

The au pair as a mediating springboard: the shifting aspirations of Chinese youth in migration

Xinran Li¹

Abstract

Since the 1980s, China has undergone a dramatic transformation through reforms and economic liberalization. Among these, the theme of migration has also developed. To complement this context, relying on an empirical study of young Chinese au pairs in Germany implemented in 2019, this paper aims to build a migration picture of au pairs' youth transitions in a transnational context.

The Au Pair programme is a 1-year cultural exchange project experienced by youth between the ages of 18 and 27 who exchange simple household chores for accommodation in a host family in a foreign country with the purpose of learning language. This study reveals that prior to joining the program, participants held a positive perception of Germany and the program. However, their experience in Germany led to a complex evaluation of this journey. Participants had to re-evaluate their visions of the future and adjust their initial idealized notions of the international experience. The ever-changing aspirations that arise in a dynamic social environment drive the shift and reshaping of the migration process and promoting unexpected personal development. The Au Pair experience acts as a springboard, giving these young people a buffer to (re)orientates for the future.

Keywords: Youth; Au pair; Uncertain; Migration; Aspiration

Introduction

How can the interaction of aspirations and reality in uncertain social circumstances imply or convey what kind of life young people should expect in the future, to the extent that it leads to more possibilities in the life that follows? This work on au pair migration from China contributes to the understanding of this research question.

An au pair is usually a young person (usually female) between 18 and 27 years old who is single and childless and works 30 hours a week in a private household for approximately EUR 260 pocket money per month (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2021). The Deutscher Bundestag indicated that the aim of the au pair scheme is 'The young people improve their language skills and broaden their knowledge in general through a broader acquaintance of the host country'.

¹ Xinran Li, Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus-Senftenberg, Germany. E-mail: lxrmoly@gmail.com



This is achieved by living with a German host family. In return, au pairs look after the family's children and 'help with the daily housework'(Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2020, 2021). The German authorities' 'instructions recommend that this project be regarded as a cultural exchange, au pair as family members'(Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2021). In Germany, basic data on au pairs have been published since 2007 in the Au Pair Immigration Report. Overall, Chinese au pair workers account for a small proportion. For example, statistics showed that in 2018, approximately 6,700 au pairs came to Germany from non-EU countries, with only approximately 3% coming from China (Migrationsberichte 2019; DR.Walter, 2019). Based on a group of young Chinese au pairs migrating to Germany, this study will embed it in a series of discussions in an uncertain social context.

Uncertainty: Post-socialist, Emerging Adulthood and Au Pairs

The ongoing debate about whether China is capitalist or communist stems from China's unprecedented socialist reforms in the 1980s, which incorporated elements of capitalism, such as a market economy. The Chinese regime, however, continues to state that China is still in the initial stages of socialism. Thinking outside this debate and to capture its historical ambiguities, Arif Dirlik(1989) has suggested that China's ideology is post-socialist. He argued that the new form of socialism that emerged from China's socialist reforms is a 'compromise' policy, an innovation within socialism (Dirlik, 1989: 35). Until now, contradictions and uncertainties have not only described the ideological condition but also articulated the future of China. In a similar vein, youth transitions can also be described as full of uncertainties in the individual's life stage. Traditionally, the youth transition was seen as linear, from student to employment, from being single to parenthood (Arnett, 2006a; Bynner, 2005). From the 1990s onwards, along with complex social changes, the period between the ages of 18 and 26 was defined either as young adulthood or emerging adulthood(Arnett, 2000, 2006b; Bynner, 2005; Côté & Bynner, 2008). It is neither pre-adolescence, nor adulthood, but a unique period of preparation for adult life (Blossfeld et al., 2006; Cairns, 2014; Wallace & Kovacheva, 1998), and it is constantly being constructed and interpreted according to the specific social context, the national institutional structure and the political development of the country(Arnett, 2006a; Molgat, 2007; Nugin, 2014; Róbert & Bukodi, 2006; Tomanović & Ignjatović, 2006). Of these, youth transitions in post-socialist countries are often more complex, facing huge, sudden changes and post-communist discourse (Kovacheva, 2001). To add to this discussion, it is useful to consider the experiences of Chinese au pairs, whose youth development intersects with their migration journey, providing insights into the complexities of post-socialist youth mobility.

