysis was structured around three key questions: What are the participants' feminist identities? How are these identities constructed? How do they manifest in participants' feminist participation? These guiding questions provided a focused and clear analytical framework and a logical progression for understanding the nuanced dynamics of identity construction and expression among Chinese feminists in transnational spaces.

Specifically, I clarified and strengthened my understanding of the three overarching codes: "I Chinese Feminist" identity, "We Chinese Feminists" identity, and "I Cosmopolitan Feminist" identity. Each code was examined to capture the layers of meaning participants attributed to their feminist identifications. For example, I analysed how individualised, collective, and cosmopolitan dimensions were shaped by participants' transnational lived experiences and socio-cultural and political contexts,

and how these dimensions manifested in their feminist self-identifications. By aligning my analysis with these key questions, I ensured that the central themes for each overarching code captured the nuances of participants' narratives, while also addressing broader theoretical and contextual considerations. This structured and iterative approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the interplay between feminist identity construction and participation in shaping Chinese feminists' self-perceptions in transnational social spaces.

From this point onward, each empirical category—"I Chinese Feminist" identity, "We Chinese Feminists" identity, and "I Cosmopolitan Feminist" identity—followed a thematic analysis based on a non-linear coding pattern (Charmaz, 2014). This approach enabled me to move fluidly between data collection, coding, and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). For instance, as I revisited earlier interviews and observation notes, I was able to identify emerging themes that had initially gone unnoticed, such as the role of specific social interactions in shaping participants' feminist identities. This iterative process allowed me to refine my coding and continuously adapt my analysis to reflect the evolving narratives shared by participants.

The coding processes at all stages were supplemented with a constant comparative method, which involved systematically comparing data segments within and across categories, as well as between individual participants within each category (Charmaz, 2014). For example, I compared how different participants expressed their collective feminist identities in contrast to their individualised feminist identities and examined whether and how their understanding of their Chinese identity evolved in different social contexts. This method was instrumental in identifying both recurring themes and unique variations in participants' transnational experiences. By continually examining similarities and differences, I was able to validate emerging themes and address potential gaps in my data. This process also informed decisions to recruit new participants or conduct follow-up interviews, ensuring a robust and comprehensive analysis that remained grounded in participants' evolving narratives and contexts.

3.5 Reflections on my positionality and power relations

When I shifted the focus of my research to Chinese feminists in the UK, I did so in response to the challenges I encountered in accessing the field of Chinese feminism as a

non-Chinese researcher. My interactions with Chinese feminists in mainland China during the second year of my doctoral studies prompted me to reflect on my positionality and its implications for my research. In this context, Nencel's (2014) theory of situated reflexivity helped me understand my experience. Situated reflexivity (Nencel, 2014) suggests that reflexivity in feminist ethnography depends on the research aims, the type of knowledge produced, and the position of research subjects in the study and society. These factors influence how a researcher's reflexivity and positionality are represented. My positionality as a western researcher was essential to understanding the challenges of accessing Chinese feminism. Seen as an outsider, I became part of the self-censoring dynamics, influencing the research process.

Yet, in interacting with Chinese feminist students living in the UK, other reflections arose. Unlike my previous experience, my participants and I share not only the identification as feminists but also the experience of living in the UK. Against this backdrop, my positionality is crucial not only in relation to my participants but also to the researched place (Yu, 2020). Drawing on Yu's (2020) theoretical considerations on reflexivity, the dialectical relationship between the researcher and the researched place constantly changes and is pivotal in defining the researcher's positionality towards the research subjects. The researched place inevitably becomes part of the researcher, and in turn, the researcher becomes part of the researched place and people (Yu, 2020). Yu (2020) argues that the key to productivity is for the researcher to navigate the space of "in-betweenness"—a constant negotiation between becoming in place and being in place. Yu's (2020) considerations helped me acknowledge my positionality as a transnational Italian feminist researcher living in England, and evaluate how it influenced my knowledge production. They also helped me understand more about my identity and mobility.

Like my interviewees, I negotiate transnational and local practices in my everyday life in England. My identity as a student in the UK often helped strengthen the relationship between me and my interviewees. Additionally, my background in sinology provided a deep understanding of Chinese culture, enabling me to connect with participants and establish rapport through shared language and common interests. In some cases, I did not merely meet my research participants but also formed new friendships. The interviews sometimes took the shape of conversations involving mutual exchange and sharing of experiences about our lives and our feminist activities in the

UK. As Yu (2020) argues, the space of "in-betweenness" facilitates emotional and psychological comprehension of and bonds with the research place and people. Conducting the research in the UK as a transnational researcher and presenting myself as a passionate and friendly feminist who had previously lived in China and could speak Chinese in some cases benefited my study. It allowed me to gain trust and strengthen my relationships with my interviewees, leading to easier access to them when needed and inclusion in online feminist discussions. I could represent someone who understood both their origins and their current experiences in the UK.

Nevertheless, this mutual understanding of our transnational lived experiences in the UK as feminist students from other countries made me reflect on how my emotions could potentially influence data collection and interpretation. For instance, during one interview, I found myself empathising strongly with a participant who described feeling isolated as a Chinese feminist in the UK. My emotional response to her narrative raised concerns about whether my empathy could affect how I interpreted her words. To mitigate this risk, I implemented two strategies to ensure the integrity of the research process. I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study, documenting my emotional reactions and preconceived ideas after each interview. This allowed me to critically evaluate how my personal experiences and emotions might shape my interpretations. For example, after one interview where a participant shared her experiences with racism, I wrote in my journal about how her story resonated with my own experiences as a non-British individual in the UK, and I reflected on how this could influence my interpretation of her experiences. I also regularly engaged in supervision sessions, discussing my findings with my supervisors to ensure that my positionality or assumptions did not influence my interpretations. For example, after discussing some preliminary themes with my supervisors, I recognised that my initial analysis might have overemphasised the role of collective identity, potentially reflecting my own interest in group dynamics rather than the participants' experiences. This helped me adjust my analysis to better reflect the participants' narratives. By taking these steps, I aimed to remain conscious of how my positionality might affect the study while maintaining objectivity in the research process.

In feminist research, it has been demonstrated that factors beyond gender, such as class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and global location, significantly impact power dynamics that are not always evident during the interview process (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008). In

social research, power is not a single, fixed construct with the researcher exclusively exerting power over participants (Reynolds, 2002). Instead, power is complex, relational, interactional, and transformative, continuously negotiated between the researcher and participants across different contexts (Reynolds, 2002). Recognising this fluidity, I approached my research with an awareness of these multifaceted power dynamics, acknowledging that my identity as a white feminist researcher carried implications that could influence both my interactions with participants and the knowledge produced.

I was conscious that my race and western background might evoke particular responses or affect the openness of my participants, particularly in a study focused on Chinese feminist identities. Power in this context was not simply a matter of researcher authority. It was subject to constant negotiation, where my position as a white outsider at times positioned me as vulnerable to the participants' perceptions of race and identity. By "vulnerable", I refer to how my identity as a white, western researcher could create a power imbalance where participants may have felt the need to adjust their responses based on their own perceptions of race, colonial histories, or cultural expectations. This vulnerability was also linked to how participants could potentially challenge my assumptions, as my identity might influence how they framed their experiences of feminism and identity in relation to mine. This dynamic created a reciprocal, though unequal, flow of power. Participants could also shape the research narrative by sharing experiences and perspectives that challenged my initial assumptions.

To mitigate these complexities, I consistently reflected on my positionality throughout the research process and noted my observations in a reflexive journal. By documenting my emotional reactions and how participants engaged with my identity, I was able to monitor how power relations influenced the data. This process allowed me to reflect on how my position might shape the interpretation of participants' narratives and ensure that their perspectives were foregrounded in the analysis. This reflective practice not only helped me remain attentive to power imbalances but also made the research process more inclusive and ethically grounded, as it provided a space for me to critically examine how power was distributed and renegotiated in the study.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the rationale behind the methodological choices made in this study, providing a comprehensive account of the methods employed. I began by discussing the adoption of CGT (Charmaz, 2014) as the overarching approach, which provided a flexible framework for exploring the research questions. This approach informed the development of a research design centred on in-depth semi-structured interviews, supplemented by participant observation. These methods were carefully selected to align with the study's objectives, contributing to the understanding of feminist identity construction among Chinese feminists in the UK.

The chapter also covered the sampling strategy, focusing on snowball sampling as an effective method for accessing "hidden" or "hard-to-reach" populations (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997; Sadler et al., 2010), and provided an overview of the sample, including key demographic characteristics of the participants. I explained how the research methods were implemented in the data collection phase, followed by a detailed description of the processes of coding and analysis, which were rooted in the principles of CGT.

Finally, I reflected on the role of my positionality and the power dynamics present in the research context. As a western, white researcher studying Chinese feminists, I was attentive to how these dynamics could influence my interactions with participants and the data generated. I also discussed potential biases and the steps I took to mitigate their impact, ensuring that participants' views were foregrounded in the research process. Ultimately, this chapter has laid the foundation for understanding how the methodological choices made throughout the study align with its goals and contribute to understanding feminist identity construction in transnational contexts.

This methodological foundation sets the stage for the first empirical chapter, Chapter 4, which explores the "I Chinese Feminist" identity. It illuminates the processes of individualised Chinese feminist identity, applying the methods and theoretical framework previously outlined.

Chapter 4

"I Chinese Feminist"

Relational processes shaping individualised Chinese feminist identities

Building on the concept of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, this chapter explores individualised feminist identity construction. My empirical findings reveal that Chinese feminist students navigate three interrelated pathways of identity construction at the intersection of gender and Chinese identities—individualised, collective, and cosmopolitan—each representing a distinct yet interconnected scale at which identity tensions unfold. This first empirical chapter focuses on the individualised pathway, analysing how my participants negotiate their feminist identities through relationships and social interactions that span China and the UK. I argue that individualised feminist identities emerge through a tension-driven process, situated in the liminal space between personal autonomy and the ongoing influence of relational networks.

Individualisation, understood as a set of diverse social processes in which individuals detach from collectivities and create spaces for themselves (Jamieson & Simpson, 2013), stems from participants' understandings of their intersecting Chinese and feminist identities. Such individualised understandings are closely embedded in their social interactions and relationships at different temporal stages—before and after moving to the UK—and in different places—particularly, in China and the UK. Within the logic of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, these transnational social interactions and relationships function as key sites where tension becomes productive, revealing how negotiations between social expectations and feminist ideas shape identity formation across borders. I will unpack participants' transnational social interactions and relationships to show their role in creating tensions that shape individualised identities.

This chapter aims to contribute to theoretical debates on individualisation by extending the focus beyond western contexts and centring it on interpersonal social relations (Bauman, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Jamieson & Simpson, 2013). I demonstrate that transnational social interactions and relationships are central to individuals' claims to individuality.

To understand the construction of individualised Chinese feminist identities, this chapter builds on theories of individualisation (Jamieson & Simpson, 2013; Yan, 2013, 2017, 2021) and intersectionality (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005). I use individualisation theories to explore how participants' social interactions and relationships shape their claims to individuality. Yan's (2013) findings on inter-family relations as key sites of individualisation in urban China are particularly relevant: they illuminate how family relationships influence identity construction even as my participants navigate transnational contexts. Tu and Xie (2020) help contextualise this process, illustrating how familial expectations and gendered norms persist across geographical distance, while Nehring and Hu's (2021) idea of fragile transnationalism highlights how such relational negotiations unfold within unstable transnational structures. Furthermore, I employ intersectionality theory to highlight the intersection of Chinese and gender identities is central in shaping individualised feminist identities. To understand participants' gender identities, I draw on Risman's (2004, 2017) framing of gender as a relational process, helping explain how interpersonal social interactions contribute to the development of individualised Chinese feminist identities.

This chapter addresses two research questions: How do the tensions embedded in relationships and social interactions in transnational social spaces contribute to crafting Chinese feminist students' individualisation? How does this tension-driven process of individualisation influence the construction of Chinese feminist identities?

Section 4.1 discusses how the individualisation of my participants' Chinese feminist identities manifests in the UK., through empirical data showing that social interactions and relationships influence participants' individualisation. In section 4.2, I analyse how participants' relationships and social interactions with individuals located in China contributed to their Chinese feminist identity individualisation, before and after moving to the UK. Section 4.3 examines participants' relationships and social interactions in the UK after leaving China: the participants in this group lacked social connections with British society before moving. In the end, the chapter summarises the findings and emphasises the theoretical and empirical contributions to existing literature.

4.1 "I Chinese Feminist": individualisation as relational and tension-driven processes

In exploring the views and experiences of Chinese feminist students in the UK, several participants discussed their feminist identities by intersecting their gender and Chinese identities with a marked emphasis on an individualised perspective. Carol, a 28-year-old PhD researcher living in Scotland exemplifies the meaning of "I Chinese Feminist" identity. She moved to the UK in 2017 for a pre-master's course in social sciences, where seminar discussions on gender sparked her feminist self-identification, noting that in China "there wasn't space for this discovery". Since then, she has been active in online feminist debates on Chinese social media. When I asked Carol what it meant for her to be a feminist from China, she noted that "being a woman and being a feminist it's all I feel. I am Chinese but in my own ways".

Carol's self-identification as a woman, a feminist, and a Chinese "in my own ways" suggests that she views her feminist, gender and Chinese identities closely intertwined with one another in an individualised way. Her emphasis on feeling like a feminist and a woman above all else indicates that gender plays a central role in her self-identification. Meanwhile, her assertion of being Chinese "in my own ways" suggests a sense of choice in defining her Chinese identity, which may diverge from conventional or collective understandings of it, revealing the tension between autonomy and relational influence that characterises transnational Chinese feminist liminality.

Carol's statements above were echoed time and again in my interviews in response to the same question I asked her. This echo highlighted the relevance of a Chinese-cum-gender intersectional approach to understanding how participants constructed, experienced and navigated their feminist identities (Anthias, 2008; Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005). Notably, a single, unified understanding of "Chinese" and "feminism" cannot be delineated: my interviewees displayed individualised and context-dependent views on both, shaped by their transnational mobility and the fragile conditions in which identity is negotiated (Nehring & Hu, 2021). As the chapter unfolds, multiple and diverse understandings of Chinese and feminist identities will emerge.

Participants' narratives often revolved around moments of decision-making that reflected their pursuit of self-making, frequently linked to their decision to move abroad. Carol, for example, explained that staying in China would have meant marrying her long-term partner at that time:

> "I didn't know what I wanted but I knew what I didn't want, and I thought that going to the UK could give me different possibilities. So, I broke up with my boyfriend and left".

Her narrative foregrounds the active attempt to make room for herself in her present and future—a recurring motif among my participants. For example, resonating with Carol's account, Jason, a 21-year-old undergraduate student in South England, noted: "I wanted to study gender, and I wanted to go to the UK, I needed a space for myself". Elisabeth, a 23-year-old master's student in England, was encouraged to move abroad by her university tutor in China, who inspired her to pursue further studies in a more open environment. As a lesbian woman acutely aware of her marginal positionality in China, Elisabeth described her relationship with feminism as transformative. Once "afraid of the word feminist", she explained that during a particularly difficult period in her life, feminism became a framework through which she could understand and reclaim her identity as a woman. Reflecting on her experiences of "coming out" in a socially sensitive environment and the risks she faced, she stated: "After all I went through when I was home [in China], I had to protect myself, I had to go away, and that's what I did".

From these narratives, moving abroad becomes both a pursuit of autonomy and a response to constraint perceived in China (Martin, 2017, 2022). Yet, as Tu and Xie (2020) and Martin (2022) observe, such movements are never purely liberating: they remain embedded within enduring social relationships that continue to influence women's identity construction across borders and at different life stages. Similarly, my participants' efforts to define themselves independently are not detached from relational contexts. For example, Jane, a 29-year-old prospective PhD applicant in South England, discussing her Chinese feminist identity, noted: "They [my parents] would say I am westernised and I'm a banana: yellow skin, white heart". Similarly, Carol remarked: "I don't really need to be classified by others". Such statements reveal that participants' identities are negotiated in dialogue with others' perceptions—especially those of family members, peers, and social institutions—rather than being formed in isolation. Therefore, these accounts suggest that individualisation is a relational and tension-driven process, echoing the dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality in which autonomy and relational influence are continually re-balanced across shifting transnational contexts.

To analyse these dynamics, the following sections examine the temporal and spatial dimensions of participants' transnational trajectories. The temporal dimension captures their social interactions and relationships before and after moving to the UK, while the spatial dimension considers the contexts of China, as their home country, and the UK, as their host country. Although my analysis recognises the diversity of my participants' transnational experiences, it centres on their social interactions and relationships in China and the UK, which emerged as particularly significant during the interviews.

This examination reveals how these relationships and interactions have evolved, shaping the individualisation of Chinese feminist identities over time and across different cultural and socio-political settings. In doing so, it illuminates the tensions central to transnational Chinese feminist liminality—between participants' individualised understandings of Chinese feminist identities and the collective or conventional expectations embedded in their relational worlds—that underpin the individualised construction of feminist identities.

4.2 China-based relationships and social interactions

In this section, I examine how relationships and social interactions located in China contribute to the construction of individualised Chinese feminist identities. My empirical data revealed that some participants emphasised the influence of their China-based relationships and social interactions on their identities before moving to the UK, while others placed greater emphasis on the impact of these interactions after their move. Therefore, I distinguish between China-based social relationships and interactions according to the temporal dynamics of before and after moving to the UK.

I focus on the experiences of two participants, Jason and Jane, as salient examples, while also drawing on materials from the other participants to further illustrate my findings. Jason's and Jane's life trajectories and perspectives resonate with the themes and reactions of ten Chinese feminist students discussed in this chapter.

Notwithstanding Jason's accounts of his solid social network in the UK, the influence of his relationships before leaving China on the construction of his feminist identity emerged strongly. At the time of our interview, Jason was a 21-year-old undergraduate student in sociology, who moved to South England to pursue studies in gender. He self-

identified as a Chinese feminist, actively engaging in both online and offline feminist mobilisation, such as participating in the Chinese #MeToo movement events in the UK and promoting gender equality on Chinese social media platforms. Furthermore, Jason emphasised his daily feminist activities—avoiding sexist language and behaviours—which reflected his personalised understanding of mobilising feminism. What emerged relevantly from Jason's narratives and lived experiences was his individualisation through departing from conventional gender norms, rooted in his understanding of his feminist identity. Subsection 4.2.1 will show that Jason's feminist identity reflects a highly individualised understanding, shaped significantly by his social interactions with family and friends before moving to the UK.

Although Jane shared some of Jason's experiences before moving to the UK, she emphasised the influence of her social interactions in China after moving to the UK. These interactions were pivotal in shaping her individualised Chinese feminist identity. At the time of my interview, Jane was a 29-year-old prospective PhD applicant in England, who moved from China in 2017 for her master's studies. She was a member of VaChina, the London-based Chinese feminist organisation, and active in promoting feminism on Chinese social media platforms. Jane also noted that she expressed her feminism daily through her intimate relationship with her English partner, explaining that "being a feminist helped me step out of the conventional gender subjugations that women go through in China. I feel empowered in my love relationship rather than subjugated". Her inter-ethnic relationship in the UK reflects a personalised engagement with feminist principles and serves as a social site where she reinforces her feminist identity. Jane's perspectives and lived experiences reveal a form of individualisation rooted in the construction of her Chinese identity in response to racial stigmas. Subsection 4.2.2 will show that Jane's individualised Chinese feminist identity is strengthened by rejecting her family's social and cultural expectations of her, embedded in racial stigmas.

4.2.1 Pre-UK dynamics: individualisation through departing from conventional gender norms

The relational dynamics before moving to the UK play a powerful role in constructing individualised Chinese feminist identities. When I asked Jason when he became aware of his feminist identity, he took me back to his childhood. He seemed to

understand his feminist identity as blended in his gender identity and embedded in his relationships with family and friends in China, noting:

> "When I think of how my feminist identity came out, I think of my childhood. As a little kid, I've never felt I was like the other boys: I didn't conform to the conventional idea of masculinity in China, I was different. On top of that, I used to spend a lot of time with my mum, my grandmas, and aunts, and I remember I preferred making friends with girls rather than boys at school".

Jason situates the origins of his feminist identity within the social interactions experienced in his childhood, both with women in his family and female friends. He notes a sense of divergence from traditional Chinese masculine ideals in his spending time with female relatives and his preference for forming connections with female schoolmates. This narrative emphasises Jason's personal perception of non-conformity to gender norms—"I was different"—which he links to the emergence of his feminist identity also through his familial and social interactions. In Jason's individualised understanding of his feminist identity, interactions with female family members and friends reinforce his sense of non-conformity to conventional gender norms. While this is not a prerequisite for self-identifying as a feminist, it clearly shapes Jason's narrative. Given that mothers are typically regarded as the primary caregivers in China (Yue & Fan, 2020), Jason's time with his mother and female relatives should not be seen as exceptional. However, he views these family interactions as key sites for constructing his feminist identity.

The relevance of interactions with female family members and friends during childhood in participants' feminist identity construction resonated in other interviews. Particularly, in my sample, similar accounts emerged with two Chinese feminist students, Chris and Leo, who, like Jason, identified as men.

Chris was a 26-year-old prospective PhD applicant in the south of England who moved to the UK in 2016 to study social sciences; both his BA and MA programmes centred on gender studies. His feminist engagement is multifaceted, encompassing digital activities, academic inquiry, participation in street protests, and everyday discussions with friends. When reflecting on the emergence of his feminist identity—prior to a more explicit articulation that he attributes to a UK course on "Black feminist epistemology"—he shared:

> "It [feminist identity] was a gradual process. It started when I was a child. […] When I was in primary school, all my friends were girls, unlike the other boys. That helped me to see gender in a different way".

Leo was a 30-year-old PhD researcher in the north of England who moved to the UK in 2016 for an MA and subsequently remained to pursue his doctoral studies. His feminist practice spans both digital mobilisation and the domestic sphere; notably, he highlighted initiating conversations with his mother to challenge gendered divisions of household labour and "empower her". Unlike Jason and Chris, Leo's academic trajectory is not focused on gender, yet, like them, he traced the roots of his feminist awareness back to his childhood:

> "I was in primary school, I was ten […]. I was different, I had female friends, many. Every time my male schoolmates made fun of them and devalued them, I stood out and defended my female friends. I could see and understand that there was a difference and it wasn't fair".

These examples illustrate the strong connections that participants make between their feminist identities and their social interactions with female family members and friends during their childhood in China. However, it is not simply the experience of spending time with women that shaped their feminist awareness; rather, it is their later reflection on these experiences that prompts a deeper understanding of gender segregation (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1987) and unequal caregiving norms. Jason, Chris, and Leo recognise that their close relationships with female family members and friends are unconventional within the Chinese socio-cultural context. Their growing awareness of gendered social divisions in caregiving and social interactions, though not associated with a specific moment of feminist political awakening, led them to question and ultimately reject conventional gender norms, laying the foundation for their individualised feminist identities.

Family dynamics played a prominent role also in another interviewee's construction of her feminist identity. Mary, a 28-year-old PhD researcher in the North West of England, moved to the UK in 2017 to pursue a master's degree. She self-identified as a Chinese feminist, though she noted that it was not something she would "shout to the world", explaining the concerns surrounding the implications of a public "coming out" as a feminist (see subsection 1.1.2). Her feminist practice reflected this understated

orientation, often taking shape through conversations with close and trusted friends about gender inequality. In my interview with her, a different perspective on the influence of family dynamics in constructing feminist identities arose:

> "I'm the second child, and 99% of people around me, family friends or relatives, always told me that my parents wanted a boy but I was a girl. They'd say: "Your parents raised you up like a boy because they wanted a boy. So they gave you more financial support and so on". Why should I feel lucky as a girl because I am treated like a boy? This made me reflect and realise I'm a feminist because there shouldn't be any difference between boys and girls. I wanted to be different from how they [relatives] expected me to be just because I'm a girl".

As the second daughter in her family, Mary expresses dissatisfaction with her relatives' remarks, which she interprets as implying she was "lucky" to be raised "like a boy". This sense of discomfort with being treated differently is rooted in her personal experiences of gender inequality within family interactions. This is central to her feminist identity, as her willingness to defy her relatives' expectations of her as a girl reflects her intention to break away from conventional gender norms. Like the "privileged daughters" described by Tu and Xie (2020), Mary's experience reveals how family relations in China both enable and constrain women's (individualised) identity construction. Familial expectations and gendered hierarchies remain powerful structuring forces, shaping women's identities even before transnational mobility takes place (Tu & Xie, 2020). In this sense, Mary's reflection captures an early stage of the negotiation between personal autonomy and the influence of relational networks that later continues within transnational Chinese feminist liminality.

Unlike the male participants discussed earlier, Mary explicitly links her sense of discomfort to her feminist political awakening: "I'm a feminist because there shouldn't be any difference between boys and girls". Yet, like Jason, Chris, and Leo, she understands these interactions not only as reinforcing her departure from traditional gender norms but also as key sites for the development of her feminist identity.

These participants' descriptions of "being different" also expose a deeper tension at the core of their feminist self-understandings. Their sense of difference emerged not through isolation from their social environments but through comparison and contrast within them—being "not like other boys" or refusing to conform to gendered

expectations within family and friendship circles. This experience of differentiation reflects a central dynamic of Chinese individualisation, where identity is constructed in negotiation with, rather than separation from, relational structures (Yan, 2013). For Jason, Chris, Leo, and Mary feminist individuality thus takes shape through the relationships that both anchor and constrain them, revealing the tension between negotiating inherited social norms and asserting alternative gendered meanings.

The examples discussed above show the interconnectedness of participants' awareness of gender inequality and the formation of feminist identities. Furthermore, they highlight how social interactions in China operate as tension-filled sites of both constraint and empowerment, simultaneously reinforcing and destabilising conventional gender norms. Participants' understandings of their feminist identities result individualised from their social interactions with family and friends in China before moving to the UK.

To understand how "Chinese" contributes to the highly individualised feminist identity construction, we need to clarify first what these participants mean by "Chinese". When discussing his Chinese identity in isolation from considerations of his feminist identity, Jason articulated a steadfast understanding of "Chinese", stating:

> "You know, many people want to migrate from China and go abroad but what they don't understand is that you will never change your being Chinese, you will always be Chinese. What I mean is that by migrating you don't solve your issues as a Chinese citizen. You can add other layers to your identity but you will always be Chinese".

Jason initially seems to understand "Chinese" primarily as a national identity, contextualising the concept of being a "Chinese citizen" through the experience of living overseas. Notably, he adopts a resigned stance in defining it, expressing a fixed view: "you will never change your being Chinese, you will always be Chinese". While Jason clearly locates his interactions with his family and friends in China before moving to the UK, he does not specify when this view of his Chinese identity emerged. Yet, noting that "migration does not solve your issues as a Chinese citizen" suggests that Jason might have developed this view before moving to the UK. Alternatively, it could have been shaped or reinforced by his experiences as an ethnic minority in the UK, indicating a blurred distinction between his national and ethnic identities.

Jason is not alone in his perspective. Other interviewees also shared his view, despite diverse understandings of what Chinese identity means. Steve, a 23-year-old postgraduate student in the south of England, moved to the UK in 2021 to study gender. He first encountered feminism in China through a "feminist teacher" and a "feminist girlfriend" during high school, experiences that shaped his enduring commitment to feminist thought. At the time of our interview, he engaged actively with feminist debates on Chinese social media and in conversations with his Chinese peers. Reflecting on his Chinese identity, Steve remarked: "I am Chinese, but what can I do about it? It's my ethnicity. I left and I'm still feeling the same...and I'm still the same". Similarly, Mary stated: "That's my destiny as a Chinese or better to say as a Chinese woman. There's not much I can do to change it. I was born a Chinese citizen". Jennifer, a 22-year-old postgraduate student living in the south-west of England, moved to the UK in 2021 after an internship in China made her acutely aware of gender inequalities. Her feminist practice centres on applying a gender-sensitive perspective to everyday life and contributing to online feminist discussions on Chinese social media. As she reflected: "Being Chinese is a double-edged sword. You can think it's a good thing when you think of the culture, history bla bla but I can tell you that the price to pay for that is huge and you can't get rid of it. If you only think of Chinese politics…I don't need to add more words. At the end of the day, I always was, I still am and will forever be Chinese".

Each quote offers a distinct interpretation of what "being Chinese" means when discussed in isolation: Steve's as ethnic, Mary's as national, Jennifer's as cultural, historical and political. Despite these differences, what unites Jason, Steve, Mary, and Jennifer is a common acceptance of their Chinese identity with a resigned attitude, resulting in a fixed view of their self-identifications as "Chinese". Such formulations reflect a tension between feeling anchored in an inherited collective identity and seeking space for individual re-interpretation (Yan, 2009, 2013, 2021).

However, if participants perceive Chinese identity as fixed and given, how can it be personalised in their feminist identity construction? In articulating their self-identifications, participants move beyond conventional understandings of being feminist and their views on being Chinese. The intersection of Chinese and feminist identities creates an individualised Chinese feminist identity, in which both "Chinese" and "feminist" mutually transform and inform each other. Jason's statement captures this transformation: "When I say I'm a Chinese feminist, this goes far beyond just being a

feminist or just being Chinese". Resonating with Jason, Mary remarked: "Saying that I'm a feminist is not enough for me. I am a Chinese feminist". Jennifer stated: "You know when I say it, when I say that I'm a Chinese feminist it feels so meaningful". Steve also noted: "I don't think that people from other countries can understand how important it is to say out loud that I am a Chinese feminist".

Through these statements, participants indicate that their feminist identities do not simply coexist with their Chinese identities but rather challenge and reshape them. The intersection of Chinese and feminist identities is inherently tension-filled—feminism provides a framework for resisting hierarchical gender relations, yet it also compels participants to confront the social expectations embedded in their sense of Chinese identity. For instance, Jennifer's reflection on the meaningfulness of declaring herself a "Chinese feminist" suggests a transformative process. Jennifer distances herself from "Chinese" perceived as a political identity. Yet, self-identifying as a "Chinese feminist" suggests that the intersection of these identities helps her redefine both her gendered and political experiences. It becomes evident that embracing feminism allows for a renegotiation of what it means to be Chinese, thus creating space for new forms of self-expression.

In the examples discussed in this subsection, individualisation emerged in two key dimensions. First, in my participants' departure from conventional gender norms, which stemmed from their social interactions with family and friends in China before moving to the UK. These interactions played a crucial role in constructing their individualised feminist identities (Tu & Xie, 2020; Yan, 2013). Second, individualisation occurred through the intersection of participants' Chinese and feminist identities. Participants' views on their Chinese identities became individualised as they integrated them with their feminist identities, leading to the "I Chinese Feminist" identity.

Having examined how my participants' relationships and interactions with individuals in China shaped their individualised Chinese feminist identities before moving to the UK, I now turn to how these relations influenced their identity construction after they arrived in the UK.

