

RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM 2026

Kinetic lives in precarious times: Genders and emotions on the move in Asia



Dates: 25–26 June 2026

Venue: South Room, [Woodward Conference Centre](#), University of Melbourne

Location: 185 Pelham st, Carlton, VIC 3053 (Level 10, Melbourne Law School)

Official Conference Program Booklet

Acknowledgement of Country

The Asian Cultural Research Hub acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the unceded lands on which this symposium takes place, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our deep respects to their Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all First Nations scholars, practitioners, and guests joining us. Sovereign land was never ceded.

Welcome

Dear colleagues, presenters, and guests,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to our research symposium. This collaborative event focuses on how macro-scale shifts in urbanization, labor routes, and displacement shape everyday micro-scale emotional experiences and gendered life courses across Asia today.

Over the two days of the symposium, you will have the opportunity to engage with presentations of the latest research in these areas and deep discussion designed to spark ongoing collaboration. We encourage you to actively participate in the discussions, challenge assumptions, and forge partnerships that will drive our areas forward.

Thank you for contributing your expertise and insights to this vital conversation.

Fran Martin

Professor of Cultural Studies , School of Culture and Communication
Co-convenor, Asian Cultural Research Hub

Symposium Schedule

Day 1: Thursday, June 25, 2026

Time	Presenters	Session / Event
9:15		Tea & coffee on arrival
9:30– 9:45	Fran Martin	Welcome & Opening Remarks
9:45 – 12:25	Chair: Dr. Charlotte Setijadi Yaxuan Su (National University of Singapore) Nursyazwani Jamaludin (University of Pennsylvania) Dr. Samanwita Paul (Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology–Delhi) (Online) Aashish Yadav (Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness, Melbourne Law School)	Panel 1: Bordering & Displacement 1. Crossing back: migrant women, platforms, and the politics of return in the Vietnam–China borderlands Discussant: Aashish Yadav 2. Dis/placing the Rohingya Woman: Everyday Gendered Discourses and Practices in Conditions of Refugeehood Discussant: Dr. Samanwita Paul (Online) 3. Agency as Rootedness: Examining Culture and Refugeehood for Rohingya women in India – Online Discussant: Nursyazwani Jamaludin 4. Gender, Emotions and Precarious Lives: Citizenship and Belonging in Assam, India. Discussant: Sanjana Santosh
12:25– 1:25		Lunch Break
1:25– 3:25	Chair: Prof Anita Harris Runhe Yu and Shawna Tang (University of Sydney) Rong Wan (Asia Institute, University of Melbourne) A/Prof Ruepert Jiel D Cho (De La Salle University, Philippines) (Online)	Panel 2: Digital Genders 1. “Romantic decolonisation”: transnational Hanfu activism among young, transnationally mobile Chinese women Discussant: Yichen Zhang 2. Spill over all four walls: transnational and transcultural affects as styling and meaning making Discussant: Yixuan Yang 3. Making the “Couple Imaginary”: Algorithmic Intimacy and Uneven Hypermobility in Inter-Asian Porn Media Discussant: Bin Wang
3:25– 3:40		Coffee Break
3:40– 5:40	Chair: Dr. Tingting Liu Prof Anita Harris (Deakin University) Prof. Fran Martin (University of Melbourne) Yichen Zhang (University of Melbourne)	Panel 3: Youth (im)mobilities 1. Longing for family: Transnationally mobile Asian queer young women and the affective work of mobile family making Discussant: Dr Shawna Tang 2. Moving an invisible mountain: Chinese international graduate women navigating uncertain times Discussant: Prof Anita Harris 3. Keeping unsettled toward a ‘better’ settlement: Chinese International Gender

		<i>Studies returnees desiring moving abroad again</i> Discussant: Rong Wan
5:40		Day 1 concludes → Head straight to dinner: Ying Thai 2, Lygon St Carlton (6:15 booking)