Based on the efforts of different scholars, a picture of au pair study is gradually being built up, including the historical development of au pair work in Austria (Orthofer, 2008) and the gender roles of au pairs(Cox, 2007; Rohde-Abuba, 2020). Moreover, some studies have connected the au pair programme to the biographical background of the participants, to explain their migration choices and mobility(Rohde-Abuba, 2011, 2020). In German policy terms, an au pair visa is considered short-term and not intended for work or study purposes. Once the visa has expired, the au pair must return to their country of origin. However, au pairing has been recognised as a form of migration and a means of having permanent residence (Hess, 2009; Hess & Puckhaber, 2004), and a form of transition from a cultural exchange programme to care work (Berg & Meagher, 2018; Cox, 2007; Cox & Busch, 2018; Hess, 2009; Hess & Puckhaber, 2004; Orthofer, 2008; Rohde-Abuba & Tkach, 2016).



Generally, the study differs from studies that have focused on related social practice in the actual migration phase or the au pair programme itself or studies where there is a clear migration plan before the movement. Interviewees had no specific plans or goals regarding their future living arrangements or career aspirations before migrating as au pairs. Moreover, they did not fully comply with the visa requirement - in this case, the au pair visa has a definite fixed period requirement.

It is meaningful to consider the au pair experience as a unique springboard for creation and realisation of aspirations, allowing young people to clarify their future goals. Based on this, the concept of aspiring mobility will be introduced as a heuristic theoretical tool in this article. Simultaneously, this study call attention to the role played by aspirations during youth transitions in multiple cultures by linking individual aspirations to their broader social contexts.

Aspiring Mobility and Lens: Theoretical Perspectives

Why do people move? In the past two decades, a wave of conceptual reflection in migration studies has led to a consensus that people's movement is a complex process and interconnected with locations, countries and economic, political, social, religious, environment and cultural aspects (Amelina & Faist, 2012; Dahinden, 2016; Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Liman et al., 2023). Within it, transnationalism provides a platform for scholars to study how migrants are embedded in the transnational social field (Levitt & Schiller, 2004; Wimmer & Schiller, 2002) in different manners. Within this context, it also includes the capacity of aspirations to shape the practice of migration (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2021).

First, the definition of aspiration refers to prospects, goals, directions, hopes and plans. It plays an important role in influencing an individual's decision-making, self-perception, and life goals (Carling & Collins, 2018). The underlying logic of seeing aspiration as socially produced is that 'all human movement is driven by the imagination of a future beyond the present horizon' (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015:113). Migration itself is full of aspiration and imagination (Salazar & Smart, 2011), and it can be viewed as both the cause and consequence of individual practices that actualise those imagined possibilities.

Second, in considering aspirations to be socially produced (Appadurai, 2004), aspirations are not just a blueprint formed by individual preferences, nor are they simply expressions detached from reality. Aspirations, the relative importance of aspirations and the perceived barriers to achieving different types of aspirations can be given meaning and are constantly revised by concepts such as proximity to the individual situation and the broader social context, future utility, preferences and geographical imagination (Carling, 2002; Carling & Collins, 2018; Carling & Schewel, 2018; de Haas, 2010). Generally, aspirations can shape the reality of one's life, as well as be shaped by reality (Appadurai, 2004; Frye, 2012). The aspiration's navigational ability can be conceptualised as aspiring mobility. It will inspire young migrants in their future lives and constantly facilitate a series of actions.

Within the interpretive–constructivist tradition, I view aspiration as a lens that conveys the possibility of another life between reality and imagination. This lens is constantly (re)constructed from past and present experiences and represents navigate ability and active quest for a better future. It can be seen as a theoretical perspective to study au pair youth migration. By studying how aspirations and reality interact in an uncertain social environment,

it is possible to better understand how young people plan for greater possibilities for their future.

Method

The arguments presented here are based on an empirical study of the migration of Chinese au pairs to Germany implemented in 2019–2020.

In total, thirteen participants from mainland China took part in the study. The participants affect various subjects: au pair applicants, the re-migration to China, currently au pairs, former au pair. Participants are recruited on a “snowball” approach, and Chinese nationality is a key criterion for recruiting and selecting participants. It should be noted that although their ages varied when interviewed, from 21 to 32, they were all in their 20th–25th year when they took part in the au pair programme. In addition, for ethical considerations, all interviews were based on the consent of the interviewees. With the exception of three interviews with interviewees in China, which were replaced by video interviews (via Skype), all interviews were conducted on-site in different locations in Germany, e.g. Frankfurt, Göttingen, Paderborn, Nuremberg, etc.