4.2.2 Post-UK dynamics: individualisation through rejecting racial stigmas

Jane approached the topic of her life in England with a profound awareness of the complexities involved in her identification as a Chinese feminist. She discussed her feminist awakening, situating it temporally after leaving China, stating: "Only when I came to the UK I realised that we needed to solve the patriarchal society structure and that I was a feminist". She also reflected on how adopting a feminist perspective enabled her to reinterpret past experiences of sexual harassment, particularly an incident from her childhood on public transportation in China:

> "Feminism helped me understand many dynamics I saw or experienced in China that I could not see clearly while I was in China. For example, when I was in primary school and I was in the bus, a man touched me…in my below…and I didn't realise at all what happened. Afterwards, all I did was telling my mother and the only thing she did was not to let me take the bus anymore, which doesn't solve the problem at all. That just confined the space in which a girl can survive. It was squeezing the space rather than solving the problem".

Jane's considerations on feminism and past experiences are crucial to understanding the interactions with her family and friends in China after moving to the UK. While reflecting on her feminist identity in relation to her Chinese origins, Jane discussed how her family and friends in China disapproved her self-identification developed after leaving China. Such disapproval took the shape of racial stigmatisation. Jane noted:

> "I'm Chinese and I see myself as a Chinese, a Chinese feminist. At the same time, I also feel close to the UK as I live here. Sometimes, I can't be understood by my family and friends in China…they know I'm a feminist and they can't really understand that…they would say I am westernised and I'm a banana: yellow skin, white heart. That makes me feel frustrated. At the same time, I feel I'm Chinese, here [in the UK] I'm Chinese".

Jane's feminist identity in her family context appears controversial, seemingly conflicting with her sense of "being Chinese". This conflict is evidenced by the apparent reluctance of Jane's family and friends in China to accept her feminist identity, often labelling her "banana": Chinese from her physical appearance but westernised in her principles and values. This derogatory term has been previously examined within Asian and Asian American communities to denote "conformity to whiteness and assimilation" (Trieu, 2019, p. 2). The use of "banana" implies individuals of Asian

descent, often actively engaged in transnational interactions, who adopt western ideologies while simultaneously distancing themselves from their traditional cultural values, though never fully assimilating solely due to their ethnic appearance (Trieu, 2019).

Furthermore, Jane reinforced her family's perspective on her feminist identity, recalling a specific episode in which she was subjected to racial stigmas:

> "I remember when I posted feminist things [on Weibo] about Peng Shuai[4], some distant relatives I never talked to commented on my post and said that everything I said was manipulated and I was brainwashed by the foreign government. They would say "How do you know what you post is true? Why don't you trust your country? Don't forget you're Chinese".

This episode illustrates how Jane's feminist articulation—particularly when expressed publicly and linked to politically sensitive issues—was viewed through moralised understandings of national belonging. Her relatives' accusations of "being brainwashed" or "not trusting her country" construct feminism as foreign and oppositional, positioning her in tension with familial and national community. Such reactions exemplify the moral dimension of relational dynamics in Chinese society, where individual actions are evaluated through collective moral frameworks (Yan, 2009, 2010). Her relatives' responses also reflect a heightened sensitivity to national representation that can be understood in light of fragile transnationalism (Nehring & Hu, 2021). Within this framework, transnational mobility is not merely a movement across borders but a socially and politically sensitive condition. In this sense, studying or living abroad may be perceived as involving exposure to "foreign" ideas, which can unsettle established moral and national boundaries. These broader dynamics help contextualise the unease surrounding Jane's feminist identification, suggesting that her relatives' reactions are shaped not only by gender norms but also by the wider fragilities and ambiguities that characterise transnational life. Jane's attempt to assert her feminist identity thus becomes entangled in the politics of national belonging, producing a

[4] Peng Shuai, a female Chinese tennis player, disappeared from public view after accusing former government official Zhang Gaoli of sexual assault on the social media platform Weibo (Germano, 2021). She reappeared weeks later and retracted her allegations (BBC News, 2022).

tension between moral accountability to the family and nation and ethical accountability to feminist principles.

Jane is not alone in her experience of racial stigmas from family and friends in China after moving to the UK. Isabel, a 21-year-old undergraduate student in Wales who moved to the UK in 2019, offered a comparable account. Although not formally studying gender, she volunteered as a research assistant for a Chinese NGO focusing on domestic violence, which shaped her understanding of gender inequality in practical terms. Isabel located the roots of her feminist awareness in China, tracing them to her early exposure to gendered readings in primary school and to a "feminist teacher" who openly discussed issues of gender injustice. However, she explained that her feminist consciousness strengthened after moving to the UK, where she gained access to a broader range of feminist literature and discourse. Reflecting on how she negotiates her feminist identity with friends in China, Isabel observed:

> "When I try to tell my friends in China how they should see the world through feminist lens, they say I'm westernised. It seems they struggle to even try to change their perspectives on things and also to accept that I'm a Chinese feminist".

Another example is Rose, a 28-year-old PhD researcher in the North West of England, who moved to the UK in 2017. She described her relocation as marking a transition from a general awareness of gender inequality to a consolidated feminist consciousness. This shift was further fuelled by increasing reports of gender-based discrimination and harassment in China, which motivated her to engage actively in online feminist debates, particularly by reposting feminist content on Chinese social media platforms. Discussing her feminist identity, Rose explained her decision not to disclose it to her parents, anticipating a reaction shaped by racial and cultural stigmas:

> "My parents don't know that I'm a feminist, they would judge me and they wouldn't understand. They would think I'm brainwashed. But I'm proud to be a Chinese feminist".

Jane' and Isabel's friends and families, as well as Rose, who anticipates her parents' reactions to her feminist identity, employ terms like "banana", "westernised", and "brainwashed", and expressions such as "don't forget you're Chinese". These critical remarks reveal how feminist self-identification becomes entangled with moralised

perceptions of cultural and national belonging, transforming the articulation of feminism into a contested moral act. In this sense, the participants' Chinese identities emerge as socially constructed and tension-filled, continuously negotiated through the moral judgments of significant others (Goffman, 1959; Yan, 2010). The tension between familial moral accountability and individual feminist self-identification thus becomes central to understanding how these participants articulate their Chinese feminist identities within transnational contexts. This negotiation encapsulates the dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality at the individualised level, where participants' pursuit of personal autonomy unfolds in constant dialogue with the relational influences that continue to shape their sense of identity across borders.

In this context, individualisation emerges as these Chinese feminist students reject the racial stigmas expressed by their families and friends, navigating the tensions between their feminist and Chinese identities. Jane, for example, after discussing her family's and friends' reluctance to accept her Chinese feminist identity, explicitly stated:

> "I am a banana for my family, I don't fit in their [my family] ideas of Chinese. But I am Chinese, I am a Chinese woman, I am a Chinese feminist and that's what's important for me. It's just strange to live in this bubble as it seems I'm westernised in China but I'm Chinese here [in the UK], although I feel Chinese".

Jane's awareness of being labelled "banana" makes her keenly aware of not conforming to her family's and friends' social and cultural expectations of her. Despite this, she emphasises her Chinese feminist identity. In doing so, she distinguishes herself from her relatives' and friends' understandings of Chinese identity, highlighting her feminist identity. For participants like Jane, rejecting racial stigmas strengthens the intersection of their Chinese and feminist identities. Jane distances from the "banana" stereotype by asserting her identity as a Chinese feminist. The rejection of racial stigmas indicates a process of reclaiming and personalising one's Chinese feminist identities.

Interestingly, in the quote above, Jane also articulates the feeling of living in a "bubble": "westernised in China but [I'm] Chinese here [in the UK]", capturing the ambivalent and tension-filled nature of her transnational identity. Anthias' (2008) conceptualisation of hybridity in her research on identity construction in the fields of migration and transnational populations movements helps to understand Jane's "bubble".

Hybridity highlights how the transnational processes generate intercultural and cross-cultural lifestyles and practices. Jane seems to experience hybridity in her understanding of her identity: non-conforming to conventional meanings linked to "being Chinese", yet, feeling Chinese in the UK.

Other participants also resonated with Jane's views, articulating variations of this sense of being in a "bubble" as a Chinese feminist living in the UK. Isabel and Rose also highlighted that this "in-betweenness" contributed to creating their distinctive individualised identities in the UK, sharing respectively:

> "I feel I'm in this "in-between". It's like I'm not British but I obviously feel close to the society here [in the UK] and at the same time I'm Chinese, a Chinese feminist but it's hard to be seen as such in China. At the end of the day, I don't mind and I feel I am a Chinese feminist, that's it".

> "The best way to describe how I feel is that I'm a fish out of water in both UK and in China. I know I'm Chinese but seems like I'm not Chinese enough anymore because I live in England […] and also I am a Chinese feminist. The good thing is here [in the UK] I can be a Chinese feminist".

The metaphorical "bubble" Jane described—akin to the "in-between" or "fish out of water" articulated by Isabel and Rose—is a complex and contentious space where hybridity arises from the intersection, negotiation, and tensions of Chinese and feminist identities in transnational social spaces in the UK. Participants' feminist identities seem to represent what makes them feel "fish(es) out of water" in China. Such a condition is partly generated by social interactions with family and friends in China accusing them to be "westernised" after moving to the UK and identifying as feminists. Rejecting such labels gives rise to a highly individualised Chinese feminist identity. Simultaneously, participants' Chinese identities make them feel in the "bubble" in the UK context. Despite recognising the opportunities that living in the UK has given them, the feminists in this group do not identify as something other than "Chinese".

This ambivalent sense of being "in-between" reflects the dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, where hybridity becomes both a product and a condition of identity-making. Participants' "bubbles" illustrate how feminist identities are continually negotiated through transnational social relations—relations that are

simultaneously reshaped and rendered fragile by the very conditions of global mobility and shifting geopolitical discourses (Nehring & Hu, 2021; Tu & Xie, 2020). Being in this "in-between" space thus becomes central to reinforcing my participants' individualised Chinese feminist identities, as they rearticulate what it means to be both Chinese and feminist within unstable transnational terrains. Isabel's "not mind(ing)" the "in-betweenness" and asserting her Chinese feminist identity exemplify the central role of hybridity in crafting her individualised Chinese feminist identity.

In this subsection, individualisation through rejecting racial stigmas arose. Racial stigmas are identified in participants' interactions with their families and friends in China after moving to the UK. Such racial stigmatisation creates tension and reinforces participants' individualised understandings of their Chinese identities in their intersection with feminist identities, highlighting the crucial role of their familial and peer interactions in shaping individualised identities (Tu & Xie, 2020; Yan, 2013). The hybridity (Anthias, 2008) that participants experience as transnational actors further illustrates the dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality: positioned "in-between"—non-conforming to conventional meanings of Chinese identity as feminists, yet feeling Chinese in the UK—they continually redefine what it means to be both Chinese and feminist. By rejecting conventional understandings of Chinese identity while reaffirming their sense of it in the UK, participants transform this liminal condition into a space of identity construction, strengthening their individualised understandings of Chinese feminist identity.

The participants in this chapter were influenced not only by social interactions and relationships based in China in forging their identities. The following section will explore the influence of inter-ethnic social interactions in the UK, highlighting the tension-filled processes through which participants crafted or reinforced their individualised Chinese feminist identities.

4.3 UK-based relationships and social interactions

My analysis reveals that my participants' inter-ethnic social encounters and relations in the UK are also influential in their development of individualised Chinese feminist

identities. This highlights the need to look beyond inter-family relations when analysing individualisation (Yan, 2013).

Before leaving their place of origin, individuals may imagine aspects of the host society (Anderson, 1991; Salazar, 2011) and form social networks there in advance (Giulietti et al., 2018). However, the interviewees in this chapter did not report having such experiences. Lacking pre-existing social connections in the UK, this section focuses on participants' interactions and relationships located in the UK after leaving China. I will examine these inter-ethnic social interactions and relationships, highlighting their significant role in shaping participants' individualised self-identifications as Chinese feminists.

This section comprises two subsections. The first illustrates how inter-ethnic social interactions and relationships in the UK prompted participants to become more aware of their Chinese identities due to perceived negative social experiences. The second demonstrates how interactions and relations in the UK encouraged participants to emphasise their Chinese identities through positive social experiences. In both subsections, I will show that individualisation, stemming from participants' understandings of their Chinese identities, contributes to crafting their individualised Chinese feminist identities. The distinction between these two subsections does not imply that participants exclusively experienced either positive or negative social interactions. Rather, it underscores that some participants placed greater emphasis on negative experiences, while others foregrounded more positive ones when discussing their identities.

I will use Carol as a salient example to illustrate how inter-ethnic social interactions in the UK influenced participants to develop more individualised Chinese feminist identities amid perceived negative circumstances. Carol's views and experiences resonate with themes that emerged from other participants' interviews, which I will use as supplementary examples. Carol, a 28-year-old PhD researcher living in Scotland, was introduced in the first section of this chapter. The long-term romantic relationship she maintained in China before moving to the UK was central to her attempts to change her life and divert from getting married ("We [Carol and her partner] talked of getting married, we were destined to marriage"). She recounted deliberately ending the relationship to move to the UK for academic pursuits. Despite the relevance of her

relationships in China before moving to the UK, Carol emphasised the influence of her inter-ethnic interactions in the UK on her identity formation. The form of individualisation stemming from these interactions in the UK partly derives from her process of "self-othering". The concept of "self-othering" emerged from four participants' narratives and refers to the process of self-identification in contrast to "what one believes one is not" (Weedon, 2004, p. 19), specifically in opposition to "other" (Hall, 1990; Weedon, 2004). In my participants' accounts, this process involves contrasting themselves with conventional stereotypes about Chinese individuals. Participants understand "Chinese" through the lens of social, cultural, and racial stereotypes commonly expressed by individuals in the UK. The mechanism of "self-othering" became central to this differentiation, allowing participants to respond to the stereotypes encountered in their interactions. By not identifying with these generalisations, they asserted a more individualised perspective on Chinese identity, reinforcing their Chinese feminist identities. Unlike the participants discussed in subsection 4.2.1, these four feminists appear to have had a less fixed and more fluid understanding of their Chinese identities before engaging in inter-ethnic interactions that highlighted stereotypical traits. However, the interviews do not provide a clear picture of what their concept of "being Chinese" was before these encounters.

The second subsection illustrates how a supportive social environment can encourage Chinese feminist students to heighten their Chinese identity, using it as a distinctive element in shaping their feminist identity. Through the inter-ethnic social interactions and relationships of seven participants in the UK, I demonstrate how individualisation emerged as a positive reinforcement of their Chinese identities, contributing to their "I Chinese Feminist" identities.

4.3.1 Individualisation through "self-othering" from racial stereotypes

To understand how the relational aspect of individualisation unfolded within the context of "self-othering", thereby developing individualised Chinese feminist identities, I will first recapitulate Carol's perspective. During our discussion on her feminist identity, Carol expressed her individualised view on her Chinese identity, noting: "Being a woman and being a feminist it's all I feel. I am Chinese but in my own ways". I asked her to clarify the meaning of such perspective on her Chinese identity. Carol told me:

> "I am a Chinese feminist the way I want to be. I don't need to choose anything that is already produced by others, like being Chinese or being feminist in a certain way. I can build my own reality".

Carol highlights her personalised understanding of "Chinese" and "feminist". The space where she builds her identity in "my own ways" is carved out in relation to "others". Carol indicates "others" as a vague category of individuals who define the meanings of "Chinese" and "feminist". At this stage of the interview, I sought to understand what Carol understood as "others" and also how "others" created meanings of "being Chinese or being feminist". She articulated:

> "People here [in the UK] see me as a Chinese and they interact with me in a very stereotypical way. However, I do not feel so, I do not feel that I am Chinese in the same way other people see me. […] I don't really need to be classified by others, people's idea of "Chinese" is so stereotypical and I don't belong to those ideas, I don't recognise myself in stereotypes. For me, being Chinese is being myself. I feel I am a Chinese feminist".

Carol elucidates that "others" specifically refers to "other people here [in the UK]", which serves as a broad categorisation encompassing individuals in the UK. Her reflection suggests that her individualisation unfolds through relational tension: she seems to define herself against the externally imposed, homogenising notions of Chinese identity encountered in daily life. While "struggles over stereotypical place-of-origin labels" (p. 68) are well documented in the literature on transnational Chinese students—particularly in Xu's (2015) work on mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong—the dynamics at play in this study take on a different significance. Here, Carol's process of redefining herself against external categorisation is shaped by the liminal position that Chinese feminist students inhabit in transnational contexts—navigating between being perceived through fixed racial stereotypes and asserting a more fluid understanding of one's identity. Such negotiation between imposed identification and self-identification lies at the core of the tension-led process through which individualised Chinese feminist identities are constructed.

Carol's account exemplifies a broader dynamic within transnational Chinese feminist liminality: the tensions between how participants are seen and how they see themselves emerge across a wide range of daily interactions in the UK. For example, interactions

with shop or office staff, university students, and lecturers, as noted by Chinese feminist students in this chapter. When I asked my participants to elaborate on their encounters with "others" and how these interactions reinforced stereotypical perceptions of their Chinese identities, they shared the following experiences. An example is Kate, a 25-year-old postgraduate student in England, who moved to the UK in 2021 and located her feminist awakening in her transnational experience abroad. Although she had been aware of gender inequalities since childhood, she noted that her exposure to diverse social media platforms and Chinese feminist influencers while in the UK strengthened her feminist self-identification. Describing her interactions with other students in her university in England, Kate recounted:

> "I was working for a group presentation […]. One of my group mates, told me something like "How can you guys in China eat dogs? It's grim" and it was completely out of the blue and in front of our other course mates".

Another clear example is Angela, a 24-year-old postgraduate student in gender studies based in South England. She traced the development of her feminist consciousness back to her undergraduate years in China, where her readings on women's experiences first inspired her interest in gender issues. Reflecting on her interactions with a university lecturer in the UK, she articulated her discomfort at being treated differently because of her accent:

> "One of my lecturers used to talk to me as if I couldn't understand him, while I could. I just have a thick Chinese accent and speak slowly but he treated me as if I was not capable of understanding what he was saying. He didn't talk the same way with the other international students and I was the only Chinese in that classroom. I felt uncomfortable because I was treated differently".

Carol, Kate, and Angela view their inter-ethnic social interactions with "others" in the UK as reinforcing racial stereotypes that generalise Chinese individuals. However, these participants neither identify with nor endorse these stereotypes. Chinese feminist students in this subsection respond to these stereotypes by "self-othering" (Hall, 1990; Weedon, 2004)—disassociating themselves from collective racial stigmatisation. This process demonstrates their rejection—along with negotiation or alignment—with identity positions imposed through discursive and relational practices. Their resistance

is articulated through "self-othering" from a strong affirmation of their individuality and the claim to a personalised view of their Chinese feminist identities.

Other interviewees echoed Carol's "self-othering" attitude, reinforcing their Chinese feminist identities by rejecting a collective stigma that "others" imposed on their Chinese identities. Kate and Elisabeth discussed their Chinese identities, stating respectively:

> "I am Chinese […] I don't care about what the others in this country [the UK] might think or might say about me as a woman, a Chinese and a feminist. I'm just so proud of who I am and that's important".

> "Why should I just shut up and behave and think what the others decide for me? I know who I am, I'm a Chinese feminist, and I don't need people to define me. […] Since I moved here [the UK], I've lost many of my old Chinese habits and traditions but I wonder, does it mean I'm not Chinese? 'Course not. I am a Chinese feminist and not living up to people's stereotypical expectations of me as a Chinese doesn't mean I'm not".

The participants' interpretations of Chinese identity are influenced by social constructs and cultural norms imposed by "others". In distancing themselves from the stereotypes projected by "others" in the UK, Kate and Elisabeth do not simply sever ties with collective identities; instead, they reconfigure their Chinese identity as flexible and context-dependent. Elisabeth's explicit mention of distancing herself from traditional Chinese habits and traditions, viewing "Chinese" as a cultural identity, underscores this point: distancing from certain cultural practices does not entail rejecting Chinese identity but reworking it into a form that aligns with her lived experience and feminist values. This redefinition of Chinese identity takes shape within transnational Chinese feminist liminality—as participants respond to external perceptions shaped by racialised and national discourses while asserting their own meanings of being both Chinese and feminist. In the current climate of global heightened nationalisms and fragile transnational relations (Nehring & Hu, 2021), such racial stereotypes acquire renewed force, further complicating how participants self-identify abroad.

Participants' "self-othering" unfolds through the relational tension inherent in processes of individualisation within Chinese contexts—where autonomy and the

persistence of relational and familial expectations are continuously negotiated rather than mutually exclusive (Yan, 2009, 2010, 2013). These dynamics persist even transnationally, shaping how participants claim individuality while remaining connected to their relational networks across borders (Tu & Xie, 2020). Participants' individuality, therefore, does not emerge in isolation but through the dialectical tension of negotiating imposed categorisation and self-identification. Such tension also extends to participants' feminist identities. Carol explicitly linked her rejection of stereotypes to the distinctiveness of her feminist identity, noting:

> "Not conforming to people's stereotypes on being Chinese makes my feminist identity unique. Saying I'm a Chinese feminist does not mean that I'm a simple feminist".

Similarly, Angela shared:

> "I don't want to be associated by others with Chinese international students, I'm not like them. I'm a Chinese feminist, I'm not an average Chinese student or person. […] It's being Chinese that makes me a different feminist".

Carol and Angela emphasise that their individualised understandings of Chinese identity render their feminist identities "different" or "unique". Their rejection of generalised stereotypes associated with "Chinese" identity allows them to assert an individualised view of what it means to be both Chinese and feminist. This intersection of Chinese and feminist identities produces a transformative liminal space where these participants reframe their Chinese identities not as a fixed trait, but as a flexible and evolving. Through processes of "self-othering", these participants resist both western racialised stereotypes and fixed understandings of Chinese identity, transforming experiences of racialisation into opportunities for self-definition. In doing so, they negotiate the tension between external categorisation and self-identification—a process that exemplifies how individualisation unfolds through relational and contextual tensions, the hallmark of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, where identity is continually reconstituted through shifting meanings of "Chinese" and "feminist".

In this subsection, participants demonstrated individualisation through "self-othering" as they navigated their Chinese identities within inter-ethnic social interactions in the UK. Relational processes in the UK further underscored the emergence of

individualisation in participants' Chinese feminist identities beyond "self-othering". The next subsection will explore how other participants' positive social experiences in the UK contributed to heightening their Chinese feminist identities.

4.3.2 Individualisation through positive reinforcement of Chinese feminist identities

In this chapter, participants highlighted how their inter-ethnic social interactions in the UK reinforced their Chinese feminist identities through negative social experiences. We identified instances of "self-othering" in response to racial stereotypes. At the same time, participants also emphasised more positive social experiences in the UK. This subsection demonstrates that some inter-ethnic social interactions in the UK led to the individualisation of participants' Chinese feminist identities through positive experiences.

Some Chinese feminist students in this study argued that living in the UK contributed to strengthening their self-awareness through an intersectional lens, as exemplified by Jason's reflection: "Living abroad made me more aware of my Chinese feminist identity". Jason views his identity by intertwining his Chinese and feminist identities. Notably, he is grounded in how he perceives and positions himself, describing his current standpoint towards his identification as "more aware".

Similarly, other participants discussed their identifications showing a profound self-awareness. For example, Steve stated: "Moving to the UK strengthened my gender and ethnic identities, and made my feminist nature more obvious". His reflection suggests that transnational mobility reinforced his understanding of existing aspects of his identity, particularly highlighting his gender, ethnic and feminist identity. Mary noted: "It is far clearer now here [in the UK] who I am: I am a feminist, a woman, a Chinese woman". Her emphasis on clarity suggests that living in the UK provided a space for her to articulate and embrace multiple dimensions of her identity with greater awareness, specifically referring to her feminist, gender and Chinese identity. Jennifer remarked: "Being in England makes it deeper in me who I am in this world. It's kind of I can feel now who I am in a stronger way. I am a Chinese woman and proud feminist". Her choice of words, particularly "deeper" and "stronger", highlights the depth of her heightened self-awareness, strengthening her gender, feminist and Chinese identity.

This shared sense of heightened self-awareness did not emerge in isolation. In exploring how participants like Jason, Steve, Mary, and Jennifer arrived at these heightened understandings of their identities, my data revealed that this reinforcement often emerged from interactions with their English partners, and friends from diverse cultural backgrounds—British or international. For example, Jane provided a detailed account of her social connections in the UK, showing how they contributed to her heightened understanding of her Chinese feminist identity. She articulated:

> "I have many English friends and a partner, and I've never felt unaccepted or not welcome in this [the British] society, but, I mean…you can tell by looking at me that I'm not English…and that's ok…[…] My feminist identity has become stronger and stronger probably because my friends here accept and embrace feminism like me".

Jane reflects on her Chinese feminist identity in relation to her inter-ethnic relationships in the UK, particularly with her English partner and friends. She describes a welcoming social environment where she has "never felt unaccepted". Yet, her statement "you can tell by looking at me that I'm not English...and that's ok..." encapsulates a subtle but telling tension: she experiences inclusion and difference simultaneously. This coexistence of acceptance and visible otherness captures the ambivalent nature of transnational identity formation, where belonging is accompanied by an ongoing awareness of distinction (Anthias, 2008). The "that's ok" does not signal an absence of tension, but rather a form of negotiated comfort—an active reconciliation with her marked visibility as Chinese in a predominantly white context.

Jane emphasises that her feminist identity is strengthened by her circle of friends in the UK, who share her feminist values, yet her awareness of Chinese identity as a visible racial marker remains a quiet undercurrent shaping her self-perception. Her experience demonstrates that individualisation unfolds not in isolation but within relational contexts defined by both affirmation and distinction (Xie & Tu, 2020; Yan, 2013). Within the fragile conditions of transnational life (Nehring & Hu, 2021), such moments of acceptance are simultaneously empowering and precarious—highlighting how inclusion itself can reproduce subtle boundaries of difference.

While Jane's reflection foregrounds visible racial markers as central to her sense of distinction, other participants, such as Julie and Isabel, experienced difference in cultural terms. We have already encountered Isabel, while Julie—a 23-year-old

postgraduate student in gender studies in South West England—moved to the UK in 2021 and was completing her degree at the time of our interview. She first became interested in feminism inspired by an American feminist singer, during high school in China "when Chinese social media were less censored than now and it was possible to access information about feminism". Julie is active both digitally—participating in feminist discussions on Chinese social media—and offline, engaging with a local feminist collective in the UK.

Julie and Isabel both articulated how their inter-ethnic friendships and, in Julie's case, her romantic relationship, contributed to reinforcing their Chinese feminist identities. They noted respectively:

> "My girlfriend is English and she introduced me to her friends' group and we're all friends now. Staying with them who are all Brits made me realise I'm Chinese…'cause they can't understand some cultural stuff that are part of who I am. At the same time, hanging around with them makes me more of a feminist too. I feel much more I'm a Chinese feminist".

> "I've got many English friends here [in the UK] and it's nice as I feel myself around them. I feel we understand each other because we share the same feminist values. But sometimes I feel like I'd like to talk about more China-related things and I feel like they wouldn't really get them, so I just avoid talking about Chinese stuff. You know it's a cultural difference. That makes me feel I'm different from them and I get more that I'm Chinese".

Both Julie and Isabel emphasise that interactions with their friends (and in Julie's case, also her partner) heighten their awareness of their Chinese identity, which they explicitly view as a cultural identity. Unlike Jane, who primarily associates her Chinese identity with physical appearance, Julie and Isabel reflect on how cultural differences become more apparent in inter-ethnic social interactions, particularly when their British friends struggle to fully grasp certain China-related topics. This suggests that their sense of cultural distinctiveness is shaped not only by visible markers but also by moments of subtle cultural dissonance in conversations and shared experiences. These participants' reflections show that difference is experienced not as exclusion but as an ongoing negotiation within otherwise affirming relationships. Within this process, we see the dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality: identity is redefined in the "in-

between" of cultural proximity and distance, where belonging and difference coexist in dialogue.

However, while participants' positive inter-ethnic interactions and relationships with their friends (and, in Julie's case, her partner) reinforce their feminist identities through shared values, they simultaneously create a nuanced boundary where certain cultural aspects remain unshared, further heightening their awareness of their Chinese identity. This points to a key tension within their identity formation: inclusion and self-perceived difference coexist in productive interplay. In Nehring and Hu's (2021) terms, even these affirming spaces remain marked by the fragility of transnational belonging—where openness coexists with implicit limits of understanding. These experiences illustrate how individualisation in transnational contexts unfolds through relational tension: the heightened awareness of participants' identity emerges not through exclusion or racialisation (Bao, 2022), but through negotiating proximity and distance within inter-ethnic relationships. Participants' feminist values provide a shared language that bridges cultural divides, while the moments of cultural incomprehension re-anchor their sense of Chinese identity.

This subsection illustrated how UK-based inter-ethnic social relationships strengthened participants' individualised Chinese feminist identities. According to their accounts, these relationships—spanning friendships and partnerships—were seen as crucial in fostering greater awareness of their identities and reinforcing the intersection of their Chinese and feminist identities.

Building on this chapter's analysis of participants' social interactions in both China and the UK and the shift in these dynamics before and after their move, I can now summarise my key conclusions. In the following section, I highlight the contributions of the "I Chinese Feminist" identity to existing literature on individualisation.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the processes underpinning the construction of individualised identities among Chinese feminist students in the UK. It emphasised how transnational social interactions and relationships shaped participants' claims to individuality, thereby crafting individualised Chinese feminist identities and highlighting the negotiated and

tension-driven nature of their construction within transnational Chinese feminist liminality.

By addressing the research questions: How do the tensions embedded in relationships and social interactions in transnational social spaces contribute to crafting Chinese feminist students' individualisation? How does this tension-driven process of individualisation influence the construction of Chinese feminist identities?, I identified four distinct processes through which individualisation emerged. First, individualisation through departing from conventional gender norms, as participants challenged gender expectations in the context of China. Second, individualisation through rejecting racial stigmas, as participants rejected stereotypes that diminished their identities as Chinese feminists in the context of China. Third, individualisation through "self-othering" from racial stereotypes, as participants redefined their identities in opposition to reductive, racialised portrayals in the UK. Fourth, individualisation through positive reinforcement, as participants experienced supportive interactions in the UK that helped shape and strengthen their feminist identities.

Across these processes, participants continually redefined what it means to be both Chinese and feminist through ongoing negotiations between autonomy and the enduring influence of relational and familial expectations, inclusion and distinction, and inherited gender norms and emergent feminist values. These tension-laden negotiations embody transnational Chinese feminist liminality—a transformative space of "in-betweenness" through which feminist identity is continually redefined across cultural, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

This chapter makes two key contributions to the scholarship on individualisation. First, this chapter extends existing literature on individualisation focused on western contexts (e.g. Bauman, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991), by situating the concept in the historical, cultural, social, and political specificities of China. For example, the process of rejecting racial stigmas is firmly situated within Chinese socio-cultural dynamics and illustrates how participants reassert their identities as Chinese feminists in response to cultural stereotypes. Jane's rejection of the "banana" racial label imposed by her family exemplifies how she constructed her Chinese feminist identity in an individualised manner, highlighting the importance of contextualising individualisation within China's unique socio-cultural landscape.