Day 2: Friday, June 26, 2026

Time	Presenters	Session / Event
9:15		Tea & coffee on arrival
9:30–12:10	Chair: Prof Fran Martin Tammie Yuet Hang Wong (University of Melbourne) Dr. Qing Shen (Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Berlin) Bella Choo (University of Melbourne) Jean Aaron De Borja (Monash University)	Panel 4: Marginalised Embodiments 1. Exhausted bodies, anticipating return: ageing Filipina domestic workers in Macau Discussant: Bella Choo 2. Micro-Queer Mobilities: Aging, Care, and self-making among Older Working-Class Queer Men in Shanghai Discussant: A/Prof Ruepert Jiel D Cho (Online) 3. Passing as an enabler of mobilities: the (in)visibility of disability, race and gender Discussant: Jean Aaron De Borja 4. Transfemininity and the Promise of Migration Discussant: Dr Tingting Liu
12:10 – 1:10		Lunch Break
1:10 – 3:10	Chair: Dr Lin Song Dr. Charlotte Setjadi (University of Melbourne) Dr. Tingting Liu (University of Technology Sydney) Dr. Arum Budiastuti (Universitas Airlangga – Surabaya – Indonesia) (Online)	Panel 5: (Im)mobile Labour 1. Good Employers? Moral Claims and Hidden Hierarchies Among Indonesian Migrant Women in Singapore and Malaysia Discussant: Dr. Arum Budiastuti (Online) 2. Playing the Platformized Game: Migrant Riders, Class Displacement, and Masculinities in Australia Discussant: Dr. Charlotte Setjadi 3. Ethical Labour at the Border: Gender, Risk, and Informal Logistics in Jastip Discussant: Yaxuan Su
3:10 – 3:25		Coffee Break
3:25 – 5:25	Chair: Dr Shawna Tang Yixuan Yang (Shanghai Conservatory of Music) Sanjana Santosh (University of Melbourne)	Panel 6: (Im)mobile Cities 1. Emotional Navigation in a Precarious City: Gendered (im)mobility and Labor in Shanghai's Music Industry among Young Female Creative Workers Discussant: Runhe Yu

	Bin Wang (University of Melbourne)	2. Illness in motion: Coping as Kinetic Practice in Urban India Discussant: Tammie Yuet Hang Wong 3. 'Enamoured with this turbulent journey': queer quest for identity in the gay capital of China Discussant: Dr Qing Shen
5:25 – 5:45		Closing remarks & wrap-up
5:45		Conference close

Presentation Abstracts & Presenter Bios (in order of presentation)

Crossing back: migrant women, platforms, and the politics of return in the Vietnam–China borderlands

Yaxuan Su, National University of Singapore

The Vietnam–China borderland is a site of frequent border crossings, both documented and undocumented. Vietnamese migrant women, who are separated from their natal communities after undocumented travelling into China and marrying without registration, increasingly turn to digital platforms to search for and reconnect with their natal families. Vietnamese vloggers in the borderlands play a critical role in mediating, facilitating, and filming these reunions as xunqin (Mandarin: searching for relatives) videos, creating a thriving digital economy and engaging transnational audiences. With the reopening of land border gates between Vietnam and China in 2023, after the pandemic lockdown, alongside increasingly stringent immigration management in China, the physical return of some Vietnamese migrant women from China to Vietnam has become possible, or in some cases inevitable, especially for those without legal documentation. Some returns, and even the institutional encounters during the process of returning, are selectively filmed by vloggers and by migrant women themselves and anticipated by audiences. Drawing on 12 months of ethnographic research (2024 – 2025) in Northern Vietnam and ongoing digital ethnography, this paper examines return of migrant women in the Vietnam–China borderlands not only as a physical reunion or a matter of legality, but also as an emerging video genre and a politicized site of contestation in everyday power relations, entangled with platform economies, institutions, affects, and kinship. I ask: When women are expected to return, how are their past gendered mobilities institutionally reframed in both China and Vietnam? What role do vloggers and their connections with Vietnamese migrant women play in facilitating return? I argue that when returns and institutional encounters are filmed by vloggers and by the migrant women themselves, “return” becomes both a way of being into the lives of others and a mode of participation in platform economies.

Yaxuan Su is a Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology at the National University of Singapore. Her research interests include gendered mobility, transnational kinship, platform economies, digital mediation, the Vietnam–China borderlands, and digital ethnography. Her thesis explores the mediated transnational reunion between Vietnamese migrant women

in China and their natal families in Vitenam. She conducted fieldwork in Vietnam, China, and in digital spaces that link these two sites, particularly during periods when border crossing was impossible.