As a method, I used in-depth semi-structured interviews alongside biographical narrative interviews. The research focused on the participants’ daily lives and their experiences of geographical and social mobility.

The interviews were conducted in three parts. The design of the first part of the interview continued Rohde's approach to interview design with Russian au pairs (Rohde-Abuba, 2011). Rohde improves on narrative research's (Rosenthal, 1993) design of “autobiographically orientated narrative prompts” autobiografisch orientierten Erzählaufforderung (Schütze 1983: 285), i.e. by changing the ice-breaker question from “I would like to invite you to share your life story” (Rosenthal 2008: 145) to “What happened before you wanted to become an au pair? And then?” This consideration was based on the similarity of my subjects to Rohde's, in that they were relatively young and had limited experience of life stories. The results proved the strength of Rohde's methodology, with interviewees' narratives focussing on the theme of au pairs. Following the independent narrative, the interviewer asks questions related to the narrative to encourage the interviewee to explain further or provide more details about what the interviewee has already reported in the independent narrative. In addition, questions are asked about topics that have not yet been mentioned, and these questions are semi-structured. Themes related to intimate relationships, discrimination, work stress, daily life, and future plans.

Interviewees used their own life experiences to reflect on their decision to pursue an au pair stay and provided descriptions of their lives before and after the au pair period. They also reported more information about their family and assessments of issues with the labour markets in China and Germany. This interview design enables participants to control the rhythm of the narrative on their own, focus on their biographical construction process and allows the interviewer to address specific questions, also has great implications for young researchers, for example, by making it easier for young researchers with similar backgrounds to the interviewees to handle and interpret the situations encountered in the interviews.

As this study focuses on a small number of specific cases, the case study approach was chosen for the analysis of the material after pre-processing (including transcription and



anonymisation) of the interviews. Case study focused on creating a detailed description of the individual, including their history, background, characteristics, experiences. This helped researcher to construct a complete story to reveal the process of development and change in individual cases in a historical context.

In the background, it is worth mentioning that the young women surveyed for this study were students or graduates of colleges or universities in China. A large proportion of them studied Germanic and related majors; the German language level is often between A2 and B1 of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Additionally, they lived the most common life of a Chinese college student until they left China, namely, they left home around the age of 18 to 23 to study and live at a university campus in a large or medium-sized city for three to four years. The course schedule and daily life are usually centred on a structured, full-time programme.

Lens Creation: Igniting Aspirations

Individuals' actions and life trajectories, how they imagine their future and how their aspirations are put into practice cannot be shaped independently of their social environment. Aspirations are formed and developed in such circumstances (Appadurai, 2004; Carling, 2002, 2014; de Haas, 2021). Subsequently, I will describe the kinds of aspiration-creation circumstances the participants in this study faced, while discussing how people's aspirations and related social practices are shaped and developed in a relatively structured social environment.

'Made in Germany'

At the time of the interview, Zhang, a twenty-year-old third-year university student and au pair candidate was studying Germanic in China and preparing her visa application to go to Germany. In response to the question why she did not choose another country, her description was a reaction to the assessment of the country she was about to go to.

'I want to go to Germany... Made in Germany means good quality... I think Germany is very well recognised in China. Germany is famous for its big companies, cars, industry, all of them. That's why I studied German in the beginning, so I could work for German companies in the future. I can experience these up close when I go to Germany'. (Zhang)

Images towards others are often loaded with ideas and values that originate from one's own history, culture and language (Said, 1995). These ideas are shaped by factors such as the media, art, products, and politics (Bennett, 1998; Gabriel, 2021). The 'Made in Germany' designation enjoys a good reputation across the world (Joseph, 2016). In the Chinese context, Germany also tends to be described in a very positive light. For example, a well-known story persists in China that the sewage system of the city of Qingdao, which German engineers built more than 100 years ago in the German colonial area of Jiao'zhou, is still fully functional today (Kneitz, 2016). Subsequently, the story moves on to the 'myth' part. After more than 100 years, when Chinese workers found a damaged part of the sewer but could not find the right material, they turned to Germany for help. The Germans responded quickly saying that if they tried digging within three metres of the damaged part, there was a hidden solution. After

careful digging, the Chinese workers eventually found a paper packet containing replacement parts, which were still in mint condition. This story of the paper packet has been refuted many times and is still widely circulated in China. These impressions of Made in Germany, which combine reality and fiction, have a profound impact, because 'If migration takes place in relation to imaginative geographies of the world, then it also works through affective responses to the possibilities of different places, the stories of others and the opportunities and constraints that people face in their lives (Carling, 2018: 918; Hindman & Oppenheim, 2014)'. In this regard, I will use the case of 'intermediaries' and 'peers' to illustrate how aspiration and its related social practice are further catalysed and implemented.