Second, this chapter, compared to much of the existing scholarship (e.g. Bauman, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991), places greater emphasis on interpersonal relational pathways to individualisation. I argue that individualised identities emerge through dynamic transnational social interactions and relationships, a perspective that aligns, to some extent, with Yan's (2013) findings. In his analysis of parent-driven divorces in urban China, Yan (2013) suggests that the apparent resurgence of parental power reflects new individual strategies for coping with the challenges arising from the individualisation process. His work thus highlights the pivotal role of inter-family relations in constructing individualised identities. However, this chapter extends this argument by demonstrating that the relational ties influencing my participants' individualised feminist identity construction extend beyond national boundaries (Tu & Xie, 2020) and the nuclear family.

Building on this perspective, my findings illustrate how relational ties within the fragile terrains of transnational life (Nehring & Hu, 2021) influence the development of individualised Chinese feminist identities not only through challenging but also reshaping collective cultural, social, and political values and expectations. These influences are not confined to parents but emerge through a wider range of relational interactions, including those with extended family members, friends, and everyday social encounters. For instance, some participants redefined their gender identities by diverging from conventional gender norms that were shaped by their interactions and relationships in China. Mary provides a compelling example of this process. Through her interactions with relatives, she redefined her gender identity by embracing her willingness to be "different" from their expectations of her as a girl. This process underscores the crucial role of relational dynamics in shaping individualised identities.

In conclusion, through the lens of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, this chapter highlights the relational, contextual, and tension-driven nature of individualisation in Chinese feminist identity construction, emphasising the interplay of local and transnational cultural, historical, and socio-political influences.

Having explored the individualised pathway to Chinese feminist identities, the next chapter shifts focus to examine the collective pathway to identity construction in transnational social spaces in the UK.

Chapter 5

"We Chinese Feminists"

The rise of collective identities in transnational social spaces

In contrast to the previous chapter's emphasis on individualisation, this chapter explores the construction of a collective Chinese feminist identity that emerged from my data: the "We Chinese Feminists" identity. I examine its formation in transnational social spaces in the UK (Faist, 2000), focusing on how collective identification unfolds through dynamic and tension-filled transnational interactions. Within this context, transnational Chinese feminist liminality offers a lens to understand how collective identity takes shape in the "in-between" spaces where solidarity and difference are continually negotiated across socio-cultural and geopolitical boundaries.

My empirical data reveal distinct manifestations of collective Chinese feminist identities in UK-based Chinese feminist grassroots organisations, such as the #MeToo movement and VaChina. The construction of this collective identity centres on three prominent and tension-laden themes drawn from interviews with these organisations' members: encounters with racism, trans-ethnic solidarity, and cross-border organising. I demonstrate that the collective Chinese feminist identity emerges not in the absence of contradiction but through these tension-filled encounters—between internal solidarity and exclusion in the face of racism, between unity and diversity in trans-ethnic alliances, and between transnational and national participation in cross-border mobilisation. These tensions do not fragment the collective; rather, they, sustain, strengthen, and redefine it across transnational contexts.

In this chapter, collective identity formation is conceptualised as a shared sense of "us"—the collectivity of Chinese feminists—shaped by transnational interactional dynamics and distinctions from "them" (Melucci, 1989, 1995). Theories of collective identity are expanded by integrating theories on intersectionality (Collins, 1990, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005) and transnational feminist mobilisation (Lyons, 2010). Intersectionality theory underscores the role of ethnicity in participants' feminist identities, where participants often understand Chinese identity as an ethnic identity—a subset of identity categories in which membership is defined by traits linked to or

believed to be tied to descent (Chandra, 2006). Theories on transnational feminist mobilisation shed light on how participants' experiences of trans-ethnic solidarity and transnational mobilisation shape their collective identity as Chinese feminists in the context of transnational mobility (Urry, 2007; Roberts. 2019).

This chapter also situates collective identity formation within the relational continuities of transnational life (Tu & Xie, 2020) and the fragile conditions of global feminist organising (Nehring & Hu, 2021). These frameworks reveal how collective practices are both enabled and constrained by shifting transnational dynamics—where solidarity must be continually negotiated.

The research question I address in this chapter is: What tensions drive Chinese feminist students in the UK to construct collective feminist identities, and how do the tension-filled processes of their identity construction unfold?

By drawing on Melucci's (1989, 1995) theories of collective identity in social movements and Lyons' (2010) theorisation of transnational feminist mobilisation, this chapter contributes to understanding how collective feminist identities are shaped through interaction, negotiation, and differentiation. Melucci's framework highlights how internal meaning-making and external recognition generate tensions between solidarity and differentiation, while Lyons underscores the productive frictions between shared commitments to social justice and differences in history and positionality in inter-ethnic alliances, and between transnational and national participation in feminist mobilisation in cross-border organising. Within this framework, the collective Chinese feminist identity is understood as an evolving, liminal formation—where solidarity and diversity coexist in precarious but generative balance.

This chapter investigates the processes of collective Chinese feminist identity construction through the following steps. The first section explores the empirical characteristics of collective Chinese feminist identities in the communities of #MeToo and VaChina. Section 5.2 examines how Chinese feminists heighten their collective identity through encounters with racism, section 5.3 through the establishment and development of trans-ethnic solidarity, and section 5.4 through transnational Chinese feminist mobilisation. This chapter concludes with a comprehensive overview of the empirical findings, highlighting their significance for the study of collective feminist identity construction in transnational contexts.

5.1 “We’re Chinese Feminists”: collective Chinese feminist identity in the #MeToo and VaChina

To delineate the contours of a collective Chinese feminist identity, this section embarks on a journey that traverses my exploration of Chinese feminist communities in the UK.

On the 20th of June 2022, I visited the “Voiceless Rise Up: the #MeToo in China” exhibition, held in Muirhead Tower, on Birmingham University campus (documented in Figures 3, 4, and 5). After several attempts to contact Chinese feminists based in mainland China without much success, my research plan was to explore the types of communication between feminists based in mainland China and the ones based in the UK (see Chapter 1 for further details). I contacted the UK-based #MeToo community through their official account on Instagram (metooinchina_exhibition_uk), which I already knew. The account was managed by a group of Chinese feminists based in the UK. My contact introduced me to a member of the Birmingham-based #MeToo, who was among the organisers of the exhibition. In the end, I had the opportunity to meet Eleanor, a 29-year-old feminist in Birmingham, to spend the day with her and help her out with the organisation of the exhibition.

Figure 3

"Voiceless Rise Up the #MeToo in China" Exhibition (Birmingham University Campus)

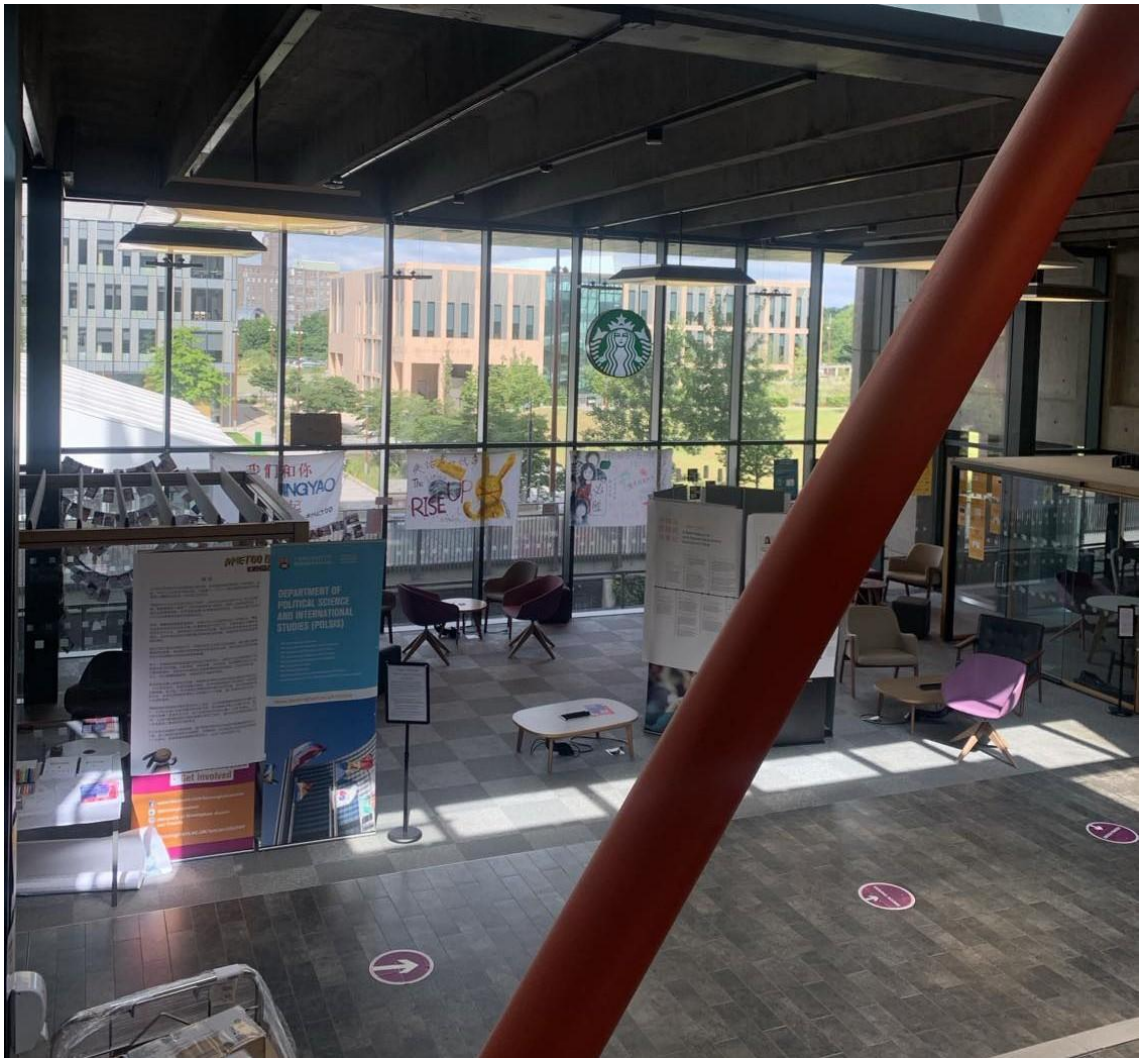


Figure 4

"Voiceless Rise Up the #MeToo in China" Exhibition (Detail 1)

Figure 5

"Voiceless Rise Up the #MeToo in China" Exhibition (Detail 2)

Eleanor and I sat at a round table in a private area of the exhibition space. She moved first to London to study for an MA degree and then to the Midlands for a PhD degree, both in non-gender-related fields. Although she had been aware of gender inequality before leaving China, Eleanor explained that her feminist consciousness flourished after arriving in the UK, where she came into contact with Chinese feminist societies. Reflecting on her current life, she enthusiastically told me how she completely devoted her life to her feminist activities and her "feminist sisters", her PhD, and her English partner. During the conversation, I asked her to discuss in detail the relations between

the UK-based Chinese feminist community and the China-based community. One thing she said in her answer particularly attracted my attention:

> "Concerns and frustrations in China derive from our [feminist] fights and state pressure. Here in the UK or generally speaking abroad, our concerns are doubled: as a [feminist] community, we support the China-based movement but we also need to take care of the situation here".

While Eleanor's observation about the "state pressures" on feminist mobilisation in China is not new—since the academic literature on Chinese feminism extensively examines such influences (e.g. Feng, 2018; Xiong, 2018)—her articulation of the "double concerns" captured my attention, leading me to focus more prominently on Chinese feminists in the UK. Notably, Eleanor's statement connects two key themes of this chapter: collective self-identification as a social group ("We Chinese Feminists") and the challenges of mobilising feminism overseas, reflected in her "double concerns".

The collective self-identification as a social group of Chinese feminists is partly reflected in Eleanor's articulation of the primary concerns shared by the UK-based Chinese feminist community: endorsing the movement in China and addressing domestic concerns in the UK. Despite living overseas, Chinese feminists in the UK actively engage in the feminist struggles occurring in China—suggesting the relational continuities that sustain transnational life (Tu & Xie, 2020)—while pursuing locally grounded feminist mobilisation in the UK. This dual orientation encapsulates a central tension of transnational Chinese feminist liminality—balancing solidarity with feminists in China and the pursuit of situated mobilisation abroad. It is within this "in-between" space that collective identity becomes both a transnational and a locally embedded practice.

During my interview with Eleanor, she elaborated on this sense of collective identity when I asked more specific questions about the #MeToo movement in the UK and the exhibition I attended with her:

> "I regard myself as one of the [exhibition's] organisers but I can't say I am the organiser. We are a fantastic community. It's been four years that I've been in this Chinese feminist community. We trust each other and we share the same values,

we're Chinese feminists. […] This builds the confidence that, yes, together, we can make it".

This narrative of mutual trust, shared values and collective actions elucidates Eleanor's clear self-identification as a member of the social group of Chinese feminists, illustrating how collective identity is constructed through ongoing interaction and shared meaning-making (Melucci, 1989, 1995). In this case, the social group encompasses feminists from China who share similar views, as Eleanor clearly articulates in the quote above. While the intersection of Chinese and feminist identities is explicit in Eleanor's statement "we're Chinese feminists", this raises the question as to how the Chinese-cum-feminist identity emerged and evolved as a collective identity. Prior to embarking on such an exploration, it is necessary to elucidate the connection between Chinese feminism and the #MeToo movement.

The #MeToo movement, founded by Tamara Burke in 2006 in the United States (Chandra & Erlingsdóttir, 2021), was introduced in China in 2017 and gained significant momentum in 2018, encouraging Chinese women to speak openly about sexual harassment (Huang & Sun, 2021; Xue & Rose, 2022). The Chinese #MeToo movement also spread to other countries where Chinese feminists moved, such as the United States (Wang & Cao, 2019), and the UK, as Eleanor explained:

"Our connections with feminist activists in China allowed us to arrange the exhibition here [in the UK] and to establish our British #MeToo unit".

She highlights how maintaining and strengthening feminist ties between the UK and China through expanding networks in the host country is crucial, exemplified by the creation of "our British #MeToo unit". By leveraging these transnational connections, Chinese feminists in the UK are able to extend the reach and influence of feminist movements from both countries, creating a shared platform for feminist mobilisation. This dynamic reflects what Lyons (2010) terms cross-border organising—the forging of solidarity in the same social group through transnational networks and mutual exchange—and moulds transnational feminist spaces in the UK in which Chinese feminists are transnational actors.

As noted in Chapter 3, the feminist students in this study engage in different types of feminist activities and inhabit changing and dynamic transnational feminist spaces in the UK. For example, Eleanor expanded on this theme, stating:

> "Our network here [in the UK] is not only centred on the #MeToo. The majority of us are involved in different types of Chinese feminist movements or organisations, like VaChina. For example, I myself performed "Our Vaginas, Ourselves" around England with the group of feminist sisters".

Eleanor's mention of VaChina underscores the organisation's significance within the broader landscape of transnational Chinese feminist mobilisation. By highlighting her involvement in VaChina, Eleanor illustrates how it serves as an essential platform for feminist mobilisation in the UK, contributing to the diverse ways Chinese feminism manifests beyond nation-state boundaries. The connection between transnational feminist spaces and grassroots movements like VaChina is central to understanding how feminist students in the UK navigate and construct their identities while contributing to transnational feminist agendas and maintaining a focus on Chinese feminist issues. Building on this, I decided to explore the VaChina organisation further, as I had already encountered it in existing literature (Jin & Ni, 2021; Li, 2018; Zhang, 2019).

VaChina is a Chinese feminist society established in 2017 which operates within SOAS University of London's Student Union. The society aims to raise awareness of gender equality and discuss feminist issues (Li, 2018) mainly through theatre performances of "Our Vaginas, Ourselves", which have been staged nationwide in the UK (Zhang, 2019).

During the recruitment phase, I had the opportunity to meet Nicky, one of the co-founders of VaChina. At the time of our interview, she was a 26-year-old PhD researcher based in southern England. Having moved to the UK at the age of fifteen to attend boarding school, she later completed her undergraduate and master's degrees—initially in fields unrelated to gender studies. However, Nicky explained that her master's year in London proved pivotal, steering her academic and personal interests towards feminist research and ultimately leading to her current PhD in feminist studies.

Nicky keenly introduced to me how VaChina came about in the first place and how it developed. In 2017, she was a master's student at a university in London. Nicky

illustrated the first steps taken to found VaChina: “In the beginning, it was just a few of us, like four people, and we were discussing what we could do in the UK”. The four people mentioned were not only course mates in the same university in London but also friends and passionate supporters of gender equality and feminist ideas. Unlike herself, Nicky told me that the other three friends had engaged and carried out feminist projects in China as individuals or within the Beijing LGBT[5] centre before moving to England—they were all “already experienced, energetic feminist activists who had connections in China”.

This early foundation illustrates a key element in transnational networks: the importance of maintaining connections with the home country while establishing new ones overseas (Köngeter & Smith, 2015). As noted in Chapter 1, among the feminist founders of VaChina was Li Maizi, a member of the renowned “Feminist Five” (Jiu, 2021). Nicky’s narrative highlights how the founders of VaChina not only preserved their ties with feminists in China but also worked to expand their networks in the UK, echoing Lyons’ (2010) concept of cross-border organising. In doing so, they successfully built transnational social spaces (Faist, 2000), positioning themselves as key transnational actors—a theme that will be explored further in this chapter.

This process of positioning and identity-building is central to understanding how Chinese feminists navigate their roles within both local and transnational contexts. In line with this, Nicky, much like Eleanor, also emphasised her identity as part of a social group, particularly when reflecting on her experiences as a Chinese feminist. She expressed:

> “I can’t see myself as individually contributing to the Chinese feminist community. I see a collective contribution. We’re Chinese feminists, we share feminism…we share our roots. VaChina wouldn’t have become a reality just by myself. It was us as a group, as Chinese feminists that founded it”.

Nicky emphasises the strong connection between her Chinese and feminist identities, highlighting that Chinese feminists collectively share both their commitment to feminism and their Chinese roots. These roots, in this context, can be understood as a

[5] After more than 15 years of advocating for the support and protection of sexual minorities in Beijing, the Beijing LGBT Center closed in 2023 due to the intensifying crackdown on LGBT community in mainland China (Shepherd & Chiang, 2023).

blend of cultural, ethnic, national, and socio-political identity factors. The collective identity also emerges from her insights about the foundation and development of VaChina, asserting that this community is not solely her initiative but rather the result of collaborative efforts among a group of Chinese feminists. In line with Melucci's (1989, 1995) understanding of collective identity as an ongoing interactional process of shared meaning-making and coordinated action, Nicky's account exemplifies how such identity is constructed through collaboration and mutual commitment. Her emphasis on collective effort underscores that the strength of the Chinese feminist community lies not in individual leadership but in continuous relational engagement. In this sense, her narrative reinforces the inherently collective nature of feminist practice, positioning it as relational rather than individual.

In this section, through the examples of Eleanor and Nicky, I have highlighted the strong presence of a collective Chinese feminist identity shared by some participants in the UK. Specifically, I have illustrated how the intersection of Chinese and feminist identities can give rise to a collective identity. The #MeToo movement and VaChina emerge as key feminist settings that play a significant role in shaping these collective identities and fostering identification with the social group of Chinese feminists in the UK.

However, this collective identification does not develop uniformly. Rather, it is shaped through ongoing tensions between transnational engagement and local situatedness, between shared feminist ideals and the diversity of social groups' histories and positionalities, and between solidarity and the constraints of distance and difference. These tensions, far from undermining the collective, reflect the dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality—where solidarity and diversity within feminist collectives coexist in productive interplay—and form the generative conditions through which the "We Chinese Feminists" identity continually evolves. The following sections unpack these dynamics, showing how encounters with racism, trans-ethnic solidarity, and cross-border mobilisation both challenge and strengthen collective Chinese feminist identification in transnational contexts.

5.2 "Double concerns": racism as a catalyst for collective ethnic feminist identities

To understand how a collective Chinese feminist identity emerges in the UK-based #MeToo movement and VaChina organisation, it is essential to examine how Chinese identity—often framed through an ethnic lens—intersects with the process of collective feminist identity construction. This intersection was vividly illustrated by Eleanor, the PhD researcher in Birmingham who guided me to visit the "Voiceless Rise Up: the #MeToo in China" exhibition. In section 5.1, I emphasised one of the observations that Eleanor made, which included some of the key themes of this chapter. She described the state of transnational Chinese feminist mobilisation from the perspective of Chinese feminists living overseas.

One thing that struck me was Eleanor's repeated reference to what she termed as "double concerns", on which she elaborated as the conversation went on. The first concern pertained to the difficulties that feminists encounter in mobilising feminism China, stemming from the sensitive socio-political environment (Feng, 2018; Liu, 2024; Xiong, 2018). The second concern derived from living in another country as a Chinese feminist, where, as Eleanor articulated it, "our concerns are doubled". Her notion of "double concerns" encapsulates a fundamental tension between transnational solidarity and situated marginality—the need to sustain cross-border feminist engagement while simultaneously responding to the lived realities in the UK. In almost all my interviews with members of the #MeToo and VaChina, the theme of racism emerged as a significant concern shaping participants' transnational experiences in the UK. This pervasive concern is vividly reflected in Eleanor's articulation of the "double concerns", as she described these challenges in her own words:

> "In the UK there's another huge challenge for us [Chinese feminists]: racism. Not only in the UK. Actually, just yesterday a Chinese feminist friend of mine in London was insulted in the streets: "Go back to your country". These kinds of racist attacks have been a new normality for us. In many places all over the world, this [racism] happens, and I think it [racism] goes beyond attacking the colour of our skin or the shape of our eyes. It is also about attacking our roots, our culture as well. In these situations [of racism/racist attacks] we feel even more united as Chinese feminists".

As Xu (2015) notes, living abroad means one will often experience one's identity from a different perspective. In my participants' case in the UK, as part of a minority group that may be subjected to racism. Eleanor's comments should be contextualised

within the broader climate post-COVID-19, during which racist violence against Chinese communities in the UK was significantly exacerbated (Jin & Ni, 2021; Nehring & Hu, 2021). Against this backdrop, her words emphasise not only the relevance of Chinese identity but also offer a broader narrative in which she delves into the concept of "double concerns".

Throughout our conversation, she consistently referred to herself as part of the collective "us", encompassing Chinese feminist "sisters" in the UK. This sense of inclusivity was especially pronounced when she recounted a racist attack her friend—a fellow Chinese feminist—experienced in London. Eleanor's use of "us" extended beyond "We Chinese" to encompass "We Chinese Feminists", intertwining her Chinese and feminist identities. This use also reflects Melucci's (1989, 1995) understanding of collective identity formation, illustrating how experiences of exclusion generate solidarity within the group.

Intersectionality theories (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005) help illuminate Eleanor's intersecting Chinese and feminist identities, particularly the role Chinese identity plays in the construction of collective feminist identities. Eleanor's articulation of Chinese identity in the context of racism in the UK appears to align more closely with ethnic identity than racial identity. In this chapter, I understand racial identity as a socially constructed category based on physical characteristics (DiAngelo, 2016) and ethnic identity as a socially constructed category that encompasses traits associated with, or believed to be tied to, descent (Chandra, 2006), in addition to physical features. In the quote above, Eleanor expands the scope of Chinese identity as racial identity to include a wider range of identity markers, such as "our roots, our culture", emphasising an understanding of her Chinese identity through an ethnic lens.

Eleanor's narrative underscores how living in the UK and experiencing racism contribute to the formation of a collective ethnic-feminist identity. Here, the collective emerges not through consensus but through the negotiation of shared vulnerability—internal solidarity is forged through encounters with external opposition (Melucci, 1995). This dynamic exemplifies the condition of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, wherein collective identity is continually reshaped through the tension between solidarity and diversity. Within this liminal space, Chinese feminists transform experiences of exclusion into opportunities for collective strength, redefining what it

means to be both Chinese and feminist across borders. In recognising that the challenges of being part of a minority group are transnational—shared by Chinese feminists "all over the world"—Eleanor frames racism as a unifying experience that catalyses the formation of a transnational collective Chinese feminist identity. She further noted:

> "We [Chinese feminists] have these daily conversations to share these racist abuses we experience. We talk about how to respond to racism. […] These kinds of racist attacks are something we share with the Chinese feminist sisters in other European countries and in the US. These [racist] abuses made me understand and feel at a deeper level that we're Chinese feminists and we're together to fight back".

Eleanor's account illustrates how discussions about racism among Chinese feminists in transnational social spaces serve not only as a coping mechanism but also as a means of reinforcing collective identity (Melucci, 1995). These conversations—centred on shared experiences of racism—are instrumental in building solidarity, promoting a collective response to racial discrimination, and reaffirming the importance of ethnic and feminist identity. This process exemplifies transnational Chinese feminist liminality as a generative space, where emotional exchange and collective reflection transform shared marginalisation into a resource for empowerment and cohesion (Melucci, 1995). Within these liminal encounters, participants move between vulnerability and solidarity, negotiating their positions across shifting transnational and racialised contexts. Such dynamics underscore the central role of relational negotiation in transnational identity-making (Tu & Xie, 2020) and how precarious and unequal global conditions require a continual reconstitution of solidarity (Nehring & Hu, 2021).

The experiences of racism thus drive participants like Eleanor to recognise and assert their Chinese identities within the framework of a collective feminist identification. As Bao (2022) notes, Chinese identity can be perceived as an ethnic identity in the context of living in a different country, as a result of racialisation—a perspective often echoed by Chinese feminists' experiences in transnational social spaces in the UK. Similarly, Nicky reflected on the role of racism in the formation of her collective Chinese feminist identity, remarking:

> "What we built in the UK as Chinese feminists is impressive, we founded a strong and solid community, a Chinese feminist network people can count on, find support.

> Living abroad is a challenging experience. For us…well, as you may imagine, there are more dangers as we're easy targets of racism. This makes you feel more attached to the community and realise that we're Chinese feminists and we're together".

Nicky's account clearly links racism with the augmentation of collective consciousness and a heightened sense of Chinese feminist identity. The experience of living overseas and facing racism fosters a stronger sense of community and solidarity, which contributes to the emergence of a collective identity rooted in both ethnic and feminist concerns (Melucci, 1995).

Building on this perspective, Nina, a 29-year-old PhD student in the social sciences in England and an active member of VaChina, provides further insight into how living overseas intensifies ethnic awareness and shapes its intersection with feminist identity. Nina moved to England in 2018 to pursue her doctoral studies. Although she was already familiar with Chinese feminist mobilisation in the UK, Nina located her feminist awakening during fieldwork in China, where her exposure to gender inequalities and feminist networks prompted a deepened engagement with feminist thought and mobilisation.

Nina reflected on the contrasts between the experiences of Chinese feminists in the UK and those in China, shedding light on the transformative role of transnational contexts:

> "Chinese feminists in the UK are obviously focused on what happens in China but also on what happens in the UK and, generally, it is connected to ethnicity. We have to deal with racism. We are forced to become more conscious of our identity as Chinese. We're not simply feminists like we would be in China".

Nina's reflections align with the insights of Eleanor and Nicky, emphasising how the dual contexts of China and the UK shape the priorities of Chinese feminists. Her observation that "we are forced to become more conscious of our identity as Chinese" captures a key tension within collective feminist identification—one that arises from the external pressures of ethnic categorisation imposed through racialisation, emphasising collective identity construction as a process forged through confrontation and negotiation (Melucci, 1995). The heightened ethnic awareness that Nina describes also highlights the influence of place and context on identity construction (Goffman, 1959;

Hu, 2016): living in a transnational context exposes Chinese feminists to racialisation, compelling them to integrate their ethnic identities more prominently into their feminist identities.

This process exemplifies the dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, wherein identity is continually reconstituted within the tensions between solidarity and differentiation. Living overseas intensifies this contradiction: racism generates shared vulnerability that fosters solidarity, yet it simultaneously reasserts ethnic distinctions that Chinese feminists must navigate when defining their feminist identities. In this sense, their transnational experiences reveal identity not as fixed but as relational, contingent, and negotiated across contexts (Goffman, 1959; Melucci, 1989, 1995; Tu & Xie, 2020). The interplay between marginalisation and collective solidarity thus illustrates how transnational Chinese feminist liminality functions as a productive space through which collective feminist identities are continually constructed.

As seen through the narratives of Eleanor, Nicky, and Nina, experiences of racism are intricately linked to living overseas—particularly in the UK—and operate as both divisive and generative forces. These encounters not only expose participants to exclusion and vulnerability but also act as catalysts for solidarity and collective action. The concept of "double concerns" thus encapsulates the tension between in-group solidarity and the pursuit of recognition and legitimacy within broader social and institutional contexts—a tension that lies at the heart of transnational Chinese feminist liminality. This dynamic illuminates how collective Chinese feminist identity emerges through the continual negotiation of these intertwined forces.

Having examined encounters with racism as the first of three prominent themes in my data and its role in shaping collective Chinese feminist identities, we now turn to a second significant theme: trans-ethnic solidarity.

5.3 Beyond the "Chinese": establishing trans-ethnic solidarity

Collective Chinese feminist identities emerge not only through negative reinforcement (Melucci, 1995), such as encountering racism, but also through Chinese feminists' interactions and solidarity with individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This section focuses on trans-ethnic solidarity, uncovering the birth and development of

coalitions and alliances formed by individuals and/or organisations representing various ethnic and/or national categories (Lyons, 2010). Such solidarities are not free of contradiction: they evolve within tension-laden encounters where feminist groups' shared commitments to social justice meet differences in history and positionality.

These encounters are to be understood in the condition of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, wherein Chinese feminists negotiate their inclusion within broader feminist and anti-racist movements while simultaneously confronting limited recognition in these marginalised transnational spaces. Within this liminal terrain, solidarity unfolds as an ongoing process of negotiation—marked by both connection and constraint—as participants seek to strengthen in-group solidarity and visibility across socio-cultural and geopolitical boundaries.

Interviewees identifying with the #MeToo movement or VaChina often emphasised the trans-ethnic solidarity that they cultivated in the UK. Specifically, these Chinese feminists discussed how living overseas facilitated Chinese feminist communities to encounter, confront, learn from and ally with other ethnic groups facing discrimination. For example, while discussing the activities of the UK-based #MeToo movement, Eleanor noted:

> "As a Chinese feminist community here in the UK, we also participated in some movements such as the Black Lives Matter. […] In this way, we also have an impact on the British society and we have an opportunity to speak out and let people know we exist".