Relevant publications: 2025 'Digital reunions and the weight of what's left out', Anthropology News website, September 1, 2025.

Dis/placing the Rohingya Woman: Everyday Gendered Discourses and Practices in Conditions of Refugeehood

Nursyazwani Jamaludin, University of Pennsylvania

Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country, seemed to offer displaced Rohingya Muslims a safe sanctuary to pursue new possibilities of religio-political life. Yet, Malaysia's reluctance to sign the 1951 UN Refugee Convention limits refugees' politico-legal affordances, leaving especially Rohingya women vulnerable to multiple layers of dispossession. This paper studies Rohingya Muslim women in Malaysia to understand how conditions of refugeehood generate new religio-political and gendered subjectivities. Drawing on digital ethnography, ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with Rohingya refugees in Malaysia between 2023 and 2025, this paper takes the figure of the Rohingya Muslim woman as a site to explore gendered experiences of im/mobility across generational, affective, aspirational and religious dimensions. First, I attend to the affective dimension of Rohingya women's experiences with child and arranged marriages. As they struggle with the precarity of their refugeehood, I look at the entanglements between heteropatriarchal and religious notions of womanhood in structuring imaginations of "the Muslim woman." Next, I explore inter-generational Rohingya women's everyday experiences to understand the implications of prolonged displacement in shaping religious traditions and gendered subjectivities. Particularly, I attend to their emotional labor in reworking interpretations of Muslimness to refute heteropatriarchal notions of womanhood. Lastly, I explore the implications of conjuring the figure of the "ideal Muslim woman" in Rohingya everyday discourses. While the image of the "Rohingya woman from Myanmar" reveals a sense of nostalgia before their displacement, Rohingya women look to the figure of the Malaysian Muslim woman – one who indexes progress yet steadfast in religious values – as an imagined future. In examining past and future conceptions of the "ideal Muslim woman," I trace the temporal imagination of womanhood cultivated in exile. This paper thus builds on migration, gender and religious studies to highlight the Muslim woman's agency in re/defining and re/working religious worlds amid the specter of the heteropatriarchal nation-state.

Nursyazwani is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. Her dissertation research is situated at the interfaces of sovereignty, migration and religious studies, to examine the world-making practices among displaced Rohingya individuals and communities on the peripheries of ummah, the global Muslim community. Through ethnographic research with Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, resettled Rohingya in Chicago, and Rohingya online communities, her comparative study traces inter-scalar modes of Rohingya world-making across different political, embodied, transnational, and spiritual domains. She recently published in the Third World Quarterly exploring the relations between race, racial capitalism and religion.

Agency as Rootedness: Examining Culture and Refugeehood for Rohingya women in India

Dr. Samanwita Paul, Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology–Delhi

Refugees are often considered to be outside the purview of national and international law and yet at its mercy for survival and therefore often equated with 'Bare life' (Agamben, 1998). Such discourse led to the stereotyping of refugee women as "reproductive vessels" in need of chivalrous protection. Policy projects often labelled them as 'vulnerable populations' in need of special assistance. Given the context, the present study looks into the intersection of culture and women's agency in the context of Rohingya refugee women across the displacement continuum from Rakhine state to India. Based on repeated in-depth interviews with Rohingya women, women leaders and humanitarian officials engaged in the refugee camps in India, it tries to argue that despite restrictive cultural assertions by the humanitarian actors about the Rohingya community, Rohingya women have been able to exercise their agency across the continuum. It focuses on their experiences as women and steers clear of homogenizing their narratives. Moving beyond reductivism, this study, postulates that women's experience as members of the Rohingya is inherently nuanced and does not mean their reduction to 'bare biological beings' nor does it in any way mean a sudden proliferation of their individual agency by breaking free of family or community networks. Instead for Rohingya women, coping strategies, solidarities and exercising their agency in the face of challenges are inherently rooted in their families and community and not in breaking away from them. Moving past the essentialist cultural discourse surrounding Rohingya women, this study shows that generalizing notions of refugee culture as given and static at a particular place and time only seeks to feed into the powerful global hierarchies which reproduces them in the first place.