The purveyor and creator of the 'lens': Intermediary

One phenomenon that was noticed during the fieldwork that most of the au pairs in the study had arrived in Germany through what was considered 'official' intermediaries. Such intermediaries often cooperated with higher education institutions (usually Chinese three-year private colleges and four-year private universities). These intermediaries are officially certified by The International Au Pair Association (IAPA)². Until 2020, fewer than 20 met the requirements, and by 2023, that number is reduced to four. Due to the endorsement of its legitimacy by higher education institutions and the university's tacit endorsement of such agencies, they inspire a higher degree of trust from applicants. In 2019, During the recruitment process in this kind of regular intermediary agencies, au pair candidates must pay both the school and the intermediary. The cost is relatively high: approximately CNY 20,000 (EUR 2,700). A lower-cost type of intermediary was also identified in the study, costing between CNY 4,000 and 9,000 (EUR 500–1,100). This type of intermediary is usually private. They also do not have the appropriate work permits or licences and usually operate in a grey area, therefore it is impossible to estimate their numbers.

'Official' intermediaries usually recruit au pairs through lectures or workshops, posters and leaflets on campuses and in language schools and cultural centres. For private intermediaries, potential au pairs are often recruited through personal relationships (e.g., classmates, relatives or acquaintances at the same school) or online advice. However, the 'lens creation' tactics in both forms of recruitment are similar. For instance, in their communication materials, the intermediaries often use terms such as 'work travel', 'free exchange student' and 'rare internship experience' to promote the au pair programme and claimed that going to Germany and spending a year on language study would be an ideal experience for future employment or study.

The intermediary's job is usually to coordinate au pair recruitment and paperwork for visas and job contracts, including contacting German host families and German embassies and coordinating between German host families and potential au pairs to provide information about the programme. Some intermediaries even provide pre-job training services. The curriculum mainly consists of teaching applicants how to cook simple western dishes or discussing topics related to German customs.

² The Global Association for Au Pair Programs IAPA, also known as the International Au Pair Association, stands as the foremost international trade association encompassing organizations involved in every facet of au pair and cultural exchange programs. With a remarkable network of over 150 member organizations spanning across 45 countries, IAPA has established its global presence. <https://www.iapa.org/>. Retrieved June 15, 2020, and October 16, 2023



Since the intermediary staff often have experience of living in Germany, even as former au pairs, they can usually provide information on how-to live-in Germany. For example, they may offer advice on how to integrate smoothly into the family or allay their concerns and fears. Therefore, intermediary services offer not only structural support but also social and emotional support in migration decision-making. The intermediary team follows up on each case, starting from the initial consultation with the candidate up to their departure for Germany a few months later. During the au pair stay itself, many agents maintain contact with their customers.

This long-term follow-up service has enabled many au pairs to establish friendships with intermediary agents. In this way, the agents will get more new customers referred by their old customers. Additionally, regardless of the type of intermediary, their work is, to a certain extent, recognised by clients who are successful in becoming au pairs, because the intermediary's work clears the way for the au pair.

This leads to mentioning that the general features of an intermediary's clients are: before an au pair stay, they have no personal relationship in Germany; to be more precise, no one provides them with the necessary information and accommodation to live in Germany. It is worth mentioning that, distinguishing this from other au pair studies where au pairs (candidates) are commonly matched with the job via Facebook Groups in ways such as contacting potential host families or communicating directly with au pairs from other countries, Chinese au pairs have hardly ever used such online resources before their stay. Their access to online resources usually comes from the limited information provided by restricted Chinese websites. Moreover, the information available about au pairs is unilateral—mostly positive and search results are flooded with different forms of advertising offered by au pair intermediaries. The consequence of this may also be that many people take part in the programme without being properly informed of the possible risks.