From Eleanor's perspective, participating in movements, such as the Black Lives Matter, is a way to increase visibility of the Chinese feminist community in the UK. Yet, the historical and political weight of the Black Lives Matter—as a global response to anti-Black racism and state violence—introduces a complex terrain of solidarity, where identification with another group's struggle requires negotiation of positionality and difference (Collins, 1990; Lyons, 2010). In the UK, the Black Lives Matter movement also drew attention to the country's own legacies of colonialism, police brutality, and structural racism (Andrews, 2018; Eddo-Lodge, 2017). Entering this space of mobilisation thus required Chinese feminists to engage reflexively with their own racial positioning within British society and the broader global hierarchy of racialised groups.

When asked how such alliances were built, Eleanor elaborated:

> "For instance, as a Chinese feminist community we participated in street demonstrations launched by the Black Lives Matter all over the UK. We went to the streets, we supported the movement by promoting anti-racism. These events bond different communities that fight for the same purposes. The intersectionality becomes real. It's almost as you notice more all the layers that you carry on your shoulders as an oppressed category in this country [the UK]. But this also makes the community of Chinese feminists in the UK stronger because we're not alone. We can count on us but also on other ethnic groups".

Eleanor clarifies the development of inter-ethnic interactions and connections. Taking part in street demonstrations launched by other ethnic communities in the UK represents a way to encounter, confront, learn, and ally with other ethnic groups. Her reflection also illuminates how trans-ethnic solidarity operates as both a unifying and differentiating process (Melucci, 1995). Participating in Black Lives Matter demonstrations enables Chinese feminists to forge connections with other marginalised groups, but it also exposes the asymmetries of visibility and power embedded in cross-ethnic spaces. Her observation that "intersectionality becomes real" captures how lived experiences of racism and allyship transform intersectionality from a theoretical framework into a lived practice of relational negotiation (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005).

Through encounters with marginalised groups in the UK, Chinese feminists engage in what Lyons (2010) terms trans-ethnic solidarity—alliances that are forged across difference and grounded in relational understanding rather than assumed sameness. Yet, these solidarities remain tension-laden: while they cultivate a sense of collective purpose and shared vulnerability, they also require ongoing negotiation of voice, legitimacy, and recognition, reflecting the fragility of cross-ethnic alliances in transnational feminist spaces (Nehring & Hu, 2021).

Eleanor noting that "we have an opportunity to speak out and let people know we exist" underscores how trans-ethnic solidarity enhances visibility while situating within hierarchies of global racial politics that may not fully recognise their specific histories of marginalisation (Wesoky, 2016). Solidarity thus emerges not as a seamless coalition

but as a relational negotiation of difference—a continual redefinition of what it means to be both Chinese and feminist vis-à-vis other racialised and feminist groups.

In this context, according to the framework of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, collective identity is shaped by the tension between inclusion and limited recognition within broader feminist and racialised hierarchies. Eleanor's assertion that participating in Black Lives Matter demonstrations make "the community of Chinese feminists in the UK stronger" reveals how this tension is generative—through cross-ethnic encounters, Chinese feminists reinforce their collective identity, transforming marginality into a resource for strength and cohesion.

What Eleanor articulates raises further questions to understand how trans-ethnic solidarity is one of the drivers for participants to form their collective Chinese feminist identities. I asked Eleanor to elaborate more on her intersectional awareness stemming from the encounters with the Black Lives Matter movement. She explained:

> "Bonding with other communities from other ethnic backgrounds makes you feel more aware of yourself in the social environment that you live in. When you see other groups being so unite fighting for a good cause, you understand more that you belong to a community. The sense of being part of the community of Chinese feminists becomes stronger".

Eleanor's reflections provide important insights into how trans-ethnic solidarity functions as a catalyst for strengthening collective Chinese feminist identities. Her interactions with movements such as the Black Lives Matter illustrate how engagement with other marginalised communities can reinforce one's awareness of social positioning (Melucci, 1995). These encounters foster a heightened intersectional consciousness, where Eleanor becomes more attuned to how her identity as a Chinese feminist is shaped by the intersecting identity dimensions of ethnicity, gender, and systemic inequities within the British socio-political landscape (Collins, 1990, 2005; Crenshaw, 1991). In this context, it is important to note that, although the UK has a visible feminist movement and institutional commitments to equality (Ahmed, 2017; Aune & Holyoak, 2017), inequalities persist in pay, leadership representation, and everyday treatment (Evans et al., 2025; ONS, 2024). These inequities are often compounded for women of colour (Collins, 1990, 2005; Crenshaw, 1991; Fawcett

Society, 2022), making Eleanor's growing intersectional awareness reflective of the local realities that inform transnational solidarity and mobilisation.

This process of trans-ethnic solidarity involves more than admiration or surface-level support. Eleanor describes how witnessing the collective action of other groups creates a deeper awareness of her own community's distinctiveness and strength. Such interactional processes strengthen collective identity by transforming observation into participation—recognising oneself in the struggles of others while sustaining a sense of distinct collective purpose (Lyons, 2010; Melucci, 1995).

Chinese feminists in this study build trans-ethnic solidarity not only through support of global race-based movements like the Black Lives Matter but also through engagement with minority ethnic and feminist communities across diverse social contexts. For instance, Claire, a 27-year-old PhD researcher in the Midlands provided different perspectives on trans-ethnic solidarity. Having completed her master's degree in the United States before pursuing her PhD in the UK, Claire is one of only two participants in this study with a broader history of transnational mobility (as noted in Chapter 3). Although she was not formally trained in gender studies, she articulated a clear sense of feminist identity and practice—one that extends beyond individual actions in everyday life to encompass collective engagement. Having lived in the US before moving to the UK, Claire's multiple experiences of transnational mobility necessitated consideration in her feminist identity construction. Thus, my questions extended beyond her lived experiences in China and the UK to encompass her broader transnational trajectories.

Claire recounted that she first came in contact with Chinese feminism during her time in the US. In describing her transnational feminist links, she emphasised the importance of staying connected with Chinese feminists in America and those in China. Reflecting on her experience in the US, Claire underscored exposure to "a multicultural environment" where she interacted with "other people struggling in this white-dominated society". Claire also noted:

> "While I was in America, I understood the importance of intersectionality and of bonding with other ethnicities. That's fundamental to grow as a community for us Chinese feminists. We can learn so much from black people as well as Latinos. The Chinese feminist society I was in did many stuff with the black and Latino societies

of the uni—we took part in events they promoted as the Chinese feminist community. But also they supported us in our events".

Claire emphasises the importance of building trans-ethnic connections for the Chinese feminist community overseas, drawing from her experiences in the US. She elaborates on how trans-ethnic solidarity develops between the Chinese feminist community and other ethnic groups on her university campus through participation in events organised by both communities. Most importantly, Claire notes that connecting with other ethnicities is essential for the growth of the Chinese feminist community, stating that they can learn significantly from Black and Latino communities. Her reflections highlight how trans-ethnic alliances become sites of mutual learning and relational negotiation (Lyons, 2010).

The relevance of Claire's reflections becomes clearer when situated within the broader social and political histories of the Black and Latino communities in the United States. Both groups have long traditions of mobilisation against structural racism, economic inequality, and gendered oppression. Black feminist movements, emerging from the civil rights era and continuing through intersectional frameworks (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991), have foregrounded the intertwined struggles of race, gender, and class. Similarly, Latina and Chicana feminists have articulated decolonial perspectives that challenge both racial and patriarchal hierarchies (Anzaldúa, 1987; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2021). These movements have profoundly shaped the broader transnational feminist landscape, offering models of community-based organising and intersectional praxis that inform the solidarities Chinese feminists like Claire describe. Situating Chinese feminist trans-ethnic alliances within this genealogy highlights how their collective identity formation is informed by—and contributes to—wider traditions of feminist resistance to racialised and gendered inequalities.

At this stage of the interview, the relevance of establishing trans-ethnic solidarity became evident. However, Claire's definitions of "growth" and "learning" remained unclear but she clarified as the conversation progressed:

> "We need to bond with other communities to learn from their experiences and put ourselves [Chinese feminists] a bit in the spotlight. It's strange because when you get in touch with other realities, with other ethnicities you feel even more that

you're part of the Chinese feminist community, and you also feel that you're not alone and that you have reliable connections with communities in the world".

For Claire, "growth" involves learning from the experiences of diverse ethnic communities while enhancing visibility for the Chinese feminist community. Her account also reveals a deeper connection between trans-ethnic engagement and identity formation (Melucci, 1995). She describes how interacting with other ethnic groups heightened her sense of belonging to the Chinese feminist community. This process where exposure to diverse realities strengthens one's identification with one's own group points to the role of solidarity in affirming collective identity (Melucci, 1995). For Claire, this connection provided a sense of empowerment, visibility, and reassurance that Chinese feminists are not isolated but are part of a larger, interconnected network of communities working toward shared goals.

While Claire's reflections emphasise growth and empowerment, they also unfold within transnational Chinese feminist liminality. Participation in broader coalitions enables visibility and solidarity, yet these interactions occur within hierarchies of feminist and racialised politics that shape how Chinese feminists are positioned and perceived (Wesoky, 2016). In this sense, Claire's account illuminates how trans-ethnic connections contribute to collective strength while simultaneously revealing the broader structures that define the boundaries of recognition in transnational feminist spaces.

In this section, I have examined how trans-ethnic solidarity plays a critical role in the development of collective Chinese feminist identities in transnational social spaces in the UK. By engaging with other marginalised groups, participants transform cross-ethnic encounters into spaces of mutual learning and empowerment. These interactions exemplify the dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, where collective identity takes shape through navigating the tension between inclusion and limited recognition within broader feminist and racialised hierarchies.

The exploration of trans-ethnic solidarity highlights how Chinese feminists in transnational spaces strengthen their collective identity by building solidarity. Moving forward, the next section examines the Chinese feminists' cross-border organising, further analysing how mobilising feminism across national boundaries heightens a collective Chinese feminist identity.

5.4 Cross-border organising: transnational Chinese feminist mobilisation

The emergence of collective Chinese feminist identities in the UK is further enriched with the exploration of the third theme that emerged from my interviews: cross-border organising. Lyons (2010) theorises cross-border organising as feminist campaigns or activities that transcend national borders and extend internationally. This section shows how Chinese feminist mobilisation beyond nation-state borders contributes to shaping a collective Chinese feminist identity, while also revealing the tensions that accompany transnational participation. These tensions, inherent in Chinese feminist liminality, arise as participants pursue solidarity across borders while navigating the challenges of uneven participation due to the differing political context of China-based networks.

In section 5.2, Eleanor highlighted the shared experiences of facing racist attacks among Chinese feminist communities in various European countries and the US. This observation laid the groundwork to investigate transnational Chinese feminist links within the community. Interviews with members of the #MeToo movement and VaChina revealed a strong emphasis on affiliations with Chinese feminist grassroots organisations within and outside mainland China. Eleanor highlighted the relevance of communication and experience-sharing with transnational Chinese feminist communities. Describing UK-China relations in the feminist community, she described these connections as dynamic and "alive", noting:

> "It's very important to keep those transnational connections alive between Chinese feminist diaspora in different areas, not only the UK. […] We wouldn't be as strong as we are if our feminist sisters in China didn't support us on a daily basis. We belong to each other".

Eleanor's insights capture the significance of transnational connections within the Chinese feminist community, encompassing Chinese feminists in China and overseas. Her explicit acknowledgement of "transnational connections" reinforces the inherently transnational nature of Chinese feminism, where national borders do not confine solidarity but are instead overcome through continuous exchange and mutual support (Lyons, 2010; Tu & Xie, 2020). By describing these ties as "alive", Eleanor underscores their dynamic and evolving character. She suggests that these connections are not

merely symbolic but actively shape a sense of collectivity among UK-based Chinese feminists, noting that "we would not be as strong" without the daily support from feminists in China (Melucci, 1989, 1995). Furthermore, her emphasis on the necessity of these transnational links highlights the reciprocal nature of feminist solidarity. Rather than a unidirectional influence from one geographical location to another, her words suggest a fluid and interdependent relationship in which feminists in China and overseas contribute to each other's strength and support (Feng, 2018). Finally, Eleanor's assertion, "we belong to each other", conveys a sense of collective identity that transcends physical distance (Melucci, 1989, 1995).

Like Eleanor, Nicky also emphasises the significance of transnational links within the Chinese feminist community, highlighting VaChina's cross-border dimension. She articulated:

> "The beautiful thing about it [VaChina] is that we have been able to go beyond the UK borders and make connections in China but also with Chinese feminists based in other countries. We are all together in our feminist fights".

Nicky's emphasis on transcending national boundaries aligns with Eleanor's perspective, reinforcing the notion that Chinese feminism and mobilisation thrive through interconnected, cross-border networks (Lyons, 2010). To understand the significance of establishing transnational Chinese feminist ties, as observed by Eleanor and Nicky, it is essential to examine the tangible mechanisms that sustain them. This investigation begins with an exploration of the practical and structural dynamics underpinning the "transnational connections" that Eleanor articulates.

From Eleanor's description of the UK-China feminist links initially emerged a rosy picture. Yet, later in the interview, she enriched her personal experience with crucial details, revealing underlying complexities and offering deeper insights into these transnational feminist links. Eleanor elaborated:

> "I feel a bit sad that I can't go back to China often, due to COVID policies and the hostile political environment in China. So I can't go back and have those intimate experiences and have those events and meet up. So everything has to be online. But I am still grateful that we can keep those connections".

These insights underscore the challenges posed by geographical distance and political constraint to transnational cross-border organising. More significantly, they highlight the pivotal role of the digital dimension in maintaining transnational Chinese feminist connections, which becomes both an enabler and a limitation for sustaining collective action (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024; Liu, 2024). Eleonor's description of maintaining ties "online" captures the liminal nature of transnational Chinese feminist identity: situated between physical absence and digital presence, between solidarity across borders and uneven participation. Within this "in-between" terrain, collective identity is sustained through mediated forms of interaction that bridge yet accentuate separation (Nehring & Hu, 2021; Tu & Xie, 2020).

Eleanor's reference to "everything [has to be online]" becomes particularly telling. By "everything" she refers to the adoption of digital means for discussions among Chinese feminists across different countries:

> "We organise some events and we invite feminists based in mainland China to share their experiences and we do online screenings of films and many of the participants are based in China".

Eleanor's reflections on the necessity of online organising illustrate how digital platforms have become a vital space for sustaining transnational Chinese feminist ties (Engebretsen & Zeng, 2024). Yet, they also expose a centrale tension: while online communication enables continuity, it also reaffirms the fragility of cross-border solidarity under conditions of geographic distance and political constraints (Nehring & Hu, 2021).

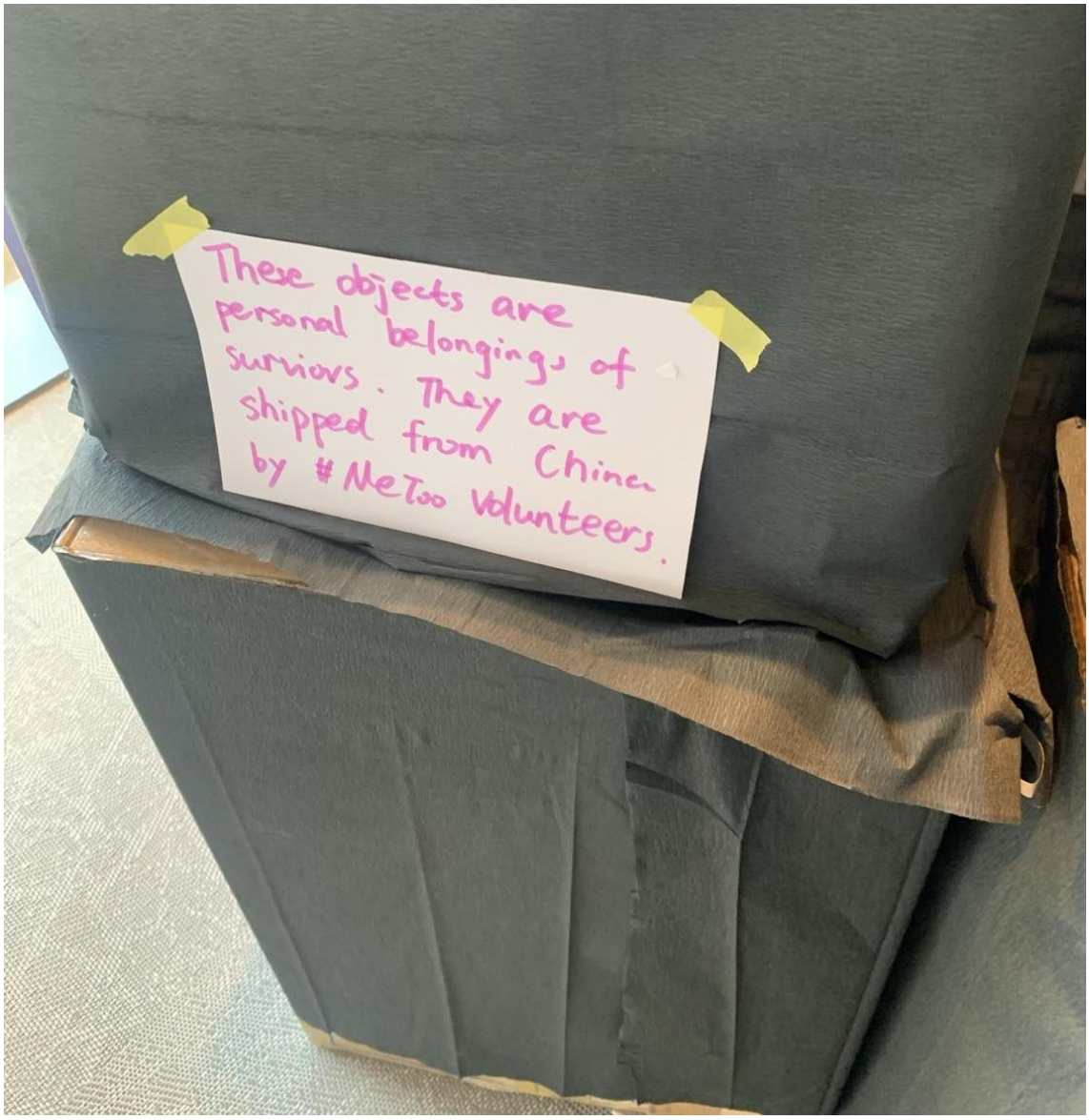
The significance of these transnational connections became even more evident when Eleanor recounted the organisation of the "Voiceless Rise Up: the #MeToo in China" exhibition in Birmingham. As we discussed the exhibition's organisation in England, Eleanor provided a concrete example of transnational feminist mobilisation. Tracing its genesis, she furnished crucial details that illuminated the mechanisms behind Chinese feminist transnational connections:

> "The exhibition was first created in China by the feminist sisters of the #MeToo movement, then it got banned. It became very complicated to carry feminist activism in mainland China, and that's why it [the exhibition] was moved to the US and now to the UK. For example, some of the objects you see [indicating some black boxes and posters] travelled from China to the States first and they finally arrived in England".

The “Voiceless Rise Up: the #MeToo in China” exhibition exemplifies transnational feminist mobilisation by crossing national borders and reaching an international audience. The exhibition, which began as a feminist initiative in China, initially faced barriers when it was banned, illustrating the increasing difficulty of carrying out feminist activities within China’s socio-political environment (Feng, 2018; Xiong, 2018). By moving to the US and the UK, the exhibition maintained its central message and reached a broader international audience, demonstrating the fluid and borderless nature of Chinese feminist mobilisation today. Eleanor’s emphasis on the journey of the objects from China to the UK (documented in Figure 6) is a powerful symbol of how feminist artefacts, narratives, and struggles are carried across borders, fostering solidarity and engagement across national contexts (Lyons, 2010).

Figure 6

"Voiceless Rise Up the #MeToo in China" Exhibition (Detail 3)



Another example of transnational Chinese feminist mobilisation is VaChina's play "Our Vaginas, Ourselves" (Zhang, 2019). "Our Vaginas, Ourselves" is the re-adaptation of Eve Ensler's script "The Vagina Monologues" (1996). Initially localised by diverse theatre companies and university students in China in 2003, "The Vagina Monologues" gained traction among Chinese feminist communities in the US. More recently, the play, evolving into "Our Vaginas, Ourselves", has been performed in the UK by VaChina. When I asked Nicky what drove her and her Chinese feminist friends in London to found VaChina on performances of "Our Vaginas, Ourselves", she argued:

> "It was a necessity. The play was banned in mainland China. The only way to carry it on was to let it travel around the world, and so did we, with the help of

Chinese feminists from China. Obviously, we re-adapted it over the years, so the script changed".

Nicky explains that due to limitations on feminist activities in mainland China, the survival of "Our Vaginas, Ourselves" necessitates recourse to Chinese feminist communities overseas. Therefore, the play crosses nation-state borders, thereby proving transnational connections among Chinese feminists and representing an example of transnational feminist mobilisation (Lyons, 2010). However, this raises a critical question: how does such transnational feminist mobilisation contribute to the formation of a collective Chinese feminist identity?

By creating spaces for Chinese feminists overseas to connect, perform, and organise, these transnational initiatives offer more than just a way to circulate feminist ideas—they help forge a shared sense of collectivity that is simultaneously rooted in Chinese socio-cultural experience and reshaped through transnational engagement (Tu & Xie, 2020). In the case of VaChina, the play becomes more than just a performance: it serves as a vehicle for constructing a feminist identity that is both socio-culturally specific and transnationally interconnected.

This sense of shared identity and collective purpose is further explored when we consider the organisation of the "Voiceless Rise Up: the #MeToo in China" exhibition. The transnational ties not only enable the construction of a collective identity among Chinese feminists but also illuminated the transformative—and tension-laden—power of cross-border collaboration. Eleanor noted:

> "When an emergency [at the exhibition in Birmingham] happens, I can always ask for help and we can all decide together. I'm not alone, and we're not alone here in the UK. Our feminist sisters who did the exhibition in New York and in China are always happy to give their support. We can always consult them and ask specific questions—how did you design this part of the exhibition etc. We constantly get help from the community".

The quote above highlights the centrality of collectivity within the Chinese feminist community in three key aspects. Eleanor illustrates the decision-making process as a shared, collective effort—"we can all decide together". She also implicitly reaffirms a sense of solidarity within the group of Chinese feminists—"we're not alone here in the UK". Furthermore, the support that flows across borders, as Eleanor mentioned with the help from Chinese feminist communities in New York and China, underscores the transnational reach and interconnectedness of these efforts. Together, these elements

highlight how the collectivity of the Chinese feminist community not only thrives within local contexts but also expands across multiple national borders (e.g. China, the UK, and the US), emphasising the transnational nature of the group's solidarity (Lyons, 2010).

Yet, beneath this collective strength lies the tension intrinsic to transnational Chinese feminist liminality—the push and pull between inclusion in cross-border networks and the constraints imposed by unequal participation due to differing political context of China-based networks. Participation in China-based initiatives is vital for legitimacy and continuity (Lyons, 2010), but it is also circumscribed by censorship and limited access in the Chinese socio-political environment (Feng, 2018; Liu, 2024; Xiong, 2018). Within this liminal terrain, Chinese feminists abroad negotiate their position between being recognised and remaining peripheral to the China-based group, navigating the fragile conditions that shape transnational feminist collaboration (Nehring & Hu, 2021).

This tension, however, is generative rather than fragmenting. Through constant negotiation and adaptation, Chinese feminists transform constraint into collaboration and distance into solidarity, reaffirming their shared identity as part of a dispersed yet interconnected collective (Melucci, 1995; Tu & Xie, 2020; Nehring & Hu, 2021). The exhibition thus exemplifies how transnational Chinese feminist identity is forged in the "in-between" spaces where global connection meets national limitation (Nehring & Hu, 2021)—a process that both sustains and reshapes collective belonging across borders.

This section has illuminated the pivotal role of cross-border organising in the construction of a collective Chinese feminist identity. By establishing and maintaining connections within Chinese feminist networks across and beyond mainland China, transnational mobilisation extends feminist agendas beyond the confines of the nation-state. These cross-border collaborations are essential for amplifying the impact of feminist mobilisation and fostering a sense of shared identity and solidarity among Chinese feminists in transnational contexts. Yet, as this section has shown, these transnational connections are also characterised by the tension central to transnational Chinese feminist liminality—between inclusion in cross-border networks and the constraints of uneven participation within China-based contexts. Within this liminal space, collective identity is both sustained and redefined: solidarity and difference coexist in a fragile but generative balance that continues to shape the evolving landscape of transnational Chinese feminist mobilisation.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the processes fostering the construction of a collective Chinese feminist identity among Chinese feminist students in the UK. I observed distinct manifestations of collective Chinese feminist identities within grassroots organisations such as the #MeToo movement and VaChina.

By addressing the research question—What tensions drive Chinese feminist students in the UK to construct collective feminist identities, and how do the tension-filled processes of their identity construction unfold?—I identified three key themes that played a central role in shaping collective identity among these organisations' members. First, encounters with racism; second, the development of trans-ethnic solidarity; and, third, the dynamics of cross-border Chinese feminist organising. These themes revealed collective identity as a relational, dynamic process shaped by tension and ongoing negotiation (Melucci, 1989; Tu & Xie, 2020).

Encounters with racism illuminated how external recognition and exclusion catalyse internal solidarity, reinforcing a shared sense of "we" among Chinese feminists (Melucci, 1989, 1995). Trans-ethnic alliances demonstrated how collective identity is negotiated through productive frictions between shared commitments to social justice and differences in history, visibility, and positionality (Lyons, 2010). Cross-border organising further revealed how collective identity is reinforced through the negotiation of uneven participation and limited access to China-based networks, illustrating the fragile yet generative nature of transnational feminist collaboration (Lyons, 2010; Nehring & Hu, 2021).

Transnational Chinese feminist liminality helped me frame these interconnected tensions, revealing how collective identity formation is situated between a push toward solidarity—whether within the group or across ethnic boundaries—and the pull of existing differences—whether in relation to the UK's racialised environment, to other marginalised ethnic groups, or to China-based feminist networks. These forces coexist in a precarious balance that both constrains and enables collective identity construction, demonstrating that tension is not antithetical to collectivity but constitutive of it.

This chapter contributes to scholarship on collective feminist identity formation by underscoring how transnational mobility creates spaces for the construction and

reinforcement of collective identity. Specifically, it shows how transnational interactions—across racial, national, and ideological boundaries—produce tensions that generate the negotiation and rearticulation of collective Chinese feminist identities (Tu & Xie, 2020).

By integrating Melucci's (1989, 1995) notion of collective identity as an interactional process with Lyons' (2010) theorisation of transnational feminist organising and Tu and Xie's (2020) emphasis on the relational influence of transnational (feminist) identity construction, this chapter advances a transnational analytical lens that situates collective identity formation within the fragile, contingent, and relational conditions of global feminist mobilisation (Nehring & Hu, 2021). Ultimately, it shows that collective Chinese feminist identity is not forged despite tension, but through it.

Having examined the individual and collective pathways to Chinese feminist identity formation in transnational social spaces in the UK, we now turn to a pathway that emerges in tension with the Chinese identity. The next chapter explores a Chinese feminist identity that reluctantly engages with cosmopolitanism.

Chapter 6

"I Cosmopolitan Feminist"

The emergence of "reluctant cosmopolitanism"

Examining views and experiences of Chinese feminists in this study revealed a notable discovery: not all participants identified strongly as Chinese. Some participants identified themselves as global feminists, articulating a worldview that brings together feminism with cosmopolitanism—understood as a cultural, social, and political attitude towards difference (Hannerz, 1990). Through the analysis of the tensions that generate this cosmopolitan feminist identity, I propose the concept of "reluctant cosmopolitanism" to capture how such identities emerge in transnational contexts through the negotiation of global aspiration and national belonging. Transnational Chinese feminist liminality further illuminates this process, revealing how "reluctant cosmopolitan" feminist identity is continually shaped amid the tension between the ideals of global feminism and the culturally situated meanings of being Chinese and feminist within shifting transnational terrains.

Feminists in this chapter fall into cosmopolitanism as a result of their reluctance to identify with any specific place, particularly with certain aspects of both China, their home country, and the UK, their host country. Lacking the pull of a pre-imagined global identity or a preconceived cosmopolitan ideal, I will demonstrate that "reluctant cosmopolitanism" stems from endeavours to redefine identity due to a partial sense of non-belonging to both home and host countries. Here, "belonging" refers to a form of attachment to a place that is socially constructed, situational, and ever-changing (Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2006). This chapter highlights three key tension-driven processes of non-belonging that emerged from my interviews, contributing to the formation of "reluctant cosmopolitan" feminist identities. I will unpack the tensions in dis-identifications with Chinese culture and politics, shaping a sense of non-belonging to China, and tensions rejecting British colonial history fosters non-belonging to the UK.

This chapter combines theories of cosmopolitanism (Hannerz, 1990; Nussbaum, 1997) and belonging (Fortier, 2000; Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023) to demonstrate that a sense of non-belonging can drive individuals to embrace "reluctant cosmopolitanism".

Within this theoretical framework, transnational Chinese feminist liminality provides the conceptual grounding for understanding "reluctant cosmopolitanism". It captures the "in-between" position Chinese feminists inhabit as they negotiate tensions of belonging and non-belonging across Chinese and British socio-cultural and political contexts. Through these negotiations, "reluctant cosmopolitan" feminist identities emerge, revealing how transnational interactional dynamics shape feminist identity construction (Tu & Xie, 2020). At the same time, these identities develop under conditions of fragile transnationalism, where the infrastructures that facilitate mobility—and thus the circulation of cosmopolitan ideas and the creation of transnational feminist communities—both enable and constrain inclusion, recognition, and participation (Nehring & Hu, 2021). In this light, "reluctant cosmopolitanism" is an identity position that arises from liminal negotiation, transforming tension into a generative force in cosmopolitan feminist identity construction.

This chapter aims to advance current understandings of cosmopolitan identity formation in transnational social spaces and contexts of transnational mobility, contributing to the literature on cosmopolitan identity construction and transnational identity construction (Anthias, 2001; Bhabha, 1994; Hannerz, 1990; Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023).

This chapter seeks to answer two key research questions: What tensions drive Chinese feminist students in the UK to identify with cosmopolitanism? How do such tensions shape feminists' version of cosmopolitanism?

These research questions are addressed through the following steps. The first section examines how cosmopolitan feminist identities manifest among Chinese feminist students in the UK. Section 6.2 scrutinises the interpretation of "Chinese" as a cultural or political identity and demonstrates that political or cultural dis-identifications with China influence cosmopolitan feminist identity construction. Section 6.3 analyses the sense of non-belonging to the UK, rooted in participants' rejection of British colonial history, and gives evidence of its influence on the construction of a cosmopolitan

feminist identity. The chapter concludes with a comprehensive overview of empirical findings and their significance for cosmopolitan and transnational identity construction.

6.1 "I'm a feminist, I am a global citizen": cosmopolitan feminist identities

In this section, I illustrate how cosmopolitan feminist identities emerged from my participants' narratives on belonging and what they looked like in my interviews. To do so, I focus on six Chinese feminist students in this study—Susanne, Chris, Leo, Sam, Alex, and Virginia—whose accounts most clearly illuminate how the interplay between cosmopolitanism and feminism informs their identity construction.