Samanwita Paul is a Teaching Fellow at Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology–Delhi and a Centre for Asia Pacific Refugee Studies (CAPRS) 2025 Fellow at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. She holds a doctoral degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, where her thesis was on the "Displacement and Politics of representation among Rohingya women refugees in India." Her academic interests include Feminist Studies, Political Geography, and Refugee Studies. Findings from her doctoral thesis has been published in reputed peer-reviewed journals including the Journal of Refugee Studies to name a few.

Gender, Emotions and Precarious Lives: Citizenship and Belonging in Assam, India.

Aashish Yadav, Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness, Melbourne Law School

Surabhi Singh, Melbourne Law School

Parallel citizenship determination mechanisms in Assam, India have threatened the citizenship of millions of persons, effectively labelling over 150,000 persons as foreigners unlawfully present in India. While the 1.9 million persons excluded from the National Register of Citizens, 2019 await resolution of citizenship status, many live in constant fear of being subjected to the state government's extensive campaign to forcibly push them across the border into Bangladesh.

Documents are the central feature of these mechanisms, requiring persons to 'perform Indian citizenship through paperwork'. However, gender-specific barriers are also inherent in the system that demands evidence of women's connections with their parents, where most of their documents only include names of the husband. Scholars have argued that the citizenship regimes in Assam produce 'liminal' and 'precarious' citizenship, dismissing the innumerable identity documents that affected persons present. Precarious citizenship is marked by feelings of fear, hopelessness, and uncertainty, resulting in the denial of rights and services with the risk of forced deportation ever present.

The precarity of citizenship claims in Assam are well-documented in the media. With this paper, we hope to contribute to the nascent accounts of emotion and citizenship in India, and the scholarship on law and emotion generally.

This work will borrow its methods from across disciplines, especially history and sociology where emotions have been located within texts such as judgements and court orders. By closely reading at least 10 judgements from appellate courts such as the Gauhati High Court and the Supreme Court of India where women petitioners have challenged the decisions of the Foreigners Tribunals, we hope to analyse how Indian law sees/does not see the emotions (such as fear, loss, despair) in the pleas of citizenship by women, many of which likely arise from the precarity of these women's lives (gender's intersection with minority religion and citizenship status). Through this feminist approach to citizenship, we hope to contribute to the growing field of emotional citizenship.

Aashish Yadav is a PhD Candidate and Research Assistant at the Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness, Melbourne Law School. His doctoral research examines the nationality concerns that emerge during protracted or permanent displacement in the context of climate change. His academic work has been published in Statelessness and Citizenship Review and Jindal Global Law Review. His public commentary has appeared in The Indian Express, Scroll.in, and Article-14.

Surabhi is a PhD candidate at the Melbourne Law School. Her doctoral work examines emotions within Indian family law. Her academic work has been published in the Jindal Global Law Review and the Indian Law Review.

"Romantic decolonisation": transnational Hanfu activism among young, transnationally mobile Chinese women **Runhe Yu and Shawna Tang University of Sydney**

In 2022, groups of young Chinese women dressed in Hanfu were spotted picketing outside Dior retail stores in Paris and the UK. These women, many of whom were transnationally mobile international students based in the West, were protesting the French luxury brand's "cultural

appropriation” allegedly in Dior’s autumn collection. In dispute was the “Mamian” skirt, claimed by Dior as its original, signature silhouette, but disputed by Hanfu fans as the traditional Chinese mǎmiànqún (马面裙). A virulent nationalist discourse circulating among Hanfu fans in Chinese social media mobilised mostly young Paris-based Chinese women, and a few men. In this paper, through textual analysis and discourse analysis, we explore the ways in which elite, cosmopolitan, young Chinese women are claiming decolonisation for themselves through a politics of visibility and representation in the context of Chinese economic power and Western multiculturalism. We draw on two case studies played out spectacularly in Chinese online media to theorise what we are calling “romantic decolonisation”.

Runhe Yu is an independent researcher who completed the Master of Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney in 2024, and they are starting a PhD at Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. Runhe is interested in cultural practices in contemporary China under the condition of postcoloniality. Their work focuses on nationalism and imperialism underlying Chinese popular culture that are interrelated with China’s internal politics and international power relations.