Additionally, it is common for relatives, friends, and classmates to be the lens makers. At the interview, Zhang (au pair; age 22) highlighted how the experiences of her peers had influenced her decision to pursue au pairing in Germany.

‘I determined about au pairing for the first time from a schoolmate. She was working as an au pair at the time. The photos she posted on social networks were new to me... She lived in Germany for only 1 year and she spoke German very well, which made me admire her’. (Zhang)

“new ideas and exposure to new life-styles transmitted back by migrants may increase aspirations to migrate”(de Haas, 2010:1593). In this context, 'migration' is given more prestige, leading to preferences. That is, migration aspirations can be motivated by the successful migration behaviour of others, whether they are relatives, peers, neighbours etc.

Lens Broken: Extinguishing Aspirations

Out of the relatively structured post-socialist Chinese context places the individual in a relatively flexible one, where the trajectory of the individual's life is no longer influenced on a large scale by comparatively solidified social conditions. In this regard, au pairs need to learn to cope with new circumstances and reassess their initial aspirations in everyday reality.

Superlative positive reports on ‘Made in Germany’ were widespread, and the Chinese au pairs interviewed for this study were bitterly disappointed with the reality when they arrived in Germany. During or after the au pair stay, some au pairs said their idealised image of Germany was shattered by some normal but negative images. Many problems found in China could also be seen in Germany; sometimes they were even worse. For example, there are many homeless people on the streets in the city centre and trains are often delayed.

Additionally, most of the host families live in rural areas far from the cities. Au pairs are often confronted with a landscape of endless fields. A gap exists between reality and their imagined picture of the developed world. Moreover, villagers have relatively fixed interpersonal relationships and lifestyles. For au pairs who have established a “pseudo-family relationship” (Burikova & Miller 2010: 33) with a host family, relationships with their host family and neighbours are neither familiar nor tender. They are very different at home and within the community and are unable to construct a sense of identity and belonging from the surrounding environment. In addition to these obvious ‘lens-breaking’ moments, there are some more insidious ones.

After just 1 year as an au pair, some return to China. They stated unanimously that it would be a good option to pursue a career opportunity in a developed city or region. They value the experience of being abroad as a means of differentiating themselves from their competitors in the labour market and expect to get a decent job ‘in connection with Germany’ thereby.

Nan (age 25) is a former au pair. After returning to China, she was offered a job at a Sino-German commercial trade company in the largest city Xi’an in Northwest China, but she was not satisfied when she assessed her current situation.

‘Yes, I saw a different world, but so what? Being an au pair for 1 year made no more difference in my life. What I am doing now is what I could have done last year. I wasted time for a year; when I came back, I had no internship experience, no additional academic qualifications and everything was just as it was before, but maybe I lost some employment benefits³. No one thought that the experience would add value to my resume. People just thought I was a babysitter for a year. I paid for my naivety’. (Nan)

Before her au pair stay, Nan’s impression of the au pair experience abroad as an ability to gain greater mobility and more negotiating power in labour markets drove the development of the biography. However, the purpose of an au pair programme is similar to international education in terms of cultural exchange, there are fundamental differences: an au pair’s overseas experience is not an officially recognised form of education and does not guarantee employment. Au pairs’ career development continues to be based on degrees or qualifications obtained in China. In Nan’s opinion, it seems to have suffered a downward shift in social class (from university student to culture spreader to nanny). In her comparison with the imagined status quo, Nan denies that there is an advantage to the au pair experience.

³ Employment Benefits: In China, certain entities like state-owned companies have mandated plans to hire new graduates, which come with employment benefits. These benefits are further supported by tax incentives and financial subsidies provided by the government. As a result, new graduates enjoy additional advantages when entering the job market. For more details https://rsj.sh.gov.cn/201712333/xwfb/zxdt/99/202003/t20200320_1303986.shtml. Retrieved February 15, 2020



Lens Reconstructed: Reshaping Aspirations

In the study of the social production of aspirations, the aspiration itself and the related social practices, such as its formation and realisation, cannot be separated from the actual social context (Leavy & Smith, 2010; Gutman & Akerman, 2008). New circumstances, more experiences and unexpected events also reshape aspirations (Wang & Collins, 2020). Especially geographically mobile people are exposed to more unexpected events, since mobility is inherently strongly uncertain and seldom coincides with people's expectations of a sequential trajectory. (Griffiths et al., 2013)

In this regard, au pairs are required to learn how to customise their biographies from complex social elements, deal with unpredictable occurrences and incorporate them effectively into their plans. Moreover, they should be able to (re-)shape their aspirations and be flexible enough to negotiate with new circumstances.