To show this interplay, I introduce Susanne, a 31-year-old PhD researcher on Chinese feminism I encountered at a conference. Having moved to England over a decade ago without plans to return to China, Susanne's life was intricately woven into her English surroundings. She lived with her English partner, whose family "is my family too", and had a circle of English friends. Susanne's feminist consciousness emerged during her master's degree in social sciences in the UK and was further strengthened through her professional experience in industry, where she directly observed gendered power dynamics at work. These experiences were among the key factors that motivated her to embark on a PhD journey in feminist studies, seeking to explore such dynamics more systematically. Over time, her feminist practice shifted from digital mobilisation on Chinese social media platforms to teaching gender and feminism modules at her university. As Susanne discussed, this shift was her response to the "rising hate" toward feminist discourse in Chinese online spaces, pushing her to pursue alternative forms of feminist engagement.

During our interview, I prompted Susanne to reflect on her feminist identity in light of her Chinese origins and her life in the UK. She then shared with me:

> "The truth is there is no country I belong to. I know myself: I am a feminist, I am a global citizen".

Susanne's sense of non-belonging to a specific country emphasises an understanding of belonging as a form of attachment to a place (Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2006). However, as Susanne reflects on her feminist identity vis-à-vis

both her Chinese origins and her experiences in the UK, she implicitly expresses a sense of non-belonging to both China, her home country, and the UK, her host country. This is combined with a profound self-awareness of her identity as a feminist and a global citizen.

Her alignment with cosmopolitan identification, conventionally linked to the notion of a "citizen of the world" (Nussbaum, 1994), is evident in her self-identification as a "global citizen". By anchoring her identity in cosmopolitanism, Susanne positions herself within broader discourses of identity and belonging, where attachment to a specific place is secondary to a sense of global affiliation.

In articulating their cosmopolitan feminist identities, interviewees frequently emphasised their sense of non-belonging to a specific place combined with the absence of a sense of belonging to a defined vision of the global/world. Chris, a 26-year-old prospective PhD applicant in England I introduced in Chapter 4, extensively discussed his perception of belonging while delineating his identity. From his account, he had a breadth of life experiences within the British social and cultural environment, having completed both his undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the UK. Reflecting on his identity as a feminist from China living in the UK, Chris observed:

> "I realised I can belong everywhere but I don't belong anywhere. It's a simultaneous sense of belonging and a sense of not belonging. It's a constant struggle. I could live anywhere in the world and be myself. I am a citizen of the world and I am a feminist".

Chris clearly self-identifies as a citizen of the world, reflecting a cosmopolitan outlook shaped by the tension between belonging and non-belonging, and echoing the condition of "in-betweenness" conceptualised in transnational Chinese feminist liminality. He describes this tension as a "constant struggle", highlighting the complexities involved in distancing himself from any specific place and the enduring negotiation inherent in tensions between belonging and non-belonging in his identity construction (Hu, 2016). This struggle aligns with existing literature on belonging, which often frames it as an individual's search for identity beyond fixed categories (Fortier, 2000; Probyn, 1996). Although the mechanisms behind Chris's self-identification as a cosmopolitan feminist remain unclear at this stage of the interview, it appears that his cosmopolitanism may emerge as a result of his "constant struggle".

While Chris describes belonging as a continuous process, Sam presents a distinct perspective on belonging and cosmopolitan feminist identity construction. For them, identifying as a cosmopolitan feminist means "liberating" themselves from the negotiation between belonging and non-belonging to a specific place.

A 21-year-old feminist based in London, Sam were pursuing a fine arts education in the city. At the time of our interview, they had recently completed their undergraduate studies and were in the process of applying for a master's programme. Throughout our conversation, they emphasised their aspiration to establish themselves as a feminist artist—the main channel through which they mobilised feminism—and their firm decision not to return to China. Sam described their feminist awakening as a gradual process that began during their teenage years in China, when interactions with peers from different towns in school first exposed them to gendered power dynamics. However, it was not until they moved to the UK in 2019 that they developed a more grounded and theoretically informed feminist consciousness, facilitated by the access to diverse, non-"sinocentric" resources and perspectives available in the British socio-cultural and political context. Reflecting on their feminist identity in relation to their Chinese origins and their experiences in the UK, Sam conveyed:

> "I am a feminist and a citizen of the world. I don't understand people craving for belonging to something or somewhere. I liberated myself when I realised I belong to the world and I can go everywhere and be myself".

Unlike Chris, Sam express little interest in forming attachments to a specific place. For Sam, cosmopolitanism serves as a pathway to self-liberation, enabling them to construct an identity free from the constraints of belonging. Yet, this notion of self-liberation itself arises from the tension between belonging and non-belonging—a tension that underpins processes of identity formation in transnational contexts (Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Sam's articulation of self-liberation being the result of their realisation suggests that they may have previously attempted to create a sense of belonging. Thus, rather than signalling the absence of belonging, it reflects an active negotiation of its limits, resonating with the dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality. This self-liberation should therefore not be seen necessarily as an effort to individualise their identity or anchor it in cosmopolitanism, but rather as a consequence of detachment from specific places—a

form of identity work that navigates the shifting boundaries of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This will become clearer as my analysis unfolds in the chapter. They continued to elaborate:

> "Saying I am a Chinese feminist to me implies a fixed identity that doesn't evolve. Saying I am a feminist makes me feel more comfortable and gives me the idea of change and includes many more components that go beyond being Chinese. I think we have the right to choose who we are and who we want to be. I am a feminist, I am a global citizen, I am a human".

For Sam, identifying as Chinese in their feminist identity represents a constraint, reinforcing a sense of fixity rather than evolution. They prefer to identify solely as a feminist, creating a conceptual space where their identity can remain fluid and self-determined (Goffman, 1959; Tu & Xie, 2020). This positioning suggests the embrace of cosmopolitanism as a liminal strategy—a way of remaining open and adaptable amid shifting transnational terrains (Nehring & Hu, 2021). By rejecting fixed identity categories, Sam embrace the potential for ongoing self-transformation. It becomes increasingly clear that their cosmopolitan feminist identity is shaped less by sense of belonging to a defined vision of the global/world than by a process of detachment from, and negotiation with, their Chinese identity.

The evidence presented above reveals a form of identity that is not anchored to a specific place—whether China, the UK or another place—and spans across geographical boundaries. Neither Susanne, Chris, nor Sam provided a clear vision of what it means to be a global citizen or what collective goals global citizens could achieve. Global citizenship seemed to be an identity they fell into rather than one they actively pursued. Therefore, cosmopolitanism emerges not as an aspirational ideology but as a negotiated outcome of living between, and often outside, national frameworks of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Nehring & Hu, 2021). This understanding of cosmopolitan identification as an unintended yet generative by-product of transnational negotiation is central to shaping the concept of "reluctant cosmopolitanism".

While participants' sense of non-belonging to a specific place is evidently linked to their cosmopolitan feminist identities, the processes behind this identity construction remain unclear. To understand "reluctant cosmopolitanism", it is essential to explore how these identities are formed among the six Chinese feminist students in this chapter.

The next section examines how my participants' dis-identification with China has served as a key driver of their cosmopolitan feminist identity.

6.2 "I don't fit into that world": cultural and political dis-identification with China

To understand the processes that drove Susanne, Chris, Leo, Sam, Alex, and Virginia to fall into cosmopolitanism reluctantly, we need to explore how Chinese identity is initially interpreted and then (dis)used in their cosmopolitan feminist identity construction. As discussed in Chapter 2, Chinese identity in this study is a subjective, discursive, situational, and contingent construct (Goffman, 1959).

These six participants exhibited two primary interpretations of Chinese identity: as cultural and political. This section examines how my interviewees construct their cosmopolitanism through dis-identifying with some cultural and political aspects of their Chinese identities. Analysing the tension-filled mechanisms of these dis-identifications provides a deeper understanding of "reluctant cosmopolitanism", revealing it as a result of non-belonging to specific dimensions of Chinese identity.

Subsection 6.2.1 explores the processes of dis-identifying with Chinese identity as cultural identity. This exploration investigates how individuals redefine their relationship with cultural norms and traditions, shedding light on the complexities of reshaping one's identity in the context of evolving cultural understandings. Subsection 6.2.2 shifts focus to the dis-identification from Chinese identity as a political identity. I unpack the mechanisms through which participants navigate the complexities of their political identities, which lead them to develop a sense of non-belonging to China. Through these explorations, I aim to shed light on how processes of dis-identification with aspects of China contribute to the formation of "reluctant cosmopolitan" feminist identities and illuminate the tensions and negotiations of belonging and non-belonging that lie at the core of transnational Chinese feminist liminality.

6.2.1 Departing from cultural China

In interpreting Chinese identity as a cultural identity, the participants in this chapter highlighted aspects of Chinese culture closely tied to conventional cultural gender norms. Susanne and Alex exemplified the role of culture in shaping gender (Epstein,

2007; Risman, 2004, 2017), expressing that they did not identify with Chinese culture when it reflected gender expectations.

Susanne shared that after moving to England, her experiences in China led her to a profound realisation of her estrangement from "that world [China]". When asked to elaborate on the aspects of "that world" with which she no longer identified, Susanne explained:

> "It's the culture. I see my family and friends minding things I don't anymore but I used to in the past, like *xiao* [filial piety], *xianqi liangmu* [good wife and wise mother], these kinds of traditional values. Those types of cultural values don't belong to who I am anymore".

For Susanne, Chinese identity is closely tied to adherence to traditional social and gender norms, including filial piety[6] and the concept of "good wife and wise mother"[7]. While research indicates that the concept of filial piety is situational and has evolved across different historical and social contexts (Ikels, 2004), its gendered structure has remained consistent: women are typically expected to provide care for children and elderly relatives, including both parents and parents-in-law (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). Similarly, the concept of the "good wife and wise mother" confines women to specific roles—wife and mother—within the private, domestic sphere (Wang, 2012). These cultural values—filial piety and "good wife and wise mother"—exemplify how gender expectations are ingrained within Chinese culture and thus how culture shapes gender in individuals' everyday lives (Epstein, 2007; Risman, 2004, 2017). Susanne perceives these gender norms as deeply embedded in Chinese culture and clearly expresses her sense of non-belonging to them. This sense of non-belonging enables her to carve out a distinct personal space in which she constructs her identity by dis-

[6] *Xiao* or also "filial piety" is a Chinese traditional virtue (Chan & Tan, 2004). In Chan and Tan's (2004) words: "The concept of *xiao* in its mature formulation serves to define the ideal relationship between parent and child, which helps to secure the place of the family at the center of the Chinese ethical worldview. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the concern with xiao pervades all aspects of Chinese culture, both past and present" (p. 1).

[7] *Xianqi liangmu* or also "good wife and wise mother" is a virtue of women rooted in Chinese tradition (Wang, 2012). Wang's (2012) analysis delves into the evolving interpretations of this concept across various historical and social contexts, elucidating its enduring significance and impact on the collective identity formation of women in China.

identifying with the gendered aspects of Chinese culture. How does this dis-identification facilitate the development of a cosmopolitan feminist identity? Susanne's narrative illustrates this process as she further elaborates on her identity:

> "As a feminist, how can I fit in all this [Chinese culture]? I don't think there's any coherence affirming to be a Chinese feminist. My country doesn't reflect me anymore. The truth is there is no country I belong to. I know myself: I am a feminist, I am a global citizen".

The quote above illustrates how Susanne arrives at her conclusions, as discussed in section 6.1: "I know myself: I am a feminist, I am a global citizen". For Susanne, identifying as a feminist prompts a renegotiation of her connection with cultural gender norms and traditions, offering insight into the challenges she faces in reconstructing her identity in transnational contexts. These challenges reflect the tensions between detachment from familiar cultural frameworks and the search for new forms of belonging—tensions that often accompany identity reconstruction in transnational settings (Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Although Susanne identifies as a cosmopolitan feminist—the apparent outcome of these tensions—she does not elaborate on what being a "citizen of the world" entails or the implications of belonging to a global community. The absence of this cosmopolitan outlook plays a significant role in shaping what I define as a "reluctant cosmopolitan" identity.

Rather than aspiring to be cosmopolitan, Susanne seems to fall into cosmopolitanism by rejecting certain aspects of her Chinese identity. Her alignment with feminism challenges the traditional gendered cultural values she associates with her Chinese identity. As Susanne dis-identifies with gender norms in China, she also distances herself from certain elements of Chinese culture, and consequently, from aspects of her Chinese identity. This dis-identification fosters a sense of non-belonging, not only to China but also to any specific place. Susanne's embrace of cosmopolitanism—through her self-identification as both a feminist and a global citizen—appears to result from this sense of non-belonging.

This process reflects the condition of transnational Chinese feminist liminality: identity is continually negotiated between the ideals of global feminism and the culturally situated meanings of being Chinese and feminist within shifting transnational terrains (Nehring & Hu, 2021). In this light, Susanne's "reluctant cosmopolitanism"

emerges not from the absence of belonging but from the tension of belonging differently—where the rejection of cultural fixity becomes a generative space for feminist self-definition beyond the nation.

Susanne's experience was not unique; Alex similarly distanced themselves from their Chinese cultural identity and embraced a cosmopolitan feminist identity. At the time of our interview, Alex, a 22-year-old feminist artist whom I met at a conference, had recently completed their bachelor's degree in London and were in the process of applying for a master's programme. Reflecting on their feminist awakening, Alex noted that opportunities to engage with feminist ideas had been limited before moving to England. However, through the digital resources available to them, they were able to access a wide range of feminist discourses. Living in the UK provided Alex with both material and social resources to deepen their understanding of feminism and to articulate a feminist identity that extended beyond the Chinese context. Art and digital mobilisation constituted their primary modes of feminist engagement, complemented by everyday practices such as discussions and informal dialogues on gender equality. When I asked how their self-identification evolved as a feminist from China living in the UK, they responded:

> "I struggle to consider myself a Chinese feminist. I'm a feminist, that's all I am. I don't want to associate myself with something I find horrible and I also don't want people to do so. In China, being sexist is culturally and socially accepted. I can't be a Chinese feminist but I wish I could. "

Alex's struggle with identifying as a Chinese feminist reveals a profound tension between embracing feminism and reconciling it with their Chinese cultural identity. In the quote, Alex associate sexism with Chinese culture, specifically viewing it as a socially and culturally accepted practice in China. This suggests that Alex see gender inequality as deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of their home country. As such, their decision to dissociate from being a "Chinese feminist" reflects a conscious rejection of those cultural norms that perpetuate gender-based disparities. Alex's alignment with feminism alone can be interpreted as a counter-position to the gendered power structures they perceive within Chinese society, signalling an effort to reconstruct identity outside the constraints of culturally prescribed gender roles (Risman, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Despite their strong dis-identification with a "Chinese feminist" label, Alex's expression of a latent desire to adopt such an identity—"I can't be a Chinese feminist but I wish I could"—indicates an evolving position. This statement reflects a tension between rejecting the cultural norms of their home country and longing for a connection to it, underscoring a sense of non-belonging to China. The conflict between identifying as "Chinese" and "feminist" catalyses Alex's move towards a fluid sense of identity (Goffman, 1959), situating them in an "in-between" position where belonging and non-belonging coexist and are continuously negotiated (Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2006), thereby illustrating how transnational Chinese feminist liminality unfolds in identity construction. Ultimately, this internal conflict seems to drive Alex to a cosmopolitan feminist perspective. As they articulate later in the interview, "I see myself as a feminist and a citizen of the world, not belonging to any country or culture or society". This statement highlights Alex's desire to transcend national, cultural, and societal boundaries, marking a shift toward a cosmopolitan feminist orientation.

Thus, Alex's journey toward this identity is not simply a rejection of Chinese cultural norms but also a process of developing a new sense of belonging—one that is not tied to any specific nation or culture. It is through this movement between belonging and non-belonging that Alex construct their cosmopolitan feminist identity, which exemplifies "reluctant cosmopolitanism": an identity formed through the negotiation of tension, where detachment from fixed affiliations becomes a generative space for reimagining feminist belonging in transnational contexts (Fortier, 2000; Nehring & Hu, 2021; Tu & Xie, 2020).

Susanne and Alex exemplify the complex processes through which Chinese identity is interpreted as a cultural identity, challenged through dis-identification with its gendered aspects, and reconfigured through the construction of "reluctant cosmopolitanism". For both participants, embracing cosmopolitanism offered a way to navigate the tensions of belonging and non-belonging that arose from rejecting culturally embedded gender expectations within their Chinese identities, situating this negotiation within the "in-betweenness" that characterises transnational Chinese feminist liminality. This subsection has shown how distancing from specific elements of Chinese cultural identity can catalyse a shift toward a cosmopolitan identification that intersects with feminism.

The following subsection shifts focus to examine how the interpretation of Chinese identity as political identity contributes to the emergence of "reluctant cosmopolitan" feminist identities.

6.2.2 Departing from political China

Discussions on feminism with my participants often led to broader conversations about politics. The Chinese feminist students in this chapter expressed a clear disassociation from Chinese politics. Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that political belonging is integral to identity formation, as it establishes the boundaries that divide the world into "us" and "them" (p. 204). However, it is important to note that not all participants equated Chinese identity with political identity. This subsection explores the experiences of Chris, Leo, and Alex, whose Chinese identities intersected with politics, prompting their disassociation from Chinese identity as a political identity. These processes of political detachment reveal another dimension of the tensions of belonging and non-belonging that underpin transnational Chinese feminist liminality, as participants negotiate the constraints of national political discourse while seeking alternative forms of feminist identification. This disengagement from political China is tied to the way gender is shaped within political discourses. I will analyse the tensions inherent in these processes of non-belonging primarily through the narratives of Chris and Leo, whose accounts provide compelling examples of such dynamics. For instance, reflecting on his identity, Chris stated:

> "Saying I'm a feminist is a political statement. You can't be a Chinese feminist. Being a feminist doesn't ally with being Chinese. It's impossible to reconcile with the idea that the regime can't be feminist. The regime suppresses individuals' freedom to express their sexuality and confines and categorises individuals into fixed gender roles. Politicians preach gender equality but, in fact, the reality is far from it. All this disgusts me and makes me realise I can't be a Chinese feminist".

For Chris, identifying as a feminist carries political implications. He views feminism not merely as a set of personal beliefs or values but as deeply interconnected with broader political structures that regulate gender and sexuality (Yuval-Davis, 2006). By stating that "you can't be a Chinese feminist", Chris distances himself from the concept of "Chinese", reinforcing his dis-identification with the political dimensions of Chinese identity and his rejection of aligning feminism with Chinese identity. This

disengagement stems from his perception that gender equality in China is politically instrumentalised—embedded in state discourses that confine gender (and sexuality) to fixed roles and suppress individual expression (Feng, 2018; Liao, 2020; Ling & Liao, 2020). In this sense, Chris's rejection of Chinese identity is not simply political dissent, but an attempt to reconstruct his identity in opposition to a system he perceives as incompatible with feminist principles.

In China, the state-driven feminism embodied by organisations like the ACWF presents a narrative of gender equality (Feng, 2018; Liao, 2020; Ling & Liao, 2020). However, these organisations, influenced by government policies, do not necessarily reflect genuine gender equality (Zhou, 2019). Chris's recognition of the contradiction between political rhetoric and lived reality situates him within a space of ongoing negotiation between the push of political detachment and the pull of feminist alignment. This tension reinforces his belief in the incompatibility of feminism with Chinese politics. By equating Chinese identity with political identity, Chris concluded, "I can't be a Chinese feminist". As a result, his feminist identity emerges through a conscious dis-identification with his Chinese political identity, propelling him—like Susanne and Alex—toward cosmopolitanism. Yet, this cosmopolitan orientation is not a deliberate pursuit but a default position arising from the impossibility of reconciling feminism with Chinese political belonging. In this way, Chris's "reluctant cosmopolitanism" reflects the tension-laden dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, where a sense of non-belonging to political China and feminist aspiration coexist within unstable transnational terrains (Nehring & Hu, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Like Chris, Leo also expressed a clear perspective on his identity as a cosmopolitan feminist, which emerged from his dis-identification with his Chinese political identity. Leo, a 30-year-old PhD researcher based in northern England I introduced in Chapter 4, reflected on his academic journey, having completed his master's degree in the UK before pursuing a PhD. He shared details of his life, including his English partner and his diverse circle of friends, which included both English and Chinese individuals. When discussing his identity as a feminist from China living in the UK, Leo elaborated:

> "I am a proud gay feminist and that's how I see myself. Being Chinese has pros and cons. Coming from a very ancient culture even though it's sexist makes me proud of being Chinese. Chinese politics is what cancels everything good there is

about being Chinese. I don't feel Chinese when referring to politics, I can feel Chinese when referring to specific aspects of my culture. But overall, I feel I belong to the world".

Leo demonstrates a nuanced understanding of his identity as both gay and feminist, notably excluding his Chinese identity from his initial statement. He explains that "being Chinese" carries both positive and negative connotations, acknowledging the significance of Chinese cultural heritage while also recognising its limitations, particularly regarding sexism. At the same time, he critiques Chinese politics for overshadowing the positive aspects of Chinese culture. This dual stance reveals a productive tension between cultural attachment and political detachment—an ambivalence that captures the shifting dynamics of belonging and non-belonging in transnational identity formation (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023).

Leo's selective identification—embracing aspects of China's culture while rejecting its political aspects—demonstrates how identity is continually shaped through negotiation across socio-cultural and political boundaries (Tu & Xie, 2020). His dis-identification from the political dimension of Chinese identity marks a pivotal moment in his self-definition, transforming non-belonging into a site of feminist rearticulation beyond national frames. While he maintains partial ties to Chinese culture, his disengagement from Chinese politics ultimately propels him toward a cosmopolitan orientation. By concluding that he "belongs to the world", Leo articulates a mode of belonging grounded in openness rather than rootedness—an expression of "reluctant cosmopolitanism", where identity emerges not from the pursuit of global (feminist) aspiration but from navigating the push and pull of attachment and detachment to China within transnational contexts (Fortier, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Similarly to Chris and Leo, Alex echoed their dis-identification with Chinese politics, which contributed to their rejection of a Chinese identity. While reflecting on their cosmopolitan feminist identity and dis-identification with their cultural roots, Alex remarked:

"I also find it horrible how the Chinese government deals with gender equality and feminism. I've never felt represented by the government. I don't want to be associated with it. I don't feel Chinese, politically speaking".

For Alex, the Chinese government's approach to gender equality and feminism stands in direct contradiction to their feminist views, prompting a clear dis-identification with Chinese identity as a political identity. Yet, their phrasing—"I don't feel Chinese, politically speaking"—suggests that while their political detachment is firm, it coexists with other forms of attachment to China. This indicates a partial and situated sense of non-belonging, in which Alex's identity negotiation operates within the tension between rejecting certain aspects of China's cultural (as discussed in subsection 6.2.1) and political dimensions—particularly where both reproduce gender hierarchies—and maintaining a sense of belonging to other elements of Chinese identity. This ambivalence exemplifies the negotiated nature of belonging in transnational contexts, where detachment and attachment coexist and continually reshape one's understanding of identity (Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Within this process of continual negotiation, Alex's position reflects the dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, where belonging and non-belonging become generative tensions that give rise to their "reluctant cosmopolitan" feminist identity.

Drawing on the insights discussed above, this subsection illustrates how a subset of Chinese feminist students in the UK dis-identify themselves with political aspects of their Chinese identity. The processes of dis-identification examined foster a sense of non-belonging to China, leading Chris, Leo, and Alex to reluctantly embrace cosmopolitanism and identify as cosmopolitan feminists.

This section has focused on the partial dis-identification with Chinese identity, particularly in its cultural and political dimensions, as a key factor in shaping cosmopolitan feminist identities. "Reluctant cosmopolitanism" emerged from the internal tensions experienced by Chinese feminists, who struggled to reconcile traditional Chinese gender norms—deeply embedded in both cultural and political contexts—with feminist ideals. These gender constructs, which fostered a sense of non-belonging to China, prompted participants to embrace a global worldview where feminist principles were more widely accepted. Consequently, cosmopolitanism was shaped less by a deliberate orientation toward global solidarity than by a negotiation of the limits of belonging. In this sense, the cosmopolitanism that emerged was inherently "reluctant"—a product of tension rather than transcendence, and a manifestation of feminist identity forged within the liminal space of transnational experience.

Having examined the processes that led participants to dis-identify with China, the following section explores their sense of non-belonging to their host country, the UK. This analysis provides further insight into the pathways through which Chinese feminist students in the UK navigated the construction of their versions of cosmopolitanism in their feminist identity formation.

6.3 "The white colonisers par excellence": rejecting British (historical) coloniality

Chinese feminist students who identify as cosmopolitan feminists devised a range of strategies in constructing their identities. While these participants expressed a general sense of non-belonging to any particular place, my interviews revealed a more pronounced sense of disconnection from another specific place beyond China, further complicating the tensions of belonging and non-belonging that underpin their cosmopolitan feminist identity construction. This section explores how "reluctant cosmopolitanism" also stemmed from developing a sense of non-belonging to the UK, as participants' host country, due to their rejection of British historical colonialism.

While my participants' experiences in the UK vary, their encounters with British colonialism cannot be understood independently of their socio-economic and educational positionalities. Most participants come from relatively privileged class backgrounds that enabled their transnational mobility for higher education, and—as shown in Chapter 3—many were enrolled in social sciences degrees where postcolonial theory, empire critique, and global power asymmetries form core components of the curriculum (Hammer, 2018). Waters (2006) has shown that privileged, mobile students often acquire distinctive forms of "global cultural capital" through overseas education, including fluency in critical academic discourses on colonialism, race, and inequality. Similarly, Ong (1999) argues that transnationally mobile Asian individuals develop particular forms of political and cultural literacy through their navigation of global educational and social fields. These frameworks shaped how my participants interpreted the UK context: colonialism became a salient analytic lens not only because of Britain's dominant historical narratives, but because it resonated with the interpretive tools they were routinely exposed to in their studies. Thus, their sense of non-belonging to the UK emerged less from direct encounters with colonial structures alone and more from the ways their class background and academic training positioned them to read British

society through the lens of coloniality as a way of making sense of global inequalities, identity, and power.

Earlier in the chapter, I used Chris as an illustrative case to show how he constructed his cosmopolitan feminist identity through a sense of non-belonging to China, stemming from his dis-identification with his Chinese political identity. This political detachment became even more pronounced when he reflected on his experiences in the UK. As I invited participants to consider their feminist identities in relation to both their Chinese origins and their lives in the UK, Chris extended his reflections by situating British colonialism as another source of non-belonging, thus further shaping his cosmopolitan feminist identity. He explained:

> "I know who I am. I am a feminist, gender equality is what I believe in. I belong to the world, I'm not British, I'm not Chinese, I don't need to be categorised in any way. […] I don't recognise myself in both societies, I don't feel represented by none of them. How could I make a choice between the Chinese regime and the white colonisers par excellence? I don't belong to none of them, I rather belong to the world".

Chris highlights his sense of global citizenship through a clear rejection of belonging to both China and the UK. He conveys a desire to transcend conventional identity categories, expressing that he does not need to be defined or categorised. His sense of non-belonging to China is rooted in his dis-identification with the Chinese political system, while his disconnection from the UK stems from viewing British citizens as "the white colonisers par excellence", a perception shaped by Britain's historical colonial dominance. This framing resonates with Mahmud's (1999) conceptualisation of colonialism as a relationship of domination, with race being a significant marker of difference. Chris's refusal to identify with either national context reveals a deeper tension between competing forces of attachment and detachment in his identity formation in transnational spaces (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023). Positioned between political disillusionment with China and a rejection of British coloniality, Chris occupies a liminal space where belonging and non-belonging coexist and are continually renegotiated. In this sense, his embrace of cosmopolitanism does not arise from a positive aspiration toward the "global", but from navigating the constraints and exclusions produced by both national contexts—an example of the

"reluctant cosmopolitanism" that emerges when transnational feminists reconfigure non-belonging as the only viable ground for self-definition (Fortier, 2000).

Interestingly, Chris was not the only participant to interpret the UK through a historical colonial lens. Discussing their experiences in the UK and their relationship with the host country after three years of living in the English capital, Sam noted:

> "It's painful for me to accept that I'm okay here [in the UK] as I don't feel any type of connection with this country. I actually hate the UK, it's the symbol of white colonialism but I guess it's still better than the US".

After expressing a strong sense of non-belonging to the UK and a lack of connection to the country, Sam echo Chris's perspective by linking the UK to its colonial past. Their characterisation of the UK as "the symbol of white colonialism" demonstrates a critical awareness of how racialised histories shape contemporary understandings of place—a point widely noted in scholarship on coloniality and racialised power (Bhambra, 2014; Gilroy, 2004). Sam's interpretation reflects how migrants may read the host society not only through lived experience but also through broader historical narratives, particularly those foregrounded in academic contexts such as their own (Ong, 1999; Waters, 2006). This awareness informs their rejection of the UK, revealing a tension between living within a society and feeling fundamentally detached from its historical and racial structures. Such tension—between being physically located in the UK yet symbolically distanced from it—exemplifies the complex negotiations of belonging and non-belonging that characterise transnational identity formation (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023). Sam's cosmopolitanism, much like Chris's, arises from the necessity of distancing themselves from both the historical legacies and contemporary realities of their host country. In this way, their cosmopolitanism is distinctly "reluctant": one borne not out of a seamless integration into global belonging but as a resistance to specific national identities and histories.

Virginia provides another compelling illustration of the sense of non-belonging to the UK in the construction of her cosmopolitan feminist identity. Unlike Chris and Sam, Virginia's perspective foregrounds a more explicitly racialised reading of the UK, situating her experiences within both Britain's colonial past and its contemporary racial hierarchies. Her account suggests that racism encountered in the present is inseparable

from the longer colonial histories that continue to shape the social terrain in which racialised migrants are positioned (Bhambra, 2014; Gilroy, 2004).

A 25-year-old PhD researcher based in Northern Ireland, Virginia had previously completed her postgraduate studies in England. She explained that her engagement with feminism began during her teenage years in China, when she "suffered as a woman"—a phrase she used to describe gendered inequalities within her family, particularly the differential treatment she received from her father because she was a girl and not a boy. These early experiences shaped her feminist consciousness, which she later developed into a more explicit feminist practice focused on discussions among her circle of Chinese friends about the gender pay gap, gendered expectations around motherhood, and the social stigma surrounding menstruation.

When articulating her feminist identity through a cosmopolitan lens, Virginia refrained from identifying as Chinese, despite the racial discrimination she and her Chinese friends encountered in the UK, which, in her words "[racial discriminations] make us feel foreigners…Chinese in this country [the UK]". Identifying as a global citizen marked the onset of her discourse, wherein she further expounded:

> "Being Chinese, British, whatever. I am a feminist. I am free from these limitations people put on their identities. I don't belong to China or the UK. I belong to the world. […] The UK doesn't represent me also. I will always be a foreigner here [in the UK.] I don't identify with the British culture and society. I feel the white supremacy in this country [the UK.]"