*Dr Shawna Tang is Senior Lecturer in Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. Her research explores race, gender, and sexuality in transnational and postcolonial contexts. She is the co-editor of *Queer Southeast Asia* and author of *Postcolonial Lesbian Identities in Singapore*.*

In-motion emotions: transmigrant Chinese beauty bloggers’ affective stylisation

Rong Wan, Asia Institute, University of Melbourne

Affect and style are co-constructive. Affects can exude from language and lie beside (Sedgwick 2003) language. When symbolic structures fail to fully capture, almost inevitably, a nebulous feeling, a bodily sensation, an ambient atmosphere, affects seep in and seep out. This article draws on eight-month ethnographic interviews and interaction with 15 transmigrant Chinese beauty bloggers in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tokyo, Melbourne and Sydney, documenting their subjective experience of affects while navigating situationally salient normativities in the “historical present” (Berlant 2011). Four affective stances have been observed emerging organically to have more sinking feeling (Ahmed 2006: 134), namely questioning, refusal, stubbornness and humour in response to highly valorised discursive-affective regimes prescribed in the materialities of specific places that seek to demarcate, anaesthetise and diminish. To claim the four stances to be affective is to highlight the killjoy joy generated from killing others’ joys, as a killjoy is “not necessarily about feeling bad, but it is about feeling” (Ahme 2023: 80).

Rong WAN (she/her/她/TA) is a PhD candidate and tutor at the University of Melbourne (Asia Institute, Faculty of Arts). Her broader research interest lies in Language, Gender and Sexuality and Queer Linguistics in Chinese cultures. Her PhD thesis investigates Chinese queer, feminist and/or transmigrant beauty bloggers’ linguistic, embodied and affective stylisation, and the discursive formation of their gender and sexuality. She has

been involved in several cross-continent collaborative Gender-Just Language projects, dedicated to redoing a more inclusive Chinese language world.

Making the “Couple Imaginary”: Algorithmic Intimacy and Uneven Hypermobility in Inter-Asian Porn Media

A/Prof Ruepert Jiel D Cho, De La Salle University, Philippines,
Dr. Lin Song, Senior Lecturer in Gender Studies, University of Melbourne,
Australia

This paper examines how inter-Asian gay porn microcelebrities navigate “hypermobility”, a form of geographic and digital movement made possible by digital media and post-pandemic movements, and how it shapes intimacy, identity, and sexual subjectivities. We draw on multi-sited netnography that combines observations and content analysis across platforms such as OnlyFans, X, Telegram, and other social media platforms. The paper explores affective and temporal dimensions of hypermobility by examining what we call “the couple imaginary”, which, we show, reflects the nuances and rhythms of digital performance, strategic disclosure of everyday life, and the management and curation of erotic and social visibility across Asian megacities such as Taipei, Bangkok, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Manila. This paper considers erotic capital as crucially grounded in cosmopolitanism that signals worldly sophistication, sexual modernity, and access to transnational networks.

We argue that hypermobility has become a necessary component for increasing erotic capital by projecting status and leveraging attachment to a diverse range of audiences and algorithmic visibility. Yet, hypermobility is unevenly distributed. Some creators leverage massive scale of geographic (i.e., international travels) and digital (i.e., cross-platform presence) to maximize erotic capital, social capital, and economic returns. Others, however, experience hypermobility in different forms that are limited to local or regional migration and self-made assemblage of disparate platforms due to cultural, legal, and economic factors. These constraints shape the production and reception of erotic labor, rendering cosmopolitan intimacy aspirational or partially foreclosed. By foregrounding the intersection of mobility with cultural, legal, and economic structures, this paper demonstrates how hypermobility produces stratified sexual subjectivities that mediate affective, temporal, spatial, and intimate experiences in place-specific ways.

Ruepert Jiel D. Cao, Ph.D., an Associate Professor at De La Salle University, studies how minority identities in Asia and the Global South use digital media to navigate structural inequities. His recent research focuses on queer Asian men’s production, consumption, and use of pornographic media in navigating normative social structures. His publications appear in Media International Australia, the International Journal of Communication, and Celebrity Studies and in edited volumes by Routledge. He earned his Ph.D. in Communication from Hong Kong Baptist University in 2022, where he received the Hong Kong Ph.D. Fellowship Scheme.