In negotiating an unsatisfactory life, the role of social media cannot be ignored. On social media, surprisingly, the photos posted under the hashtag #AuPair were similar in content. The au pair usually chooses some typical Western elements. For example, smiling with their host families under the Christmas tree or taking beautiful selfies with well-known attractions such as the Eiffel Tower and the Colosseum. Interviewees indicated that this was a good strategy to show others that they were satisfied with their lives in Germany. Even if they are disappointed with the reality, they choose to hide the negative on social media and show the rare positive side of their experience abroad, so that they can maintain their unique status and image in contrast to their acquaintances. And affirmations and likes they receive on social networks brought them comfort in their lives.

Beyond the superficial glorification of the status quo through travel or social media, the more positive strategies of interviewees are reflected in the exploration of new life possibilities for the future. Some of them began to adapt and use conditions they encountered in Germany to reshape their aspirations.

Lily (former au pair, aged 28) had studied English Literature in China; she defined her major as 'no major'. Since everybody could speak English, she felt that English proficiency offered no advantages over others in finding a job. Fortunately, Lily met a host family in which the parents were successful in the information technology (IT) industry. At their suggestion, she had the idea to return to university to obtain an undergraduate degree:

'The short-term 'babysitter' experience was useless. With more returnees, competition for jobs will become more intense. If you only experience being a babysitter, you do not have any advantages. Still, if you have an excellent foreign diploma from a very popular major or have worked in a large German company, it will be very different'. (Lily)

In this way, Lily's host parents helped her make a career plan that allowed her to combine the linguistic skills she had acquired in China with the IT skills that she was now interested in. After an au pair stay, she returned to the university in Germany to study a programme related to both linguistics and computer science.

The case shows that some au pairs through their au pair experience have already found new vocational directions that they will try to implement through future education. Moreover,

some interviewees said that the experience in Germany provided the answer to the questions of what to do next. Former au pair Nan returned to China immediately after her 1-year au pair stay and worked for six months later in a Chinese company before preparing to go abroad for a second time. Different from other studies in which migrants are willing to change their disadvantaged position in the labour market in the destination country through employment (Efe, 2023), the participants in this study indicated that education is a good way to do so. Having lived in Germany for a year, it would be a good choice to return to this familiar place as a student. This route will not only offer her the possibility of permanent residence in the future but also if she returns to China, she will be able to benefit from the privileges offered to returnees⁴ by the Chinese authorities, which will free her from the embarrassment of her status.

Having a Chinese university degree that is recognised by the German authorities is not an exception; many former au pairs choose to go back to Germany to pursue a German university qualification. This is a good strategy in these former au pairs' view, as it makes up for the current 'informal' deficit and means that by obtaining a 'formal' qualification in Germany, one can cope better with the Chinese/German labour market and the migration policy offered by the regime. However, this means that their existing qualifications are not being used and there are more difficulties awaiting them in the future, such as Akademische Prüfstelle (APS) exams⁵, language exams and the distress of being older than their peers in campus.

Concluding Discussion

How aspirations relate to and interact with mobility has been discussed widely (Carling, 2014; Carling & Collins, 2018; Carling & Schewel, 2018; Leavy & Smith, 2010, 2010; Scheibelhofer, 2018; Wang & Collins, 2020). A fuller understanding of aspiration-related topics in international migration requires attention to different contexts. The work on au pair migration from China—short-term experiential non-purposeful migration—contributes to this effort. I suggest that aspiring mobility is a theoretical perspective that helps researchers to focus on the role that aspirations play in the creation of individual biographies; it highlights the potential for aspiration to be shaped by circumstances and the ability of aspiration to navigate personal developmental trajectories.