Virginia's account reveals how racialisation in everyday life positions her as permanently "out of place" (Ahmed, 2000), reinforcing a sense of structural exclusion rather than mere personal disconnection. Her statement that she will "always be a foreigner" captures how processes of racial othering actively delimit the boundaries of belonging in the UK, echoing scholarship on systemic racial hierarchies and the endurance of white supremacy in settler and post-imperial contexts (Bhambra, 2014; Razack, 2002). In this sense, her rejection of the UK is not only a critique of its colonial past but also a response to the racialised social relations that continue to shape her transnational experience.

Virginia's sense of non-belonging to both China and the UK produces a tension between imposed identities and her desire for self-definition (Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Positioned between these sites of exclusion, she turns to cosmopolitanism as a means to transcend the constraints of national categorisation. Yet, as with the other participants, her cosmopolitanism is not aspirational but "reluctant": it emerges from negotiating the limits of belonging within racialised and politicised national frameworks. By claiming a cosmopolitan feminist identity, she occupies a "third space" (Bhabha, 1994; Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023) where new modes of identity construction become possible when dominant cultural and political identities are insufficient. For Virginia, this space becomes the only viable ground on which her feminist identity can thrive beyond the exclusions she encounters in both China and the UK.

Chris, Sam, and Virginia illustrated how Chinese feminist students in this chapter developed a sense of non-belonging to the UK through their rejection of British historical colonialism. This dis-identification with their host country, alongside their dis-identification with China, shaped their pathways to "reluctant cosmopolitanism". By distancing themselves from both contexts, they navigated the tensions of belonging and non-belonging that underpin their feminist identity formation in transnational spaces. It is within this ongoing negotiation—where attachment to neither place feels tenable, yet detachment from both requires continual reorientation—that their identities come to reflect the dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality. In this liminal condition, the instability of place-based belonging becomes a generative ground for reconfiguring identity, leading participants to articulate a cosmopolitan feminist position not by aspiration but through the conditions of their transnational lives. Their embrace of cosmopolitanism thus emerges as the outcome of reconciling feminist commitments with the constraints, exclusions, and contradictions of the national contexts available to them.

Having explored the processes that shape "reluctant cosmopolitan" feminist identities among Chinese feminist students, I conclude this chapter by summarising my findings and reflecting on the contributions of my participants' experiences on cosmopolitan and transnational identity construction.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the processes underpinning the construction of a "reluctant cosmopolitan" feminist identity among Chinese feminist students in the UK. In addressing the research questions—What tensions drive Chinese feminist students in the UK to identify with cosmopolitanism? How do such tensions shape feminists' version of cosmopolitanism?—I demonstrated that participants' identities were formed through a sustained negotiation of belonging and non-belonging across transnational social, cultural, and political contexts (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Their cosmopolitan feminist identities emerged not from a deliberate aspiration toward global belonging, but from the tensions generated by dis-identifying with particular dimensions of both China, their country of origin, and the UK, their host country. Three key mechanisms of non-belonging shaped this process: rejection of gender-related aspects of Chinese culture and politics, and of British historical coloniality. Together, these mechanisms illuminate the dynamics of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, in which identity is continuously reworked within the "in-between" spaces created by competing attachments and detachments, ultimately enabling the formation of "reluctant cosmopolitanism" as a response to these tensions.

Theories on cosmopolitanism tends to frame its developments as rooted in individuals' liberation from being products of their cultures (Beck & Sznaider, 2006), emphasising autonomy, experiential openness, and engagement with diverse cultures (Hannerz, 1990). Cosmopolitan identity is thus understood as transcending national and cultural boundaries and resisting fixed categorisations (Delanty, 2006; Pichler, 2012; Turner, 2001). While my participants' identities reflect some of these characteristics—such as fluidity and the willingness to transcend boundaries—I argue that their cosmopolitan feminist identity construction diverges from existing literature in two key ways.

First, my participants' cosmopolitanism is not shaped by a clear understanding of what it means to be a cosmopolitan citizen. As discussed, they did not articulate a vision of global belonging or engagement with a cosmopolitan community, suggesting that their cosmopolitanism does not stem from a preconceived cosmopolitan ideal. Instead, they appear to fall into cosmopolitanism as a consequence of their sense of non-belonging to China and the UK. However, this non-belonging does not reflect a

complete detachment from either country. Rather, it reflects a more fluid process of self-identification, where participants simultaneously reject and selectively engage with aspects of both cultures. For example, Leo explicitly dis-identified with Chinese politics but still embraced certain aspects of Chinese culture. This nuanced engagement suggests that "reluctant cosmopolitanism" involves a selective and critical form of belonging, where individuals assert their autonomy while engaging with elements of both their home and host countries.

Second, I conceptualise "reluctant cosmopolitanism" within transnational identity construction. Understanding this requires situating the concept within broader scholarship on transnational identities, particularly in the context of individuals experiencing transnational mobility, such as the Chinese feminist students in this study. My participants' "struggle" of belonging might resonate with Marino's (2019) concept of "double absence", which describes the dual experience of Italian migrants in Australia who struggle to establish belonging in either their home or host country. However, while Marino (2019) found that Italian-Australians construct their identities in the "in-between" space of this double absence, my participants take a different approach: they build an identity beyond the China-UK binary, embracing cosmopolitan feminism as a "third space" for identity construction.

Contemporary diaspora studies have conceptualised a "third space" as a site where individuals negotiate their identities beyond the dichotomy of origins and destination's countries: a space for reconciling conflicting cultural, social, and political identifications (Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023; Purkarthofer, 2022). Marchetti-Mercer and Virga's (2023) concept of "interliminal space", which captures the complexity of identity negotiation among Italian-South Africans, offers valuable insights into this process. Their participants actively engage in imaginative identity constructions and build a long-term sense of self between Italy and South-Africa.

By contrast, the Chinese feminist students in this chapter do not articulate an imaginative identity between China and the UK; instead, they demonstrate a fluid identity construction grounded in ongoing tensions of belonging and non-belonging. Rather than cultivating attachments to either context, their cosmopolitanism emerges through a process of detachment from both, moving beyond the China–UK binary altogether. This divergence from the "interliminal" identity-making observed by

Marchetti-Mercer and Virga (2023) necessitates a different conceptual approach. Building on the framework of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, which captures the "in-between" tensions through which Chinese feminist students' identities are first negotiated, I interpret my participants' "reluctant cosmopolitan" self-identification as a site of identity formation in which, neither China nor the UK serves as a site of belonging; instead, both function primarily as points of rejection, through which non-belonging becomes the generative ground for cosmopolitan feminist identity.

With this chapter's analysis, this study has examined three key identity formations among Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK: individualised Chinese feminist identity, collective Chinese feminist identity, and cosmopolitan feminist identity. Together, these modes of identification illuminate how participants negotiate the frictions and pressures that shape feminist identity construction across personal, communal, and global scales, as well as across socio-cultural and geopolitical terrains. These negotiations unfold within the framework of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, highlighting the dynamic and unsettled conditions through which participants reconfigure their feminist identities. Chapter 7 will summarise the key findings, highlight the study's original contributions and implications, and outline its limitations and directions for future research.

Chapter 7

Conclusions and discussion

This research has examined the processes underpinning the construction of feminist identities among Chinese feminist students in the UK. I situated feminist identity formation within two interconnected contexts: China's recent socio-political tightening—marked by intensified restrictions on feminist mobilisation and rising nationalist anti-feminism and misogyny (Feng, 2018; Liu, 2024; Mao, 2020; Wang & Driscoll, 2018)—and the increasingly significant role of transnational mobility in the lives of Chinese feminists. My pilot study revealed that mobility itself has become a meaningful site of feminist identity work, prompting the need to theorise Chinese feminism through a transnational lens. In doing so, this thesis has sought to expand our understanding of Chinese feminism by illuminating an underexplored aspect through the analysis of the interplay between transnational mobility, China's socio-political changes, and feminist identity formation.

Throughout this study, I framed Chinese feminism as an ongoing negotiation between transnational feminist influences and China's evolving historical and contemporary gender discourses (Liu et al., 2015; Wesoky, 2016). I understood this negotiation as taking place within—and shaped by—fragile transnational conditions (Nehring & Hu, 2021), where mobility enables new forms of feminist engagement while simultaneously producing precarity. Building on multidimensional conceptualisations of mobility (Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007), I positioned transnational mobility not merely as a backdrop but as a catalyst: a transformative and tension-laden space in which socio-cultural, political, and feminist frameworks are continually negotiated. This approach enabled me to situate the identity work of Chinese feminist students within both China's shifting socio-political landscape and the structurally constrained transnational settings through which they navigate.

Accordingly, this study analysed identity construction as fluid, context-dependent, and socially produced (Goffman, 1959; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991). It was guided by three research questions—with the first serving as the central focus:

- How do Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK construct their feminist identities?
- (a) How does transnational mobility influence the identity construction of Chinese feminist students in the UK?
- (b) What processes drive Chinese feminist students in the UK to identify in particular ways, and how do these processes shape their feminist identities?

These questions examined how participants navigated transnational social spaces to construct, negotiate, and articulate their feminist identities, and how the intersection of Chinese and feminist identities emerged as a dynamic, relational, and context-dependent process. Drawing on social constructionist understandings of identity (Goffman, 1959), I conceptualised identity work as unfolding through everyday interactions and situated within shifting socio-cultural and political landscapes across China and the UK.

Across the analysis, I identified three key pathways to feminist identity shaped by these negotiations—individualised Chinese feminist identity, collective Chinese feminist identity, and cosmopolitan feminist identity. Rather than discrete categories, these identity pathways represent tension-driven sites of negotiation through which participants positioned themselves within, against, and beyond particular national, socio-cultural, and political frameworks, engaging in an ongoing interaction with these structures. These identity pathways are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2

The Three Identity Pathways

	"I Chinese Feminist" identity	**"We Chinese Feminists" identity**	**"I Cosmopolitan Feminist" identity**
Characteristics	Individualised Chinese feminist identity	Collective Chinese feminist identity	"Reluctant cosmopolitan" feminist identity
	a) departing from gender norms; b) rejecting racial stigmas;	a) encounters with racism; b) trans-ethnic solidarity;	a) departing from cultural China; b) departing from political China;

Motivations	c) "self-othering" from racial stereotypes; d) positive reinforcement of Chinese feminist identities.	c) cross-border organising.	c) rejecting British (historical) coloniality.

In this chapter, I reflect on how my key findings contribute to three main areas of scholarly inquiry: Chinese feminism, transnational feminism, and feminist identity construction in transnational contexts. I also discuss this study's implications, limitations and potential directions for future research.

7.1 Contributions and implications of this research

By examining how Chinese feminist students in the UK negotiate, contest, and redefine their identities, this thesis advances theoretical understandings of Chinese feminism, transnational feminism, and feminist identity construction in transnational contexts. It also highlights the implications for Chinese feminist practice and gender equality policymaking in the UK. The following subsections outline this study's key contributions and implications.

7.1.1 Illuminating Chinese feminism beyond national boundaries: transnational Chinese feminist liminality

This study broadens our understanding of Chinese feminism by demonstrating that feminist identity among Chinese feminist students in the UK is constructed within what I conceptualise as transnational Chinese feminist liminality. This framework captures the "in-between" condition that arises as participants navigate the shifting terrain between China's socio-cultural and political landscape (Liu, 2024; Mao, 2020; Tu & Xie, 2020; Wang & Driscoll, 2018) and the uneven, opportunity-filled yet precarious conditions of transnational mobility (Nehring & Hu, 2021; Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007).

Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) theorisation of liminality, transnational Chinese feminist liminality conceptualises identity construction as a dynamic process through which Chinese feminist students negotiate tensions shaped by mobility, gender, and the multifaceted meanings of "being Chinese" under fragile global conditions. From this perspective, liminality is not a transitional phase but a generative space where cultural meanings, political attachments, and feminist aspirations are continually rearticulated through tension and encounter.

Within this conceptual framing, the three identity pathways identified in this thesis—individualised, collective, and cosmopolitan feminist identities—emerge not as descriptive categories but as empirically grounded manifestations of this liminal condition. Each pathway illuminates a particular configuration of tension: between autonomy and relational influence (Chapter 4), between solidarity and diversity within feminist collectives (Chapter 5), and between global aspiration and national attachment in cosmopolitan engagement (Chapter 6). Together, they show that Chinese feminist identities take shape through tensions generated across social, cross-cultural, trans-ethnic and political interactions (Goffman, 1959; Tu & Xie, 2020) that are themselves conditioned by transnational mobility (Nehring & Hu, 2021; Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007).

For example, in Chapter 4, participants' experiences of "self-othering" demonstrated how inter-ethnic interactions in the UK, often marked by racial stereotypes, led some feminists to distance themselves from their Chinese identities and redefine these identities through their feminist identities. The participants who "self-othered" themselves expressed discomfort in their interactions with non-Chinese individuals in the UK, citing how racialised assumptions about their Chinese identity heightened their awareness of it. These interactional encounters generated a tension between external categorisation and self-definition, prompting participants to negotiate and reconfigure the meaning of being both "Chinese" and "feminist". In this process, they drew on feminist identity to counter the constraints imposed by racialisation, illustrating how individualised identity construction unfolds through the tension-laden dynamics.

In Chapter 5, my findings of trans-ethnic solidarity revealed how alliances with communities such as Black or Latino groups in the UK and the US enabled participants to develop a sense of shared struggle, reinforcing their collective Chinese feminist identity. Many feminists in this group described how participating in the Black Lives

Matter protests against racism extended their understanding of interconnected oppressions and strengthened their sense of belonging to the Chinese feminist community. These trans-ethnic encounters simultaneously produced tensions between inclusion and marginality, as participants navigated both the solidarities of shared struggle and the limits of recognition afforded to them as racialised outsiders. These interactional tensions became a catalyst for collective identity formation, as participants articulated a sense of "we Chinese feminists" through their positioning within broader struggles for racial justice.

In Chapter 6, my findings of participants' views on British colonial history and its influence on the UK's current socio-political and cultural landscape revealed that some participants deliberately distanced themselves from British national identity. These feminists explicitly critiqued the UK's colonial history, prompting them to construct a feminist identity detached from British national and socio-political frameworks. This stance generated a tension between attachment and detachment within transnational spaces, as neither China nor the UK offered a stable site of identification. Negotiating this dual sense of non-belonging led participants to orient themselves toward a cosmopolitan stance shaped less by aspiration than by the constraints of exclusion across both national contexts. These interactional tensions ultimately gave rise to "reluctant cosmopolitan" feminist identities.

This interactional perspective highlights that feminist identity construction is about interacting with people as much as with cultural, historical and political frameworks. Such a perspective expands current theories of Chinese feminism (Liu et al., 2015; Wesoky, 2016) by emphasising the multiple dimensions and implications of transnational mobility (Nehring & Hu, 2021; Roberts, 2019; Urry, 2007) on feminist identity construction.

Chinese feminists living overseas, particularly in the UK, navigate profound transformations in their feminist identity, reflecting a nuanced negotiation between freedoms and constraints across both domestic and host societies. For instance, some participants covered in Chapter 5 articulated the concept of the "double concerns" for Chinese feminists in the UK: encountering racism in the host country while simultaneously grappling with China's hostile socio-political environment. These dynamics reveal the fragile and liminal transnational positions that Chinese feminists

inhabit, where identities must be continually constructed and reconstructed across uneven socio-cultural, and geopolitical terrains (Nehring & Hu, 2021). In this context, identity work is shaped as much by possibility as by precarity, reinforcing the need to view Chinese feminism as formed through ongoing interactional tensions rather than fixed or nationally bounded categories.

By advancing the concept of transnational Chinese feminist liminality, this study challenges static, monolithic understandings of Chinese feminism that are rooted in methodological nationalism (Beck, 2007; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Such nation-bound approaches confine Chinese feminism to developments within China's borders, overlooking the increasingly transnational, tension-driven, and interactional conditions under which contemporary Chinese feminists construct their identities. In contrast, this study demonstrates that Chinese feminism is a dynamic and evolving movement shaped simultaneously by Chinese socio-political conditions and by the frictions, negotiations, and opportunities generated in transnational spaces.

Applying the lens of transnational mobility further illuminates Chinese feminism as a multifaceted and heterogeneous formation that responds not only to constraints within China but also to the broader global feminist discourses that participants encounter abroad. The findings underscore the importance of recognising the plurality, fluidity, and contextual diversity of Chinese feminist identities—identities that are continually reworked through cross-border encounters, shifting geopolitical dynamics, and the uneven conditions of global mobility.

In doing so, the concept of transnational Chinese feminist liminality offers a productive framework for future research. It foregrounds how Chinese feminist identities emerge in spaces characterised by tension, negotiation, and continual redefinition, and it highlights the need for further scholarly attention to the experiences of transnational Chinese feminists overseas. Such a perspective opens new avenues for understanding how feminist identities are shaped across borders, within the unstable and generative "in-between" that defines contemporary transnational life.

7.1.1.1 Implications for Chinese feminist practice

The three identity pathways identified in this study through transnational Chinese feminist liminality reflect distinct yet interconnected implications for Chinese feminist

practice, highlighting the diversity and fluidity of feminist mobilisation. First, individualised feminist identities are linked to personalised forms of feminist activity that centre on self-expression and individual practices, without necessarily prioritising collective benefits (Kelly, 2015). However, my findings indicate that such an individualised perspective on feminist mobilisation and collective efforts are not mutually exclusive but can instead complement one another in advancing feminist goals. For instance, many feminists discussed in Chapter 4 exemplify this individualised approach by citing their personal ways of mobilising feminism in their everyday lives (e.g. through avoiding sexist language and behaviours and their intimate relationships). Simultaneously, their active participation in the Chinese #MeToo movement events and VaChina initiatives in the UK, and their digital advocacy for gender equality on Chinese social media platforms demonstrate how individualised identities can meaningfully contribute to collective feminist mobilisation. These findings suggest that Chinese feminist practice should cultivate models of mobilisation that bridge individual and collective feminist practices. Recognising the value of personalised feminist practices could strengthen collective action by encouraging diverse forms of participation and engagement.

Second, collective feminist identities emphasise transnational and trans-ethnic solidarity, bridging feminist communities across cultural and geographic divides (Lyons, 2010). This form of mobilisation addresses shared struggles, such as racism and inequality, in transnational contexts. My findings demonstrate that collective identities emerge through participants' sustained interactions with feminist networks and trans-ethnic alliances. For instance, many participants discussed in Chapter 5 described how participating in global anti-racist campaigns enabled them to find common ground with activists from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These experiences not only reinforced their commitment to addressing racial inequality but also strengthened their sense of a shared Chinese feminist identity, illustrating how collective feminist mobilisation is rooted in solidarity and shared experiences. These findings suggest that Chinese feminist practice should cultivate trans-ethnic solidarity by fostering inclusive platforms for dialogue and collaboration. Building these alliances across ethnic minority groups can enhance collective Chinese feminist mobilisation, enabling it to address intersectional challenges and create resilient and adaptive feminist practices in transnational contexts.

Third, cosmopolitan feminist identities are associated with a praxis that transcends national and cultural boundaries, engaging with universal feminist principles of justice and equality (Reilly, 2007). Yet, the participants who identified with cosmopolitan principles in this study did not express a defined vision of "global" feminism. They articulated a cosmopolitan feminist identity that was not anchored in a strong connection to any specific global feminist community. Rather than engaging in collective cosmopolitan feminist mobilisation, these feminists viewed their embrace of cosmopolitan feminism as a vehicle for individual transformation and feminist mobilisation beyond China. This was evident in their professional aspirations linked to their feminist practice (e.g. becoming feminist artists) and their decisions not to return to China, seeing their cosmopolitan feminist identity as integral to shaping their life trajectories. These findings suggest that Chinese feminist practice should engage with cosmopolitan feminists from China to expand feminist mobilisation beyond national frameworks. Understanding why some feminists from China embrace a ("reluctant") cosmopolitan approach to their feminist identities and feminist mobilisation may offer valuable insights into how Chinese feminism can adapt to more fluid and transnational forms of mobilisation.

Acknowledging the fluid nature of Chinese feminist identities is essential for shaping effective feminist practice. By developing flexible and inclusive models that empower both individual and collective mobilisation, Chinese feminists can cultivate adaptive and resilient forms of engagement across diverse socio-political and cultural contexts.

Having outlined the contributions of this thesis to Chinese feminism and its implications for Chinese feminist practice, the following subsection examines how this research advances our understanding of transnational feminism.

7.1.2 Intersectionality and mobility shaping Chinese feminist experiences: extending transnational feminism

This research makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on transnational feminism by challenging the dominance of western-centric feminist narratives (Mohanty, 2003). Through analysing Chinese feminist students' lived experiences in the UK, this study underscores the diversity of feminist identities emerging in transnational spaces, offering a crucial counterpoint to the homogenised portrayals of feminism (Grewal, 2008). By focusing on the interplay of transnational mobility (Roberts, 2019;

Urry, 2007) and intersectionality (Collins 1990; Crenshaw, 1991), this research advances our understanding of how intersecting identities and socio-political and cultural specificities shape multiple and diverse manifestations of transnational Chinese feminist experiences.

For instance, my findings of collective Chinese feminist identity construction reveal that heightened ethnic identity awareness reinforces participants' collective feminist identity. Specifically, transnational encounters—such as experiences of racism in the UK—shape socio-political specificities that, in turn, craft a distinct collective feminist consciousness. In this process, which informs not only feminist identity construction but also feminist mobilisation, transnational mobility plays a fundamental role as it creates the conditions for Chinese feminists to engage in both local and transnational feminist mobilisation, fostering a hybrid feminist praxis that embraces strategies addressing both contexts. These hybrid strategies enable participants to bridge feminist discourse across national and cultural boundaries, creating synergies between their mobilisation in China and the UK. Encounters with racism, for example, emphasised the role of anti-racist mobilisation and trans-ethnic solidarity in reshaping feminist identities, as participants' resistance to racism intertwined with their feminist mobilisation.

Moreover, this study highlights the pluralistic nature of transnational feminist experiences by showing how my participants' transnational trajectories between China and the UK shaped their feminist identities. For example, in discussing the influence of their transnational experiences on their feminist consciousness, some participants identified their feminist awakening as occurring after moving to the UK. They described how adopting a feminist perspective transformed their interactions within intimate relationships, family dynamics, and social circles. These findings highlight that transnational mobility not only shapes feminist identity formation but also plays a crucial role in integrating feminist ideologies into everyday social interactions.

By navigating gender and mobility across borders, participants encounter both challenges and opportunities for feminist expression. The negotiation of feminist identities fosters a diversified and adaptable feminist engagement that responds to the unique socio-political conditions in each context. While racism in the UK presents significant obstacles, it also serves as a catalyst for reinforcing collective feminist identity. For instance, many participants discussed in Chapter 5 explicitly linked their

collective experiences of racism in the UK to a strengthened feminist and ethnic minority consciousness, demonstrating how marginalisation can contribute to collective feminist identity formation. Similarly, some participants who articulated a cosmopolitan feminist identity reflected on how their sense of foreignness in British society—exacerbated by racial dynamics—shaped their understanding of feminism. Rather than seeing this exclusion as solely negative, they used it to develop a "reluctant cosmopolitan" feminist perspective. These experiences demonstrate how Chinese feminists in the UK engage in diverse forms of feminist expression—whether through individual feminist practices, collective solidarity, or cosmopolitan feminist ideologies—while simultaneously resisting marginalisation in transnational contexts.

By centring intersectionality and mobility, this research underscores the need for transnational feminist scholarship to adopt theoretical frameworks that reflect diverse voices. Through an examination of Chinese feminist students' identity construction in the UK, it advocates for an intersectional transnational feminist approach (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Grewal, 2008; Mohanty, 2003) that values cross-cultural dialogue, mutual learning, and the incorporation of diverse feminist experiences. This approach not only broadens transnational feminist perspectives but also provides practical insights for feminist movements seeking to build solidarity across cultural and national boundaries.

In conclusion, this study challenges monolithic portrayals of feminism by foregrounding the intersectional and transnational lived experiences of Chinese feminist students in the UK. By emphasising the interplay between transnational mobility and intersectionality, it advances our understanding of how transnational feminism can become responsive to the intersectional experiences of marginalised groups (Mohanty, 2003).

As transnational actors, Chinese feminist students occupy a critical position in broader conversations on gender equality in the UK. Their experiences, shaped by intersectionality and mobility, offer valuable insights into the complexities of gendered inequalities. Recognising these dynamics underscores the importance of including their voices in gender equality policymaking. The following section explores how their lived experiences can inform the development of inclusive and effective gender policies in the UK.

7.1.2.1 Implications for gender equality policymaking in the UK

By navigating both China's and the UK's political and cultural systems, Chinese feminist students can provide a unique vantage point on how gender policies are shaped, challenged, and adapted across borders. Particularly, their transnational lived experiences in the UK allow them to highlight structural inequalities that may be overlooked in national policymaking, unveiling opportunities for inclusive, transnational approaches to gender equality. Drawing on my findings, I argue that the active participation of Chinese feminists in debates and discussions on gender equality in the UK holds significant implications for the effectiveness and inclusivity of policymaking.

The participation of Chinese feminist students in gender equality policymaking can enhance policy inclusivity by integrating diverse, transnational perspectives into decision-making. This ensures that gender equality policies accurately reflect the lived experiences of transnational feminist communities in the UK. For instance, their insights can help policymakers address intersectional issues related to gender, particularly in relation to race and ethnicity. My findings indicate that encounters with racism in the UK heightened participants' ethnic awareness, influencing their perceptions of both their feminist and gender identities. By expanding on this issue, Chinese feminist students can offer valuable perspectives on the ways racialised gender discrimination operates in the UK. Their inclusion in policy discussions would facilitate a comprehensive understanding of these challenges, ultimately contributing to effective and equitable policy responses.

Chinese feminist students can diversify policy interventions by challenging western-centric narratives surrounding gender equality in the UK. As my findings underscore, culture plays a central role in shaping gendered experiences (Epstein, 2007; Risman, 2004, 2017) and, thus, necessitates attention when formulating gender policies that aim to be inclusive and effective. For example, some participants actively distanced themselves from aspects of Chinese culture that reinforced rigid gender expectations, demonstrating how cultural norms influence gender identities and feminist consciousness. Recognising the central role of culture in shaping gendered experiences highlights the need for policies that account for diverse cultural contexts. The involvement of Chinese feminist students in policymaking ensures that gender equality

interventions are nuanced, culturally responsive, and attuned to the varied ways gender inequality manifests across socio-cultural settings. This approach facilitates the development of policies that are both contextually relevant and effective in addressing gender disparities.

Against this backdrop, policymakers, gender equality advocacy organisations, and grassroots feminist communities should actively create inclusive spaces for Chinese feminists to participate in transnational feminist dialogues and contribute to discussions on gender justice. Including their voices in policymaking fosters an intersectional approach to gender equality, reinforcing transnational feminist ties and enriching feminist discourse.

Having explored this thesis's contribution to transnational feminism and its implication for gender equality policymaking in the UK, the following section shifts focus to a broader analysis of feminist identity construction. I will examine how feminist identity is shaped within the complexities of transnational contexts.

7.1.3 Understanding feminist identity construction in transnational contexts

This research underscores the relevance of transnational mobility in shaping contemporary Chinese feminism by shifting the focus from China as a geographical site to its manifestations overseas and emphasising the role of transnational social connections in shaping feminist identities. In doing so, this study positions transnational mobility not only as a setting in which feminist identities unfold but also as a dynamic force that actively reshapes the meanings, possibilities, and limits of feminist identity construction. However, beyond transnational mobility, other external forces also influence the formation of feminist identities. To gain a deeper understanding of feminist identity construction in transnational contexts, it is necessary to situate my findings in the wider context of ongoing geopolitical shifts.

In an increasingly fragmented world, characterised by rising nationalism, systemic racism, and the resurgence of nation-state influence over transnational connections (Nehring & Hu, 2022), this study highlights how feminist identities are negotiated within—and sometimes against—these forces. This broader global socio-political context shapes feminisms, as it allows nation-states' legitimisation of inequality and conservative social norms through intensifying anti-feminist discourses (Sanders &

Jenkins, 2022). China's rising nationalist anti-feminism in digital spaces (Huang, 2023; Liu, 2024) thus is not unique but one among the many manifestations of anti-feminism pervading civil society internationally (Sanders & Jenkins, 2022).

While transnationalism has often been associated with the free movement of people, ideas, and solidarity, the contemporary geopolitical climate suggests an increasingly contested space (Nehring & Hu, 2022). To frame these shifting dynamics, Nehring and Hu (2022) introduce the concept of "fragile transnationalism" to understand current fragile transnational connections, rooted in nationalist politics, structural racism, postcolonial global order, and further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The concept of "fragile transnationalism" is particularly relevant to this study, as it offers a useful framework for examining how my participants' feminist identities are shaped not only by their mobility between China and the UK but also by broader geopolitical shifts that influence their transnational feminist engagement. A key insight of this research is that transnational mobility can generate new ideological tensions, which emerge from the interplay between individuals' identities, racial hierarchies, and the socio-political climate in the UK.

For instance, my findings of cosmopolitan feminist identity reveal that some participants perceive the UK not as an inclusive space for feminist mobilisation but rather as a site where racial and colonial histories continue to shape contemporary inequalities. These participants contextualise race in the present, suggesting that the legacies of colonial-era racism persist in British society. This perception implicitly underscores a racial hierarchy in which my participants, as Chinese individuals, occupy a marginalised position within the UK's ethnic landscape. The entanglement of race, history, and socio-political dynamics in the UK led these participants to identify with a form of "reluctant cosmopolitan" feminism. By distancing themselves from both China and the UK, these cosmopolitan feminists also disengaged from transnational feminist dialogues in the UK, reflecting a broader sense of detachment from both Chinese and transnational feminist movements.

This example illustrates how transnational mobility exposes participants to structural inequalities that are central to the concept of "fragile transnationalism" (Nehring & Hu, 2022). These inequalities complicate their engagement with transnational feminist

movements in the UK, further demonstrating that feminist identities in this study cannot be understood solely as a product of UK-China transnational mobility. Rather, they are also shaped by the structural tensions and constraints that define fragile transnational connections (Nehring & Hu, 2022).

This dynamic reflects a broader pattern among my participants, where transnational mobility does not always straightforwardly facilitate cultural hybridity (Anthias, 2001) but instead leads to tension-filled negotiations of identity. For example, my findings of participants' experiences of living "in a bubble" in the UK, demonstrate that transnational processes can generate intercultural and cross-cultural practices (Anthias, 2008) through identity negotiation, rather than straightforward cultural assimilation. Within this "bubble", some participants rejected conventional socio-cultural meanings linked to their Chinese identity—often encapsulated by terms such as "banana", "westernised", and "brainwashed"—while self-identifying as Chinese feminists in the UK context. Framed within the context of "fragile transnationalism", these findings highlight how nationalism, racialised discourses, and anti-feminist narratives influence transnational feminist identity formation, shaping how participants navigate and redefine their identities.