Lin Song (PhD in Gender Studies, CUHK) is a Senior Lecturer in Gender Studies at the University of Melbourne. He has worked in universities in mainland China, Hong Kong, and

Macao. Lin's research focuses queer representations in Asian mediascapes, and experiences of queer mobilities across the Asia-Pacific.

Longing for family: Transnationally mobile Asian queer young women and the affective work of mobile family making

Prof Loretta Baldassar, Edith Cowan University

Prof Anita Harris, Deakin University

Dr. Hao Zheng, Cultin Univeristy

In youth mobilities and queer migration, Asian queer young people articulate a strong longing for family. Drawing on in-depth interviews with young women from a five-year longitudinal study of transnationally mobile youth moving in and out of Australia and on a qualitative project with 20 Chinese queer female international students in Australia, this paper shows the complex ways that 'longing' centres as a gendered, affective element for acknowledgement and support from their own and their partners' families of origin. Crucially, such longing coexists and persists alongside efforts to resist heteronormative expectations and to craft new kin relations through mobility. Mobility opens practical and aspirational routes to family making, especially through assisted reproductive technology (ART), enabling queer young people to pursue parenthood and to practise family making beyond the heterosexual framework and conventional gendered life pathway. How are these opportunities negotiated alongside recognition and support from families of origin? By foregrounding emotion work and expanding, nuanced forms of kinship in mobile family making, this paper offers a critical examination of queer relationality and the entangled involvement of families of origin. In doing so, it enriches queer-of-colour debates and complicates homonormative narratives (Huang, 2022). It further shows how queer identity unsettles conventional understandings of 'family' in transnational migration, and provides empirical insights into young women's experiences for contemporary analyses of queer migration (Fortier, 2021; Gorman-Murray, 2009).

Professor Loretta Baldassar is Vice Chancellor's Professorial Research Fellow in the School of Arts and Humanities at ECU. She is Professor of Anthropology and Sociology. She is one of Australia's leading Social Scientists and her work is internationally recognised as foundational to the field of transnational family studies. Loretta leads the Migration, Diversity and Care Research Program in the School of Arts and Humanities, which includes the Social Ageing (SAGE) Futures Lab, the TRACS Diversity Research Network, and the Rainbow Migrants Lab (RaMiLab).

Prof Anita Harris is Distinguished Professor in Sociology at Deakin University. Her research interests include youth mobility and migration, changing forms of transitions, youth citizenship and everyday civic life, and gender and cultural diversity. She is co-Cl of the 10-year longitudinal mixed methods research program Youth Mobilities, Aspirations and Pathways, funded by The Australian Research Council. Its current phase is the project Youth Futures After Mobility. She is the author of several books in youth studies, including Future Girl, Young People and Everyday Multiculturalism, and Thinking About Belonging in Youth Studies (with Cuervo and Wyn).

Dr Hao Zheng (she/her) is a Chinese queer female researcher with expertise in sociology, cultural studies, and media studies. Her work focuses on gender and sexuality, transnational mobility, and digital cultures. Hao's doctoral research explored the experiences of Chinese queer female students in Australia, examining how they construct their queer and adult identities in a transnational context. She is currently a Research Fellow of the Influencer Ethnography Research Lab at Curtin University and holds a PhD from Deakin University. Her research has been published in *The Sociological Review*, *Journal of Homosexuality*, and *International Journal of Cultural Studies*.

Moving an invisible mountain: Chinese international graduate women navigating uncertain times

Prof. Fran Martin, University of Melbourne

In the wake of the dissolution of more predictable structures in employment, relationships, families, lifecourses and mobility patterns in many societies, the effects of intensified uncertainty on people's capacities to imagine and plan for the future have been much discussed (Rosa 2003; Blatterer 2009; Zhang 2025). In this same period, international student mobility has increased significantly, including from China: for many years the largest student sending country globally, and one that sends more women than men to study overseas (Martin 2022). Western degrees are in large part intended by China's middle-class families as a strategic hedge against children's future employment uncertainty. Responding to these contexts and drawing on interviews with 35 Chinese international women graduates of Australian universities, this paper asks: What are Chinese international women graduates' subjective experiences of post-study uncertainty, strategies for managing it, and emotional orientations toward the future?