The au pair journey began with a time-countdown migration experience. These young Chinese women were briefly absent from institutionalised life in China for a period in a precarious phase of the youth–adulthood transition and migration process, which may face challenges of

⁴ “War for Talent”: In the competitive landscape known as the “war for talent,” China has implemented various measures to attract and retain skilled individuals. These initiatives include providing scholarships, offering generous incentives, and creating favorable conditions to entice talented individuals. Some of these conditions include tax exemptions for car purchases, preferential policies for returning entrepreneurs, access to better educational resources for children, benefits related to housing purchases or rentals, and the opportunity to obtain a 'Hukou' (household registration) in developed cities, thereby becoming a resident. These efforts aim to encourage graduates and professionals to return to China. For more information: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelwenderoth/2018/11/30/chinas-growth-is-slowing-but-the-war-for-talent-is-not/#24e417674799>. Retrieved January 5, 2023

⁵ The Akademische Prüfstelle (APS) is a service institution established in July 2001, operating under the Cultural Department of the German Embassy in Beijing in collaboration with the DAAD (Deutschen Akademischen Austauschdienst). Serving as the pathway for Chinese applicants seeking to study in Germany, the APS carefully reviews applicant documents, which may include a plausibility interview or Test AS. Upon successful evaluation, the APS issues a certificate that is mandatory for admission to German universities. This certificate confirms the authenticity of Chinese applicants' documents and validates their academic achievements in China, enabling them to apply to German higher education institutions. Notably, the APS does not evaluate academic achievement documents from Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Macao. The APS exam is specifically designed for applicants from China, Mongolia, Vietnam, and North Korea. Additional information <https://www.aps.org.cn/>. Retrieved January 5, 2023.



the multiple transformations of youth–adulthood, post-communism–capitalism and geographical mobility simultaneously. The au pair experience serves as a springboard, where the buffer function enables young people to (re)position themselves for the future.

Before going abroad, young girls believe that the au pair experience will bring betterment, but what it is, in what way, and what the actual gains will be, and even possible risks, are uncertain. Even so, a carefully designed beautifying lens keeps these young people going into the au pair programme—through this lens, they see an easy, exciting and rewarding path, the rewards of which may be good options and opportunities, or something to be admired by others or, generally, a bright future thanks to the experience. The creation of the lens began with the highly recognised image of Germany in Chinese society and was then enriched by intermediaries or acquaintances, who provided the necessary information and emotional support. Moreover, the difficulty of accessing information makes the lens not easy to break. These have contributed to the imagination of overseas becoming a reality.

The interviewees' situations reflect the general characteristics of the experiences of many Chinese au pairs before they leave China. First, this may confirm that young people's aspirations are often higher than their current situation or expectations. Second, it also reflects the limitations of accessing information in structurally constrained resources. This makes them enter or prepare to enter the program without sufficient knowledge of the au pair situation and being fully informed of the risks. Simultaneously, they express an optimistic sense of self-efficacy about the opportunity to achieve aspirations, assigning romantic significance to their behaviour. However, the future they imagine is often only a vague notion of 'better'.

When they arrive in the foreign temporary settlement of Germany, the difference between reality and imagination breaks the lens. These young people not only have to deal with the difficulties and challenges posed by the differences between the old, familiar environment and the new, unfamiliar one but also need to reflect on their initial aspirations and then make a series of decisions in a short time. They need to revise their initial idealised and romantic aspirations substantively according to their specific social circumstances or encounters and customise individual youth–adulthood transitions and assign meaning to them in a short time. However, the scope for self-selection and the opportunities for self-fulfilment are limited to some extent.

It was not easy for these young women, but surprisingly, new lens is built during this process. The experiences and encounters during the au pair experience provide these young women with additional unplanned abilities and challenge the limited opportunities for self-fulfilment, allowing for more possibilities for the future. In different circumstances, individuals' perceptions and interpretations of phenomena will affect their choices. In this sense, the au pair is not a passive acceptor of the circumstances but negotiates with them to find some other way out. Even if aspirations are contradicted, interrupted, or stopped by reality, the experience of being assigned meaning and value by the aspiration opens another window of opportunity that can define the next action.

At the end of this study, many participants presented an open attitude towards their future possibilities. However, unpredictable changes and events will certainly continue to influence their future aims. These processes highlight the fact that the mobility of young au pairs can be understood not only as an uncertain and dynamic process but also as reversible and cyclical.

Certainly, thirteen interviewees in this study were female. The lack of male participants means that the importance of gender roles is unclear, and secondly, the small sample size and limited research period prevented a more meaningful study. Future research could consider larger samples and longitudinal studies to better understand trends in the evolution of aspiration construction.

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