At the same time, participants' experiences suggest that identity construction extends beyond cultural hybridity (Anthias, 2008), revealing deeper ideological tensions that "fragile transnationalism" produces. For instance, six of my participants self-identify as cosmopolitan feminists without articulating a sense belonging to a defined vision of the global/world or a shared feminist community. Reluctantly identifying as cosmopolitan feminists reveal a broader shift in how individuals are navigating the complexities of a world where a cosmopolitan vision of solidarity among nations and individuals is increasingly undermined (Beck, 2006; Nehring & Hu, 2022).

The experiences and identities of my participants reveal much about the current state of transnational Chinese feminism and its relationship to the broader geopolitical and socio-cultural forces at play. Chinese feminist students' lived experiences in this research show how feminist identity construction is deeply intertwined with the shifting tides of nationalism, racialised politics, and global power dynamics. In navigating multiple, often contradictory, socio-political landscapes, these Chinese feminists are not only reacting to the localised challenges they face in the UK, such as racial

discrimination, and China, such as anti-feminist and misogynist tendencies. They are also grappling with the broader implications of a world marked by the growing erosion of transnational solidarities. These processes are indicative of an increasing "fragile transnationalism" (Nehring & Hu, 2022), where opportunities for solidarity and feminist mobilisation are tempered by the geopolitical forces that threaten to pull them apart.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that feminist identity construction is not a straightforward process exclusively related to the individual. The forces at play are several and include transnational interactions as well as broader influences deriving from ongoing geopolitical transformations. The ways Chinese feminists in the UK navigate these complex, often hostile spaces is essential not only for advancing our understanding of Chinese feminism in a broader global context, but also for envisioning the future of transnational feminisms in a rapidly changing global context.

7.2 Limitations and future research directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the construction of feminist identities among Chinese feminist students in the UK, it has certain limitations. These limitations, both theoretical and methodological, must be considered when interpreting the findings and their implications.

The first key theoretical limitation of this research is that it does not fully account for the fluid and evolving nature of feminist identity construction. While the study identifies three distinct identity pathways that capture how Chinese feminist students navigate their identities at the intersection of gender and Chinese identities, numerous other factors—such as socio-economic background, sexuality, and political ideology—also shape identity negotiation. Many of these fall beyond the scope of this research. Consequently, the framework developed may not encompass the full range of identity negotiation processes, especially as individuals reassess their feminist positions over time or in response to changing political or cultural contexts.

Furthermore, I acknowledge a theoretical limitation in not distinguishing between the gendered experiences of my participants who identified as women, men, and non-binary. By emphasising the fluidity of gender as something "done" through everyday social

interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 1991), this research does not fully address how diverse gender identities shape distinct feminist experiences and, by extension, feminist identities. A key limitation is the underrepresentation of men, despite their crucial role in advancing gender equality (Van Laar et al., 2024). This underrepresentation primarily stems from the challenges encountered in recruiting Chinese men who self-identify as feminists.

Several factors may contribute to the scarce presence of Chinese feminist men in contemporary Chinese society. For example, the increasing emphasis on Confucian values in state discourse tends to reinforce traditional gender norms and portray feminism as a challenge to masculinity and social stability (Han, 2018; Wu & Dong, 2019). Additionally, digital nationalism often frames feminism as a western construct that conflicts with local cultural traditions (Liu & Dahling, 2016; Peng, 2020). At the same time, research indicates that some feminists in digital spaces exhibit mistrust toward men, even when they self-identify as feminist men (Yang, 2024). Together, these influences may discourage men from openly self-identifying as feminists, making their perspectives less visible in feminist research (Wang, 2020).

As a result, the recruitment challenges I encountered limited the diversity of gendered experiences represented in this study. In particular, the scarcity of male participants restricted the extent to which this research could capture the ways in which men engage with and navigate feminist identities. Without sufficient representation of men's perspectives, the theoretical framework developed in this study does not fully account for the complexities of male feminist identity formation, particularly in relation to their gendered experiences.

The third theoretical limitation concerns the use of western theories to analyse the construction of feminist identities among Chinese feminist students in transnational social spaces in the UK. While these theories provide valuable analytical tools, they may not fully capture the specific socio-historical and cultural contexts that shape Chinese feminist identities. This research, however, extends beyond a purely western theoretical framework by localising key concepts to Chinese specificities—for example, by drawing on the theoretical foundations of Chinese feminism and its interaction with transnational feminist theories. Nonetheless, a deeper engagement with Chinese theoretical perspectives could have further enriched the study by offering alternative

frameworks for understanding feminist identity negotiation within a Chinese context. However, due to a gap in the existing literature on this specific topic, I was unable to incorporate a substantial body of Chinese scholarship.

Finally, this study has considered the transnational dimensions of the Chinese feminists' trend of moving abroad from a singular perspective—feminists who leave China. As a result, it does not account for the experiences of those who remain, the "left-behind" feminists in China. While the departure of feminists to overseas countries provides critical insights into their experiences of mobility and feminist identity construction in a transnational context, a comprehensive understanding of transnationalism requires attention to both home and host societies. The perspectives of those who remain in China equally speak to the current state of Chinese feminism as they navigate state restrictions, shifting feminist discourses, and evolving gender politics within the country. Their experiences may differ significantly from those of feminists overseas, particularly in how they negotiate feminist identity and mobilisation under different socio-political conditions.

Turning to the methodological limitations of this study, the first concerns the sample size of 30 participants, which limits the breadth of perspectives represented, particularly given the exclusive focus on students. While researching Chinese feminist students provides valuable insights into their potential as agents of social change (Li, 2018; Shi, 1990; Šadl & Ferko, 2017; Weiss et al., 2012), this focus inevitably excludes other Chinese feminists in the UK who are not engaged in academic studies. These individuals, whether, for example, professionals or community organisers, may experience and articulate their feminist identities in distinct ways from students. However, the value of focusing on students lies in their unique position within both educational and transnational contexts. These contexts enable students to navigate complex social, cultural, and intellectual transitions, which in turn offer rich insights into the process of feminist identity construction. While the exclusion of non-student feminists limits the perspectives represented in this research, the focus on students' specific social positioning in the UK significantly enriches our understanding of feminist identity negotiation.

Additionally, this study is limited by its exclusive focus on the UK as a transnational context. The UK provides a rich setting for exploring how mobility and

transnationalism influence feminist identity construction among Chinese feminist students, particularly due to the significant presence of Chinese international students and the vibrant Chinese feminist mobilisation within British universities (Jin & Ni, 2021; Li, 2018; Universities UK, 2024; Zhang, 2019). However, this focus does not account for how different socio-political environments, institutional frameworks, and cultural landscapes in other countries might shape similar or divergent processes of feminist identity negotiation.

Finally, a methodological limitation arises from the choice of research methods. While in-depth semi-structured interviews, supplemented with participant observation, proved to be valuable in capturing the complexity of feminist identity construction, the study could have benefited from additional methodological approaches, particularly focus groups. Focus groups would have allowed for dynamic discussions among participants and collective reflection and interaction that could reveal further nuances in their feminist identity construction. For instance, after establishing participants' individual approaches to feminist identities through interviews, I could have organised focus groups to strengthen the theorisation of the three identified identity "sparks". The inclusion of focus groups would have facilitated comparative analysis between participants' narratives, helping to enrich the theorising process (Flick, 2018).

Looking ahead, several important avenues for future research emerge from the limitations identified in this study. One promising direction is a longitudinal examination of feminist identity construction. Given that identities are dynamic and subject to change over time (Goffman, 1959), a longitudinal study could provide deeper insights into how Chinese feminist students' identities evolve. Tracking these changes as individuals engage with new feminist discourses, encounter shifting political climates, or return to China would illuminate the long-term processes of feminist identity negotiation and transformation.

Future research could adopt a more inclusive sampling strategy to incorporate a broader range of voices, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse ways in which feminism is negotiated among Chinese individuals. One way to achieve this would be to expand the scope beyond students and include Chinese feminists in non-academic settings. This broader focus would illuminate a wider spectrum of feminist identity formations, practices, and discourses.

A complementary approach for future research would be to adopt an intersectional lens that considers how factors such as class, sexuality, ethnicity, and the urban-rural divide shape feminist identity construction. While this study's sample predominantly reflects participants from socio-economically privileged and urban backgrounds, sexuality emerged as a key factor differentiating their lived experiences. Notably, most men-identifying feminist participants identified as gay, a trend not observed among female or non-binary participants. This raises important questions about the role of sexuality in shaping Chinese men's feminist identities, particularly given the difficulty in recruiting cisgender men who identify as feminists. The notable absence of cisgender men in my sample prompts a critical question: What does this absence reveal about Chinese feminism and feminist mobilisation? Future research should explore how sexuality intersects with feminist identity construction within Chinese transnational communities, particularly among feminist-identifying men, shedding light on the complex interplay between gender, sexual orientation, and feminist engagement.

Further research could also expand upon the Chinese feminists' trend of moving abroad identified in my pilot study, approaching it from three key angles. First, the trend suggests exploring transnational Chinese feminists based overseas. Expanding the scope of research beyond the UK could offer valuable comparative insights into how Chinese feminist students experience identity formation in other transnational contexts. For instance, examining the experiences of Chinese feminists in countries with distinct socio-political climates, such as the United States, could reveal how institutional and cultural settings shape feminist discourses and mobilisation differently. Comparative studies would further enhance our understanding of the transnational dimensions of feminist identity and mobilisation.

Second, the trend of Chinese feminists moving abroad also speaks to the future of Chinese feminism in mainland China. As feminists leave China, they leave space for anti-feminist sentiments to grow, which is already entrenched both within China and internationally (Liu, 2024; Sanders & Jenkins, 2022). Investigating the trend could help us understand the polarisation of feminism in China, viewing the sharp divide between feminists and anti-feminists as a transnational, geographical, and spatial phenomenon, rather than solely an ideological one. Moreover, this exodus also raises questions about the feminists who remain in China—the "left-behind". Who are these feminists and why

are they “left-behind”? If mobility is largely accessible to feminists from socio-economic privileged backgrounds, exploring the experiences of the “left-behind” feminists would provide critical insights into how feminist mobilisation is stratified along socio-economic lines. Future research could explore how feminist and anti-feminist divisions in China are increasingly shaped by socio-economic disparities, leading to further stratification within feminist mobilisation itself. This, in turn, raises an important central question: What does the transnational geographical mobility of Chinese feminists reveal about the future of Chinese feminism in mainland China?

Third, the trend of Chinese feminists moving abroad underscores the need for scholarship on Chinese feminism to engage more deeply with Chinese theoretical perspectives on feminist identity construction in transnational social spaces. While this study has drawn on Chinese feminist scholarship to localise key concepts and bridge the gap between western and Chinese feminist thought, future research can further expand on this foundation. As argued throughout this thesis, Chinese feminism continues to evolve, with its transnational dimensions—particularly beyond national borders—becoming increasingly significant. This highlights the need for theoretical frameworks that can account for its fluid and transnational nature, shaped by an ongoing dialogue between Chinese and transnational feminist thought. Building on my theoretical framework, future studies could further explore this cross-fertilisation, offering deeper insights into Chinese feminist identity construction and feminist mobilisation.

Finally, as geopolitical shifts continue to grow, it is crucial to explore how these challenges affect transnational feminist identities and mobilisation. Future studies could investigate how Chinese feminists in different transnational contexts respond to these emerging obstacles. By examining how Chinese feminists negotiate these barriers, future research could provide valuable insights into how transnational feminists are developing new strategies to sustain cross-border connections and continue their mobilisation in the face of growing hostile environments.

Appendix 1

Interview protocol

The interview protocol below is the final version of an iterative and developmental process, which evolved alongside my research focus. Initially, I conducted a pilot study with Chinese feminists in mainland China. I then shifted my attention to examining how Chinese feminists in the UK supported their counterparts in China. This transition ultimately led to the final iteration of my study, which explores feminist identity construction among Chinese feminist students in the UK. The following document reflects the culmination of these research stages and the refinements made throughout the process.

1. Regarding your perception of yourself as a transnational feminist

1.1 Tell me about your story.

Where were you born? How old are you?

Why are you living in the UK? What do you do? When did you move?

How, why and when did you become close to feminism?

What do you do as a feminist in your everyday life?

1.2 How do you understand your transnationality in relation to being a feminist from China in the UK?

How do you contribute or non-contribute to Chinese feminism?

1.3 What are the differences between Chinese feminists in the UK and the ones based in mainland China?

1.4 How do you, as a feminist from China living in the UK, feel in relation to the community based in mainland China?

1.5 If and how has the way you identify yourself changed (as a feminist from China living in the UK)? How did you come to this understanding?

1.6 If you were in China now, how would the way you define yourself as a feminist change?

1.7 In the future, if you decided to go back to mainland China, how would you carry on your feminist activities?

2. Regarding the transnational nature of Chinese feminism

2.1 How do you think that transnationality help or limit Chinese feminists?

2.2 For some people, transnationalisation is a hybrid process that is based on maintaining one's own identity (e.g. citizenship, gender, feminist etc.) on a global scale (social and geographical mobility). What does this mean to you?/How does it make you feel?

How do you understand your "being Chinese" in the UK?

How do you understand being a feminist from China in the UK? and in China?

Appendix 2

Participant information sheet

Like my interview protocol (see Appendix 1), the participant information sheet presented below reflects the shifts in focus that shaped my research project. This version was used during my investigation into how Chinese feminists in the UK supported their counterparts in China and remained relevant as my study evolved into its final focus: feminist identity construction.

I am Francesca Ceccato, a PhD student in FASS at Lancaster University. I am researching transnational Chinese feminism, particularly Chinese feminists in the UK. My research goal is to understand how Chinese feminists in the UK support Chinese feminism and Chinese feminists based in mainland China. I will use individual in-depth semi-structured interviews as a research method to explore the above topics.

Please, take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Project background

Chinese feminism is a very interesting field of study. Its configuration is hard to describe. My definition of it is "mosaic": each tile is unique and necessary. Among the multiple facets of Chinese feminism, its transnational manifestations overseas, such as Chinese feminists in the UK, have attracted my attention.

Your participation

- **Why have I been invited?**

If I have approached you, it is because you identify as a feminist, you are from China and live in the UK. Hence, you are the ideal interviewee for this study.

I would be very grateful and honoured if you agreed to take part in this research.

- **What will I be asked to do if I take part?**

If you decide to take part, I will ask you to conduct an interview (offline or online), which will be audio recorded, to discuss your life as a feminist from China in the UK and your connections (or absence of your connections) with feminists in mainland China.

- **What are the possible benefits from taking part?**

If you participate in this study, your insights will help understand the transnational connections among Chinese feminists.

- **Do I have to take part?**

No. It is completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

- **What if I change my mind?**

First, you are not obliged to answer any questions. Moreover, if you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your interview. After the interview, due to the research schedule, you will have a two-week period to withdraw. In case you decide no longer to take part in the research, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas, information and data you contributed to the study and destroy them. Furthermore, you would not need to give any reason and your decision would not have any kind of consequences for you.

- **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part, since the interview would take about 60 minutes of your time and will be conducted informally, just like a simple friendly chat.

Moreover, a pseudonym will be assigned to you to ensure the protection of your privacy. By remaining anonymous, no personal details or information which may identify you will be integrated into the study.

- **Will my data be identifiable?**

After the interview, only I, Francesca Ceccato, the researcher conducting this study, and Dr. Derek Hird and Professor Yang Hu, as supervisors of the project, will have access

to the information you will have shared with me. The information include personal details, interview audio recording and transcripts.

Your personal information data (e.g. your name, gender or other information that can identify you) will not be shared with anyone except from Dr. Derek Hird and Professor Yang Hu, as supervisors of the project. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity.

The audio-files of your interview and the transcripts will be destroyed ten years after the completion of the research. Finally, I will ensure the protection of your privacy by encrypting the audio records and the interview transcripts and by archiving them on my password-protected laptop.

- **How will you use the information I have shared with you and what will happen to the results of the research study?**

I will use the information you have shared with me only for research purposes. The most relevant findings will be disseminated as an English-language dissertation or might be presented for publication, in the form of articles, in an English academic or professional journals, or at academic conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, if I reproduced some of the views you shared with me, I would only use anonymised quotes (e.g. statements from my interview with you) to protect your identity. Moreover, all the information which could make you identifiable will be generalised or removed, thus, not used.

- **How will my data be stored?**

All your data (personal information, audio recordings, transcripts of the interviews, and the analysis of the contents) will be stored securely, under the UK Data Protection Act. They will be encrypted on my personal laptop with a password.

Apart from me, Francesca Ceccato, as PhD student, Dr. Derek Hird and Professor Yang Hu, as supervisors of the project, can access the data gathered.

In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

If you have any queries please contact:

Name: Francesca Ceccato (PhD Student)

Address: B182, B - Floor, County Main, Lancaster University, Bailrigg, LA1 4YW
Email: f.ceccato@lancaster.ac.uk

Name: Dr. Derek Hird (Supervisor and Head of Department)

Address: B138, B - Floor, County Main, Lancaster University, Bailrigg, LA1 4YW
Email: d.hird@lancaster.ac.uk

Name: Professor Yang Hu (Supervisor)

Address: B011, B - Floor, Bowland North, Lancaster University, Bailrigg, LA1 4YW
Email: yang.hu@lancaster.ac.uk

If you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you can also contact the Postgraduate Research Appraisal Monitor:

Name: Professor Allyson Fiddler (Postgraduate Research Appraisal Monitor)

Address: B176, B - Floor, County Main, Lancaster University, Bailrigg, LA1 4YW

Email: a.fiddler@lancaster.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix 3

Consent form

Project Title: Transnational Chinese feminism

Name of Researchers: Francesca Ceccato (PhD Student), Dr. Derek Hird (Supervisor), Professor Yang Hu (Supervisor)

Email: f.ceccato@lancaster.ac.uk, d.hird@lancaster.ac.uk, yang.hu@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to consider the information provided regarding this study, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within two weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within two weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	☐
4. I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	☐
5. I understand that the interview will be video/audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

Name of Participant	Date	Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____

Date _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

Bibliography

Ahmed, S. (2000) *Strange encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality*. London: Routledge.

Ahmed S. (2017). Embedding gender equality into institutional strategy. *Global Health, Epidemiology and Genomics* 2(5) doi:10.1017/gheg.2017.5

Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* 2nd ed. London: Verso.

Andrews, K. (2018). *Back to black: Retelling black radicalism for the 21st century*. BestRed.

Angeloff, T., & Lieber, M. (2012). Equality, did you say?: Chinese feminism after 30 years of reforms. *China Perspective, 4*(92), 17–24. https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.6014

Anthias, F. (2001). The material and the symbolic in theorizing social stratification: Issues of gender, ethnicity and class. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *52*(3), 367–390. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071310120071106

Anthias, F. (2002). Where do I belong? Narrating collective identity and translocational positionality. *Ethnicities, 2*(4), 491–514. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968020020040301

Anthias, F. (2008). Thinking through the lens of translocational positionality: An intersectionality frame for understanding identity and belonging. *Translocations, 4*(1), 5–20.

Anthias, F. (2012). Transnational mobilities, migration research and intersectionality: Towards a translocational frame. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research, 2*(2), 102–110. https://doi.org/10.2478/v10202-011-0032-y

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands: la frontera: The new mestiza.* Aunt Lute books.

Aronson, P. (2017). The dynamics and causes of gender and feminist consciousness and feminist identities. In H. J. McCammon, V. Taylor, J. Reger, & R. L. Einwohner (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of U.S. women's social movement activism*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190204204.013.5

Aune, K., & Holyoak, R. (2017). Navigating the third wave: Contemporary UK feminist activists and 'third-wave feminism'. *Feminist Theory*, *19*(2), 183-203. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700117723593

Bao, H. (2020). "Anti-domestic violence little vaccine": A Wuhan-based feminist activist campaign during COVID-19. *Interface: A journal for and about social movements, 12*(1), 53–63.

Bao, H. (2022). The new generation: Contemporary Chinese art in the diaspora. *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art (Great Britain)*, *9*(1–2), 3–17. https://doi.org/10.1386/jcca_00053_2

Barlow, T. E. (1993). *Gender politics in modern China: Writing and feminism.* Duke University Press.

Barlow, T. E. (1994). Politics and protocols of funü: (Un)making national woman. In C. K. Gilmartin, G. Hershatter, L. Rofel, & T. Whyte (Eds.), *Engendering China: Women, culture, and the state* (pp. 339–359). Harvard University Press.

Barlow, T. E. (2001). Globalization, China, and international feminism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 26*(4), 1286–1291. https://doi.org/10.1086/495664

Bauman, Z. (1992). Soil, blood and identity. *The Sociological Review, 40*(4), 675–701. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1992.tb00407.x

BBC News. (2022, February 7). *Peng Shuai: Weibo post sparked "huge misunderstanding"*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-60284261

Beck, U. (2006). *The cosmopolitan vision*. Polity.

Beck, U. (2007). The cosmopolitan condition: Why methodological nationalism fails. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *24*(7–8), 286–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407024007250

Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences.* Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446218693

Beck, U., & Sznaider, N. (2006). Unpacking cosmopolitanism for the social sciences: A research agenda. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *57*(1), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2006.00091.x

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

Bhambra, G. K. (2014). *Connected sociologies*. Bloomsbury.

Bradley, H. (2013). *Gender.* 2nd ed. Polity Press.

Birks, M., & Mills, J. (2015). *Grounded theory: A practical guide (2nd ed.)*. Sage.

Bronfenbrenner, U., Ed. (2005). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development.* Sage Publications Ltd.

Brooks, R. & Waters, J. (2011) *Student mobilities, migration and the internationalization of higher education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Bryant, A. and Charmaz, K. (2007) Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective: An Epistemological Account. In: Bryant, A. and Charmaz, K., Eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*, Sage, 31-57.

Burr, V. (2015). *Social constructionism.* 3rd ed. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315715421

Calhoun, C. (2002). Imagining solidarity: Cosmopolitanism, constitutional patriotism, and the public sphere. *Public Culture*, *14*(1), 147–171. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-1-147

Callahan, W. A. (2006). History, identity, and security: Producing and consuming nationalism in China. *Critical Asian Studies*, *38*(2), 179–208. https://doi.org/10.1080/14672710600671087

Campt, T., & Thomas, D. A. (2008). Gendering diaspora: Transnational feminism, diaspora, and its hegemonies. *Feminist Review, 90*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2008.41

Cebolla-Boado, H., Hu Y., & Nuhoğlu S.Y. (2018). Why study abroad? Sorting of Chinese students across British universities. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 39*(3), 365–380. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2017.1349649

Chan, A., & Tan, S.-H. (2004). Introduction. In A. Chan & S.-H. Tan (Eds.), *Filial piety in Chinese thought and history* (pp. 1–11). RoutledgeCurzon. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203413883

Chan, M. K. (1996). Hong Kong: Colonial legacy, transformation, and challenge. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 547,* 11–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716296547001002

Chandra, G., & Erlingsdóttir, I. (2021). Rebellion, revolution, reformation. In G. Chandra & I. Erlingsdóttir (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of the politics of the #MeToo movement* (pp. 1–23). Routledge.

Chandra, K. (2006). What is ethnic identity and does it matter? *Annual Review of Political Science, 9*(1), 397–424. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.9.062404.170715

Charles, N., Davies, C. A., & Harris, C. C. (2008). *Families in transition: Social change, family formation, and kin relationships.* 1st ed. Policy Press.

Charmaz, K. (2000). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 509–535). Sage Publications.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory : A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. SAGE.

Charmaz, K. (2007). Tensions in qualitative research. *Sociologisk Forskning*, *44*(3), 76–85. https://doi.org/10.37062/sf.44.19279

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory*. 2nd ed. Sage Publications.

Charmaz, K., & Belgrave, L. L. (2019). Thinking about data with grounded theory. *Qualitative Inquiry, 25*(8), 743–753. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418809455

Chen, Z. (2019). Kang Tongbi's pioneering feminism and the first transnational organization of Chinese feminist politics, 1903–1905. *Twentieth-Century China, 44*(1), 3–32. https://doi.org/10.1353/tcc.2019.0001

Cheng, Y. (2004). *Women's organizations in China: From affiliation to autonomy* [Master's thesis, Lund University, Center for East and South-East Asian Studies].

Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 38*(3), 785–810.

Clarke, A. E. (2005). *Situational analysis: Grounded theory after the postmodern turn.* Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412985833

Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.* Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Collins, P. H. (1998). It's all in the family: Intersections of gender, race, and nation. *Hypatia, 13*(3), 62–82. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1998.tb01370.x

Collins, P. H. (2015). Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology, 41*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Consoli, S. (2024). What motivates Chinese students to study in the UK? A fresh perspective through a 'small-lens'. *Higher Education* 88, 1589–1610. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01184-3

Cornwall, A. (2006). Marginalisation by sexuality: Report of an IDS workshop. *Gender & Development*, *14*(2), 273-289. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552070600747305

Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241–1299. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Crenshaw, K. W., & Phillips, A. (1998). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989*, 139–167. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198782063.003.0016

Culler, J. (2010). Teaching Baudelaire, teaching translation. *Profession*, 91–98. https://doi.org/10.1632/prof.2010.2010.1.91

Dang, H.-A. H., & Viet Nguyen, C. (2021). Gender inequality during the COVID-19 pandemic: Income, expenditure, savings, and job loss. *World Development*, *140*, 105296–105296. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105296

Davidson, H. (2024, June 14). *Sophia Huang Xueqin, prominent China #MeToo journalist, sentenced to five years in jail, supporters say*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/14/sophia-huang-xueqin-prominent-china-metoo-journalist-sentenced-jail-five-years-supporters-say

Davin, D. (1992). British women missionaries in nineteenth-century China. *Women's History Review, 1*(2), 257–271. https://doi.org/10.1080/0961202920010204

deLisle, J. (2010). Security first? Patterns and lessons from China's use of law to address national security threats. *Journal of National Security Law & Policy, 4*(2), 397–419.

Delanty, G. (2006). The cosmopolitan imagination: Critical cosmopolitanism and social theory. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *57*(1), 25–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2006.00092.x

Della Porta, D., & Tarrow, S. (2005). *Transnational protest and global activism*. Rowman & Littlefield.

DiAngelo, R. (2016). What is race? In *What does it mean to be white? Developing white racial literacy* (Revised ed., pp. 97–106). Counterpoints.

Dirlik, A. (1994). *After the revolution : Waking to global capitalism*. Wesleyan University Press.

Duff, A. (1981). *The third language: Recurrent problems of translation into English: It ain't what you do, it's the way you do it*. Pergamon.

Durán-Almarza, E. M., & Álvarez López, E. (2014). *Diasporic women's writing of the Black Atlantic: (En)gendering literature and performance*. Routledge.

Eddo-Lodge, R. (2017). *Why I'm no longer talking about race*. Bloomsburg.

Edwards, L. (2010). Chinese feminism in a transnational frame: Between internationalism and xenophobia. In M. Roces & L. Edwards (Eds.), *Women's movements in Asia: Feminisms and transnational activism* (pp. 53–74). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203851234

Engebretsen, E. L., & Zeng, J. (2024). *Feminist activism in the post-2010s sinosphere: Identifying issues, sharing knowledge, building movements*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Epstein, C. F. (2007). Great divides: The cultural, cognitive, and social bases of the global subordination of women. *American Sociological Review*, *72*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240707200101

Evans, E., Bengtsson Meuller, E. & Hiraide, L.A. (2025). Feminist politics and gender equality in Britain. *Br Polit* 20, 418–433. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-025-00282-9

Faist, T. (2000). *The volume and dynamics of international migration and transnational social spaces.* Oxford University Press.

Faugier, J., & Sargeant, M. (1997). Sampling hard to reach populations. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *26*(4), 790–797. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1997.00371.x

Fawcett Society. (2022, October 24). *Landmark report reveals 75% of women of colour have experienced racism at work*. https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/news/landmark-report-reveals-75-of-women-of-colour-have-experienced-racism-at-work

Feng, Y. (2019). Women levering the state in a glocal China: From the rise of feminist NGOs to the legislation on anti-domestic violence. In G. Wu, Y. Feng, & H. Lansdowne (Eds.), *Gender dynamics, feminist activism and social transformation in China* (1st ed., pp. 187–214). Routledge.

Fetner, T. (2022). Feminist identity and sexual behavior: The intimate is political. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*. *51*, 441–452. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-02158-7

Fincher, L. H. (2016). China's Feminist Five. *Dissent.* 63(4), 84–90. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/dss.2016.0078

Fincher, L. H. (2018). *Betraying big brother: The feminist awakening in China.* 1st ed. Verso.

Fischer, R. (2011). Cross-cultural training effects on cultural essentialism beliefs and cultural intelligence. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35*, 767–775. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.005

Flick, U. (2018). Qualitative research kit: Doing grounded theory (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529716658. n5

Fortier, A. M. (2000). *Migrant belongings: Memory, space, identity*. Berg.

Germano, S. (2021, November 17). WTA says it is still unable to locate Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai. *Financial Times*. https://www.ft.com/content/33571486-3b1d-4371-90d0-827149bc4106

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity.* Oxford: Polity Press.

Gilroy, P. (2004*). Postcolonial melancholia*. Columbia University Press.

Giulietti, C., Wahba, J., & Zenou, Y. (2018). Strong versus weak ties in migration. *European Economic Review, 104*, 111–137. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2018.02.006

Glaser, B. G. (1978) *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Sociology Press.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1968). *Time for dying*. Aldine Publishing Company.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2010). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. 2nd ed. Aldine Transaction.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* Doubleday.

Grewal, I. (2008). The transnational in feminist research: Concept and approaches. In H. Brabandt, B. Roß, & S. Zwingel (Eds.), *Mehrheit am Rand?* (pp. 189-199). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Grewal, I., & Kaplan, C. (1994). *Scattered hegemonies: Postmodernity and transnational feminist practices*. University of Minnesota Press.

Guo, S. (2010). Toward recognitive justice: Emerging trends and challenges in transnational migration and lifelong learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *29*(2), 149–167. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601371003616533

Halegua, A., & Dong, Y. (2024) China's ban on sexual harassment: A four-year report card. *USALI Perspectives*, 5(3) https://usali.org/usali-perspectives-blog/chinas-ban-on-sexual-harassment-a-four-year-report-card.

Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity, community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.

Hammer, R. (2018). Bringing the Global Home: Students Research Local Areas through Postcolonial Perspectives. *Teaching Sociology*, *46*(2), 135–147. https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X17749284

Han, E. (2013). *Contestation and adaptation: The politics of national identity in China*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199936298.001.0001

Han, L. (2022). Dependency as situated knowledge: A reflexive politics of location on the positionalities of Chinese feminist scholars. *American Behavioral Scientist, 68*(3), 338–354. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642221134843

Han, L., & Liu, Y. (2024). When digital feminisms collide with nationalism: Theorizing "pink feminism" on Chinese social media. *Women's Studies International Forum*, *105*, 102941. 10.1016/j.wsif.2024.102941

Han, X. (2018). Searching for an online space for feminism? The Chinese feminist group Gender Watch Women's Voice and its changing approaches to online misogyny. *Feminist Media Studies, 18*(4), 734–749. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447430

Hannerz, U. (1990). Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture. *Theory, Culture & Society, 7*(2-3), 237–251. https://doi.org/10.1177/026327690007002014

Hansen, M. H. (2015). *Educating the Chinese individual: Life in a rural boarding school*. University of Washington Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780295805436

Hansen, M. H., & Svarverud, R., Eds. (2010). *iChina: The rise of the individual in modern Chinese society*. NIAS Press. https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2012.680706

Hesse-Biber, S., & Flowers, H. (2019). Using a feminist grounded theory approach in mixed methods research. In A. Bryant & K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of current developments in grounded theory* (pp. 347–365). SAGE Publications.

Hildebrandt, T., & Chua, L. J. (2017). Negotiating in/visibility: The political economy of lesbian activism and rights advocacy. *Development and Change, 48*(4), 639–662. https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12314

Honko, L. (1995). Traditions in the construction of cultural identity and strategies of ethnic survival. *European Review (Chichester, England)*, *3*(2), 131–146. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798700001435

Horton, J. (2011). Self-Censorship. *Res Publica, 17*, 91–106. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-011-9145-3

Hu, Y. (2016). *Chinese-British intermarriage*. Springer.

Hu, Y., & Scott, J. (2016). Family and gender values in China: Generational, geographic, and gender differences. *Journal of Family Issues*, *37*(9), 1267–1293. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14528710

Hu, Y., & Shi, X. (2020). The impact of China's one-child policy on intergenerational and gender relations. *Contemporary Social Science*, *15*(3), 360–377. https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2018.1448941

Huang, Q. (2023). Anti-Feminism: Four strategies for the demonisation and depoliticisation of feminism on Chinese social media. *Feminist Media Studies*, *23*(7), 3583–3598. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lancs.ac.uk/10.1080/14680777.2022.2129412

Huang, S., & Sun, W. (2021). #MeToo in China: Transnational feminist politics in the Chinese context. *Feminist Media Studies, 21*(4), 677–681. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1919730

Human Rights Watch. (2021, February 9). *Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on China*. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/09/submission-committee-elimination-discrimination-against-women-china#_ftnref32

Iacono, J., Brown, A., & Hotham, C. (2009). Research methods: A case example of participant observation. *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods, 7*(1), 39–46.

Ikels, C. (2004). *Filial piety: Practice and discourse in contemporary East Asia.* Stanford University Press.

Ince, J., Rojas, F., & Davis, C. A. (2017). The social media response to Black Lives Matter: How Twitter users interact with Black Lives Matter through hashtag use. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 40*(11), 1814–1830. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1334931

Ivaz, L., Griffin, K. L., & Duñabeitia, J. A. (2019). Self-bias and the emotionality of foreign languages. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, 72*(1), 76–89. https://doi.org/10.1177/1747021818781017

Jamieson, L., & Simpson, R. (2013). *Living alone: Globalization, identity, and belonging* (pp. 1–22). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Jin, X., & Ni, L. (2021, July 15). Outsider within: Young Chinese feminist activism in the age of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom. *Made in China Journal.* https://madeinchinajournal.com/2021/07/15/outsider-within-young-chinese-feminist-activism-in-the-age-of-covid-19-in-the-united-kingdom/

Jiu, T. (2021, March 28). Rebirth after catastrophe: Feminist activists set up overseas battlefields. *Wainao Reads*. https://www.wainao.me/wainao-reads/rebirth-after-catastrophe-feminist-activists-set-overseas-battlefields-03282021/

Kajanus, A. (2015). Overthrowing the first mountain: Chinese student-migrants and the geography of power. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs, 44*(3), 79–102. https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261504400304

Kelle, U. (2005). "Emergence" vs. "Forcing" of empirical data? A crucial problem of "grounded theory" reconsidered. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *6*(2). https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-6.2.467

Kelly, M. (2015). Feminist identity, collective action, and individual resistance among contemporary U.S. feminists. *Women's Studies International Forum, 48*, 81–92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2014.10.025

Kempster, S., & Parry, K. W. (2011). Grounded theory and leadership research: A critical realist perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly, 22*(1), 106–120. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.12.010

Köngeter, S., & Smith, W. (2015). Transnational agency: Migrants, movements, and social support crossing borders. In S. Köngeter & W. Smith (Eds.), *Transnational agency and migration: Actors, movements, and social support* (pp. 1–20). Taylor & Francis Group.

Lee, C. K. (2014). The spectre of global China. *New Left Review*, *89*(89), 29–66.

Lee, F. L. F., & Chan, J. M. (2018). *Media and protest logics in the digital era: The Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong*. Oxford University Press.

Li, T. (2018, March 6). #OurTimeNow: The importance of mobilizing Chinese students to join feminist movements overseas. *The Fawcett Society*.

https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/blog/ourtimenow-the-importance-of-mobilizing-chinese-students-to-join-feminist-movements-overseas

Liao, S. (2020). Feminism without guarantees: Reflections on teaching and researching feminist activism in China. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies, 26*(2), 259–267. https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2020.1769368

Lin, X. (2013). *Gender, modernity and male migrant workers in China: Becoming a "modern" man*. Abingdon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203590904

Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2018). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences revisited. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed., pp. 108–150). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ling, Q., & Liao, S. (2020). Intellectuals debate #MeToo in China: Legitimizing feminist activism, challenging gendered myths, and reclaiming feminism. *Journal of Communication, 70*(6), 895–916. https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqaa033

Liu, L. H., Karl R. E., & Ko D. (2013). *The birth of Chinese feminism: Essential texts in transnational theory.* Columbia University Press.

Liu, W., Huang A., & Ma J. (2015). Young activists, new movements: Contemporary Chinese queer feminism and transnational genealogies. *Feminism and Psychology, 25*(1), 11–17. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353514563091

Liu, Y. (2024). When feminists are misidentified as traitors: Nationalism, disinformation, and anti-feminism in Chinese cyberspace. *Feminist Media Studies*, *24*(1), 170–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2284101

Luo, H., & Zhang, L. (2022). Scandal, social movement, and change: Evidence from #MeToo in Hollywood. *Management Science*, *68*(2), 1278–1296. https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2021.3982

Lu, Y., Yang, J., & Qin, T. (2021). Public life as identity construction: A case study based on an SL square-dancing group in Shanghai. *British Journal of Sociology, 72*(5), 1260–1283. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12904

Liu, Z., & Dahling, R. (2016). The quieter side of Chinese feminism: The feminist phenomenology of Li Yu's films. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, *22*(1), 2–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2015.1133170

Longarino, D., & Ren, Y. (2021, September 16). #MeToo cases face big challenges in China's legal system. *The Washington Post*.

Lü, P. (2019, March 28). Finding a voice. *ChinaFile*. https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/finding-voice

Lyons, L. (2010). Transnational networks and localized campaigns: The women's movement in Singapore. In M. Roces & L. Edwards (Eds.), *Women's movements in Asia: Feminisms and transnational activism* (pp. 75-89). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203851234

Maccoby, E. E., & Jacklin, C. N. (1987). Gender segregation in childhood. In H. W. Reese (Ed.), *Advances in Child Development and Behavior* (Vol. 20, pp. 239-287). https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2407(08)60404-8

Machum, S. (2015). A rural woman's impact on Canadian feminist practice and theory. In B. Pini, B. Brandth, & J. Little (Eds.), *Feminisms and Ruralities* (pp. 31–42). Lexington Books.

Mahmud, T. (1999). Colonialism and modern constructions of race: A preliminary inquiry. *University of Miami Law Review, 53*(4), 1219–1246.

Mao, C. (2020). Feminist activism via social media in China. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies, 26*(2), 245–258. https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2020.1767844

Marchetti-Mercer, M. C., & Virga, A. (2023). *The Italian diaspora in South Africa: Nostalgia, identity, and belonging in the second and third generations.* 1st ed. Taylor & Francis.

Marino, S. (2019). Ethnic identity and race: The "double absence" and its legacy across generations among Australians of Southern Italian origin. Operationalizing institutional positionality. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 42*(5), 707–725. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1451649

Marshall, M. N. (1996). Sampling for qualitative research. *Family Practice*, *13*(6), 522–526. https://doi.org/10.1093/fampra/13.6.522

Martin, F. (2017) Mobile self-fashioning and gendered risk: Rethinking Chinese students' motivations for overseas education. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 15, 706–720. doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2016.1264291

Martin, F. (2018). Overseas study as zone of suspension: Chinese students re-negotiating youth, gender, and intimacy. *Journal of Intercultural Studies, 39*(6), 688–703.

Martin, F. (2022). *Dreams of flight: The lives of Chinese women students in the West*. Duke University Press.

Mauthner, N. S., & Doucet, A. (2008). "No man's land": Feminist ethics and reflexive research practices. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 11*(6), 447-463.

McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs, 30*(3), 1771–1800. https://doi.org/10.1086/426800

Medjuck, S. (1990). Ethnicity and feminism: Two solitudes? *Atlantis, 15*(2), 1-10.

Melucci, A. (1989). *Nomads of the present: Social movements and individual needs in contemporary society*. London, UK: Hutchinson Radius.

Melucci, A. (1995). The process of collective identity. In H. Johnston & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *Social movements and culture* (pp. 41–63). University of Minnesota Press.

Min, D. (2005). Awakening again: Travelling feminism in China in the 1980s. *Women's Studies International Forum, 28*, 274–288. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2005.04.013

Min, D. (2007). Duihua (dialogue) in-between: A process of translating the term "feminism" in China. *Interventions, 9*(2), 174–193. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698010701409111

Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, *30*(1), 61–88. https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1988.42

Mohanty, C. T. (2003). *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity.* 1st ed. (pp. viii–viii). Duke University Press.

Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. (2021). *This bridge called my back, fortieth anniversary edition: Writings by radical women of color.* (1st ed.). State University of New York Press. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/lancaster/detail.action?docID=6925936

Mu, G. M., & Pang, B. (2019). *Interpreting the Chinese diaspora: Identity, socialisation, and resilience according to Pierre Bourdieu.* Routledge.

Nehring, D., & Hu Y. (2022). COVID-19, nation-states and fragile transnationalism. *Sociology, 56*(1), 183–190. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385211033729

Nencel, L. (2014). Situating reflexivity: Voices, positionalities, and representations in feminist ethnographic texts. *Women's Studies International Forum, 43*, 75–83. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2013.07.018

Neuman, W. L. (2014). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (7th ed.). Pearson.

Ni, V., & Davidson, H. (2021, July 8). Outrage over shutdown of LGBTQ WeChat accounts in China: Dozens of WeChat accounts have been blocked and deleted without warning. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/08/outrage-over-crackdown-on-lgbtq-wechat-accounts-in-china

Nordin, A., & Brown, K. (2022). Chinese identity and intersectionality in an age of anti-Asian racism. *British Journal of Chinese Studies, 12*(1), 124.

Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). Kant and Stoic Cosmopolitanism. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, *5*(1), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9760.00021

Nyman, C., Reinikainen, L., & Stocks, J. (2013). Reflections on a cross-national qualitative study of within-household finances. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *75*(3), 640–650. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12033

Oleszczuk, A. (2020). Hashtag: How selected texts of popular culture engaged with sexual assault in the context of the MeToo Movement in 2019. *New Horizons in English Studies*, *5*(1), 208–217. https://doi.org/10.17951/nh.2020.5.208-217

Oliver, C. (2012). Critical realist grounded theory: A new approach for social work research. *The British Journal of Social Work, 42*(2), 371–387. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr064

Ong, A. (1999). *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality*. Duke University Press.

Parker, D. (1998). Chinese people in Britain: Histories, futures and identities. In G. Benton & F. N. Pieke (Eds.), *The Chinese in Europe* (pp. 67–95). Palgrave Macmillan.

Pellicer-Ortín, S., & Kuznetski, J. (2019). *Women on the move: Body, memory and femininity in present-day transnational diasporic writing*. Routledge.

Peng, A. Y. (2020). *A feminist reading of China's digital public sphere*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59969-0

Phiri, A. (2023). Reframing the Black Atlantic. *Cultural Studies (London, England)*, *37*(2), 191–203. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2022.2104898

Pichler, F. (2012). Cosmopolitanism in a global perspective: An international comparison of open-minded orientations and identity in relation to globalization. *International Sociology*, *27*(1), 21–50. https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580911422980

Polletta, F., & Jasper, J. M. (2001). Collective identity and social movements. *Annual Review of Sociology, 27*, 283–305. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.283

Probyn, E. (1996). *Outside belongings*. Routledge.

Purkarthofer, J. (2022). Transnational families' social spaces "in between": Expectations, decision-making and belonging in light of educational choices in Norway. *European Educational Research Journal*, *22*(4), 482–495. https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041221106846

Purkayastha, B. (2012). Intersectionality in a transnational world. *Gender & Society, 26*(1), 55–66. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243211426725

Qiu, G., Zhao, J., & Cheng, H. (2025). Criminalising feminism: Feminist activists' experiences and perceptions of state repression in China. *Journal of Criminology*, https://doi.org/10.1177/26338076251323303

Ranasinha, R. (2016). *Contemporary diasporic south Asian women's fiction : Gender, narration and globalisation.* 1st ed. Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-40305-6

Razack, S. H. (2002). *Race, space, and the law: Unmapping a white settler society*. Between the Lines.

Redman-MacLaren, M., & Mills, J. (2015). Transformational grounded theory: Theory, voice, and action. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 14*(3), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691501400301

Reilly, N. (2007). Cosmopolitan feminism and human rights. *Hypatia*, *22*(4), 180–198.

Reynolds, T. (2002). Reflexivity and power in the research process: The relationship between Black female researchers and Black female research participants. In T. May (Ed.), *Companion to qualitative research* (pp. 220-225). Open University Press.

Risman, B. J. (2004). Gender as a social structure: Theory wrestling with activism. *Gender & Society, 18*(4), 429–450. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243204265349

Risman, B. J. (2017). 2016 Southern Sociological Society presidential address: Are millennials cracking the gender structure? *Social Currents, 4*(3), 208–227. https://doi.org/10.1177/2329496517697145

Robert-Foley, L. (2016). Writing with translational constraints: On the "spacy emptiness" between languages. *MLN, 131*(4), 905–918. https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2016.0065

Roberts, R. (2019). *Ongoing mobility trajectories: Lived experiences of global migration* (1st ed. 2019.). Springer.

Robertson, S., Harris, A., & Baldassar, L. (2018). Mobile transitions: A conceptual framework for researching a generation on the move. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *21*(2), 203–217. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1362101

Roesch, E., Amin, A., Gupta, J., & García-Moreno, C. (2020). Violence against women during covid-19 pandemic restrictions. *BMJ (Online)*, *369*, m1712–m1712. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m1712

Rolland, L. (2023). "I'm sure at some point we'll be switching": Planning and enacting an interview language policy with multilingual participants. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, 44*(8), 702–717. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2023.2199000

Rose, M. G. (1997). A sentimental education: Exploring the interliminal translation theory and postmodern taste. *Dalhousie French Studies, 38*(Spring), 85–93.

Sadler, G. R., Lee, H.-C., Lim, R. S.-H., & Fullerton, J. (2010). Recruitment of hard-to-reach population subgroups via adaptations of the snowball sampling strategy: Hard-to-reach populations. *Nursing & Health Sciences, 12*(3), 369–374. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1442-2018.2010.00541.x

Salazar, N. B. (2011). The power of imagination in transnational mobilities. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, 18*(6), 576–598. https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2011.672859

Sanders, R., & Jenkins, L. D. (2022). Special issue introduction: Contemporary international anti-feminism. *Global Constitutionalism*, *11*(3), 369–378. doi:10.1017/S2045381722000144

Schneider, E. (2014). Heritage language learners and the politics of identity: Bridging the gap between languages and cultural self-perception. *Journal of Language and Identity, 23*(4), 45-67.

Scoggins, S. E. (2023). Authoritarian policing under Xi Jinping. *Journal of Chinese Political Science, 28*(2), 251–271. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-022-09825-z

Sebastian, K. (2019). Distinguishing between the types of grounded theory: Classical, interpretive, and constructivist. *Journal for Social Thought, 3*(1).

Shao, S., & He, G. (2024). After account bombing: Chinese digital feminists haunt platform censorship as cyber living ghosts. *Feminist Media Studies*, *24*(5), 944–961. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2311362

Shen, G., & Li, Y. (2011). The development of women's NGOs in China. In Y. Li (Ed.), *NGOs in China and Europe: Comparisons and contrasts.* 1st ed. (pp. 95–116). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315598246

Shepherd, C., & Chiang, V. (2023, May 16). Beijing LGBT Center closes its doors, a blow for China. *Washington Post*. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A749435282/AONE?u=unilanc&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=2ec34a25

Shi, T. (1990). The democratic movement in China in 1989: Dynamics and failure. *Asian Survey, 30*(12), 1186–1205. https://doi.org/10.1525/as.1990.30.12.00p0006k

Shi, Y. (2005). Identity construction of the Chinese diaspora, ethnic media use, community formation, and the possibility of social activism. *Continuum, 19*(1), 55–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/1030431052000336298

Snow, D. A., & McAdam, D. (2000). Identity work processes in the context of social movements: Clarifying the identity/movement nexus. In S. Stryker, T. J. Owens, & R. W. White (Eds.), *Self, identity, and social movements* (pp. 41–67). University of Minnesota Press.

Song, G., & Hird, D. (2014). *Men and masculinities in contemporary China*. BRILL. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004264915

Song, Y., Wu, H., Dong. X.Y., & Wang, Z. (2021). To return or stay? The gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant workers in China. *Feminist Economics*, *27*(1–2), 236–253. https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2020.1845391

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson, & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. University of Illinois Press.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Sage Publications.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Sun, L. (2023). The circulation of intersectionality in China. In J. C. Nash & S. Pinto (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to intersectionalities* (pp. 203–214). Routledge.

Swank, E., & Fahs, B. (2017). Understanding feminist activism among women: Resources, consciousness, and social networks. *Socius*, *3*. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023117734081

Šadl, Z., & Ferko, T. (2017). Intersectionality and feminist activism: Student feminist societies in the United Kingdom. *Teorija in Praksa, 54*(6), 925–1109.

Taylor, V., & Whittier, N. E. (1992). Collective identity in social movement communities: Lesbian feminist mobilization. In A. D. Morris & C. M. Mueller (Eds.), *Frontiers in social movement theory* (pp. 104–129). Yale University Press.

Thomas, M., & Thompson, A. (2014). Empire and globalisation: From "high imperialism" to decolonisation. *International History Review*, *36*(1), 142–170. https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2013.828643

Thornberg, R., and K. Charmaz. 2014. Grounded theory and theoretical coding. In *The SAGE handbook of qualitative analysis*, ed. U. Flick, 153–69.

Tomba, L. (2004). Creating an urban middle class: Social engineering in Beijing. *The China Journal*, 51, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.2307/3182144

Trieu, M. M. (2019). Understanding the use of "Twinkie", "Banana", and "FOB": Identifying the origin, role, and consequences of internalized racism within Asian America. *Sociology Compass, 13*(5). https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12679

Tu, M. (2018). Education, migration and family relations between China and the UK: The transnational one-child generation. Emerald Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1108/9781787146723

Tu, M., & Xie, K. (2020). Privileged daughters? Gendered mobility among highly educated Chinese female migrants in the UK. *Social Inclusion, 8*(2), 68–76. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v8i2.2675

Turner, B. S. (2001). Cosmopolitan virtue: On religion in a global age. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *4*(2), 131–152. https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310122225046

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Routledge & K. Paul.

Universities UK. (2024). *International student recruitment data*. https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/explore-uuki/international-student-recruitment/international-student-recruitment-data

Urry, J. (2007). *Mobilities*. Polity.

Van Laar, C., Van Rossum, A., Kosakowska-Berezecka, N., Bongiorno, R., & Block, K. (2024). MANdatory: Why men need (and are needed for) gender equality progress. *Frontiers Psychology, 15.* https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1263313

Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203927083

Vertovec, S., & Cohen, R. (2002). *Conceiving cosmopolitanism: Theory, context, and practice*. Oxford University Press.

Wang, B. (2020). Turning limitations into opportunities: Researching Chinese feminist activism as a male outsider. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *22*(3), 425–433. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2020.1731318

Wang, B., & Driscoll, C. (2018). Chinese feminists on social media: Articulating different voices, building strategic alliances. *Continuum, 33*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2018.1532492

Wang, C. (2023). *Cultivating the Confucian individual: The Confucian education revival in China*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Wang, C., & Billioud, S. (2022). Reinventing Confucian education in contemporary China: New ethnographic explorations. *China Perspectives*, *2*, 3–6. https://doi.org/10.4000/CHINAPERSPECTIVES.13630

Wang, D., & Liu, S. (2021). Doing ethnography on social media: A methodological reflection on the study of online groups in China. *Qualitative Inquiry, 27*(8-9), 977–987. https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004211014610

Wang, F. (2012). The "good wife and wise mother" as a social discourse of gender. *Chinese Studies in History, 45*(4), 58–70. https://doi.org/10.2753/CSH0009-4633450404

Wang, H. (2022) Legislative and judicial responses to workplace sexual harassment in mainland China: Progress and drawbacks. *Frontiers in Public Health*. https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/public-health/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2022.1000488/full

Wang, J., & Barlow, T. E. (2002). *Cinema and desire: Feminist Marxism and cultural politics in the work of Dai Jinhua*. Verso.

Wang, J., & Cao, M. (2019, August 28). Thwarted at home, can China's feminists rebuild a movement abroad? *ChinaFile.* https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/postcard/thwarted-home-can-chinas-feminists-rebuild-movement-abroad

Wang, Q. (2018). Young feminist activists in present-day China: A new feminist generation? *China Perspectives, 3*, 59–68. https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.8165

Wang, Y. (2024). Chinese NGOs "going out": Depoliticisation and diplomatisation. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *55*(2), 249–275. https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2024.2305916

Wang, Z. (2012). *Never forget national humiliation: Historical memory in Chinese politics and foreign relations*. Columbia University Press.

Waters, J.L. (2006), Emergent geographies of international education and social exclusion. *Antipode*, 38, 1046-1068. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2006.00492.x

Weedon, C. (2004). *Identity and culture: Narratives of difference and belonging*. 1st ed. McGraw-Hill Education.

Weiss, M. L., Aspinall, E., & Thompson, M. (2012). Introduction: Understanding student activism in Asia. In M. L. Weiss & E. Aspinall (Eds.), *Student activism in Asia: Between protest and powerlessness.* (pp. 1–32). University of Minnesota Press.

Werbner, P. (2008). *Anthropology and the new cosmopolitanism: Rooted, feminist, and vernacular perspectives* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Wesoky, S. (2002). *Chinese feminism faces globalization.* Routledge.

Wesoky, S. (2016). Politics at the local–global intersection: Meanings of bentuhua and transnational feminism in China. *Asian Studies Review, 40*(1), 53–69. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2015.1123217

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society,* 1(2), 125–151.

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1991). Doing gender. In J. Lorber & S. A. Farrel (Eds.), *The social construction of gender* (pp. 13–37). Sage Publications.

Williams, J. P. (2013). Authenticity and the dramaturgical self. In C. Edgley (Ed.), *The drama of social life: A dramaturgical handbook* (pp. 93–107). Ashgate.

Wimmer, A., & Glick Schiller, N. (2002). Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nation-state building, migration and the social sciences. *Global Networks (Oxford)*, *2*(4), 301–334. https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00043

Woodman, S. (2018). The cultural politics of women's human rights in transnational China: From the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women to now. In G. Wu, F. Yuan, & H. Lansdowne (Eds.), *Gender dynamics, feminist activism and social transformation in China* (pp. 32–49). Taylor & Francis Group.

Wu, A. X., & Dong Y. (2019). What is made-in-China feminism(s)? Gender discontent and class friction in post-socialist China. *Critical Asian Studies*, *51*(4), 471–492. https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2019.1656538

Wu, G. (2022). *China's common prosperity program: Causes, challenges, and implications.* Asia Society Policy Institute

https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/ASPI_ChinaCommonProsp_report_fin.pdf

Wu, G., Yuan, F., & Lansdowne, H., Eds. (2018). *Gender dynamics, feminist activism, and social transformation in China*. Taylor & Francis Group.

Wu, W. (2020). Media coverage of women in China during the Covid-19 crisis: Reflections on China's commitment under CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action. *Cross-cultural Human Rights Review, 2*(2-3), 33–61.

Xiao, Q. (2019). The road to digital unfreedom: President Xi's surveillance state. *Journal of Democracy, 30*(1), 53–67. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0004

Xie, K. (2021). *Embodying middle class gender aspirations: Perspectives from China's privileged young women*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-1139-1

Xie, R., & Li L. (2024). Lifting the veil of feminist podcasts in 2020s China. In E.L. Engebretsen, & Zeng, J. (Eds.) *Feminist activism in the post-2010s sinosphere: Identifying issues, sharing knowledge, building movements*. (pp. 93–108). Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Xiong, J. (2019). From margin to centre: Feminist mobilizations in digital China. In G. Wu, Y. Feng, & H. Lansdowne (Eds.), *Gender dynamics, feminist activism and social transformation in China* (pp. 215–232). Routledge.

Xu, C. L. (2015). Identity and cross-border student mobility: The mainland China–Hong Kong experience. *European Educational Research Journal*, 14(1), 65-73. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904114565155

Xu, C. L., & Montgomery, C. (2019). Educating China on the Move: A Typology of Contemporary Chinese Higher Education Mobilities. *Review of Education*, 7(3), 598-627. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3139

Xu, Y. (2012). Understanding netizen discourse in China: Formation, genres and values. *China Media Research*, *8*(1), 15–24.

Xue, A., & Rose, K. (2022). *Weibo feminism: Expression, activism, and social media in China*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Yan, Y. (2003). *Private life under socialism: Love, intimacy, and family change in a Chinese village, 1949-1999*, Stanford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804764117

Yan, Y. (2009). *The individualisation of Chinese society*, (1st ed., Vol. 77). Routledge.

Yan, Y. (2010). The Chinese path to individualization. *The British Journal of Sociology, 61*, 489–512. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01323.x

Yan, Y. (2013). Parent-driven divorce and individualisation among urban Chinese youth. *International Social Science Journal, 64*, 317–330. https://doi.org/10.1111/issj.12048

Yan, Y. (2017). Doing personhood in Chinese culture: The desiring individual, moralist self and relational person. *Cambridge Anthropology, 35*(2), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.3167/cja.2017.350202

Yan, Y. (2021). "Living for oneself" or "one's own way of living": A reconsideration of the localization of the individualization thesis in China ("Wei ziji er huo" yi huo "ziji de huofa": Zhongguo geti hua mingti bentuhua zaisikao). *Exploration and Free Views (Tansuo Yu Zhengming)*, (10), 46–59.

Yan, Y. (2023). Familial affections vis-à-vis filial piety: The ethical challenges facing eldercare under neo-familism in contemporary China. *The Journal of Chinese Sociology*, *10*(1), 5–21. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40711-023-00185-6

Yang, G. (2009). *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online*. Columbia University Press.

Yang, Y. (Yue). (2022). When positive energy meets satirical feminist backfire: Hashtag activism during the COVID-19 outbreak in China. *Global Media & China, 7*(1), 99–119. https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364211021316

Yang, Y. (Yushuang). (2024). Ambivalent effects of anger in Chinese feminists' refusal to patriarchal marriage and family. *Social Movement Studies*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2024.2369603

Yu, S. (2020). Becoming in/out of place: Doing research in Chinatown as a Chinese female geographer in the era of transnationalism. *The Professional Geographer, 72*(2), 272–282. https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2019.1633368

Yue, J., & Fan, X. (2020). Childcare policy in China: Review, reflection, and reconstruction. *Social Sciences in China, 41*(4), 151–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/02529203.2020.1844448

Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, *40*(3), 197–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331

Zhan, H. J., & Montgomery, R. J. V. (2003). Gender and elder care in China: The influence of filial piety and structural constraints. *Gender & Society, 17*(2), 209–229. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243202250734

Zhang, J. (Jinman). (2023). Feminist responses to COVID-19 in China through the lens of affect. *Feminist Media Studies*, *23*(4), 1327–1343. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2041694

Zhang, J. (Jingxue). (2024). The (im)possibility of transnational coalition in the Xi era: Resilience, strategy and survival. In E.L. Engebretsen, & Zeng, J. (Eds.) *Feminist activism in the post-2010s sinosphere: Identifying issues, sharing knowledge, building movements*. (pp. 175–189). Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Zhang, J. H. (2003). Gender in post-Mao China. *European Review*, *11*(2), 209–224. doi:10.1017/S1062798703000218

Zhang, L. (2019, May 29). Reflections on the play "Our Vaginas, Ourselves" by VaChina. *DeLC Student Blog*. https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/languages-and-cultures/blogs/blogs-archive/student/reflections-on-the-play-our-vaginas-ourselves-by-vachina--lei-zhang/

Zhang, S., & Xu, C. L. (2020). The making of transnational distinction: An embodied cultural capital perspective on Chinese women students' mobility. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 41*(8), 1251–1267. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1804836

Zheng, W. (2010). Creating a socialist feminist cultural front: Women of China (1949–1966). *The China Quarterly, 204*, 827–849. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741010000986

Zheng, W. (2015). Detention of the feminist five in China. *Feminist Studies, 41*(2), 476–482. https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.41.2.476

Zheng, W. (2021, June 9). (Self-)Censorship and Chinese feminist networking in a global perspective. *Made in China Journal*. https://madeinchinajournal.com/2021/06/09/self-censorship-and-chinese-feminist-networking-in-a-global-perspective/

Zheng, W., & Zhang, Y. (2010). Global concepts, local practices: Chinese feminism since the Fourth UN Conference on Women. *Feminist Studies, 36*(1), 40–70.

Zheng, X., Jing, C., Liu, Y., & Zhang, Y.-Y. (2023). Why are people "lying flat"? Personal relative deprivation suppresses self-improvement motivation. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 62*(2), 932–948. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12611

Zhou, K. (2023). Western missionaries and Chinese women's right to education between 1840 and 1930. *7th International Conference on Education, Management and Social Science (EMSS 2023), 23*. https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v23i.13938

Zhou, X. (2008). *Chinese middle class: Reality or illusion?* https://doi.org/10.4135/9788178299976.n5

Zhou, Y. (2019). "Being a good daughter of the party"?: A neo-institutional analysis of the All-China Women's Federation organisational reforms in China's Xi era. *China Perspectives, 117*(2), 17–28. https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.9042

Zhu, P., & Xiao, H. F. (2021). *Feminisms with Chinese characteristics.* Syracuse University Press.

Zito, A., & Barlow, T. E. (1994). *Body, subject, and power in China.* The University of Chicago Press.