The study confirms that for these international graduates, the future often feels deeply and perplexingly uncertain—like being assigned the task of “moving an invisible mountain”—and educational mobility may in fact compound uncertainty. In the mobility domain, it opens up domestic or international migration potentials, increasing the complexity of future pathways and decisions. In the gendered biography domain, it contributes to the de-standardization of once-predictable milestones and life courses. And in wider life planning, for some, the experience of living abroad opens up deeply impactful existential tensions between competing value systems. Practical strategies that participants adopt in the face of uncertainty include reproducing the family as security haven, and exploring non-mainstream value systems in alternative spiritual and lifestyle movements. Participation in these non-familial communities tends to occur in response to more intense negative affects (anxiety, lostness), but, I argue, also holds out stronger transformative potentials than (re)familization as a defensive response to future uncertainty.

Fran Martin is Professor of Cultural Studies in the School of Culture & Communication and co-convenor of the Asian Cultural Research Hub at The University of Melbourne. Her research has led to advances in scholarly understandings of the transformations that globalization is wreaking in media, gender, sexuality and cultural identity across the transnational Chinese-speaking world. Fran is engaged in a multi-phase longitudinal study of the social and subjective experiences of fifty young women from China through the years

of their university study in Australia and after. The project has been running since 2012, with its second phase (2015–2020) funded by a Future Fellowship. Fran’s research also addresses television, film, literature, digital cultures and other forms of cultural production across Taiwan, the mainland People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and the worldwide Chinese diaspora.

Keeping unsettled toward a ‘better’ settlement: Chinese International Gender Studies returnees desiring moving abroad again

Yichen Zhang, University of Melbourne

While settlement is often assumed to be the ultimate goal of migration, migrants’ understandings and aspirations regarding settlement are heterogeneous and context-dependent. In dialogue with Martin’s (2025) work on Chinese international graduate women returnees’ ambivalent unsettlement, this paper explores narratives of un/settlement among three Chinese Gender Studies returnees who desire to move abroad again. Drawing on interviews and weekly diaries collected as part of a broader PhD project, this study investigates how participants seeking re-migration imagine a ‘better’ settlement abroad. It also explores how they experience and understand unsettlement after returning to China, in relation to their socio-economic privilege as urban middle-class singleton daughters.

The findings show that participants’ imagined ‘better’ settlement emerges through their subjective comparison of their possible lives in China and abroad. Their desire to re-migrate is driven less by attraction to foreign destinations than by a wish to move away from perceived constraints in China, including gender-related inequality, intense workplace competition, and limited passport mobility. Settlement abroad, often envisioned as the acquisition of citizenship, is associated with greater freedom of self-choice, expanded life possibilities, and visa-free international mobility. At the same time, participants’ desire to re-migrate generates forms of temporal, spatial, and emotional unsettlement characterised by uncertainty and anxiety about a future not yet realised. However, such unsettlement is enabled not only by personal aspiration and autonomy but also by family support that provides the socio-economic resources necessary to sustain the prolonged periods of instability.

The paper contributes to scholarship on return migration, remigration, and youth mobility by revealing a relational, comparative understanding of settlement/stability and flexibility/mobility. It also provides a nuanced account of the entanglement of middle-class privilege and precarity that shapes the unsettled desire for ‘better’ settlement.

Yichen ZHANG is a PhD candidate in Screen and Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne. Her doctoral thesis explores the post-study lives of Chinese Gender Studies graduates from Western universities after they return to China. Before embarking on her PhD, Yichen obtained a BA in English from Shanghai University and an MA in Gender, Media and Culture from Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Ageing in life-times of disposability: ageing Filipina domestic workers in Macau

Tammie Wong, University of Melbourne

Migrant domestic workers in Macau remain largely absent in migration scholarship. Drawing on in-depth group interviews and body maps conducted during ethnographic fieldwork with older Filipina domestic workers in Macau, this paper examines how they articulate their uncertainties, hesitations, and hopes as they navigate the rupture of retirement and return after decades of working aboard. Since Macau's handover to China in 1999, the post-colonial city has adopted a series of neoliberal casino-restructuring measures that transformed the city into a gambling mecca in just over two decades, attracting many migrant workers from Mainland China and Southeast Asia to facilitate its labour-intensive, service-oriented economic growth.

As of 2026, there are 15,543 domestic workers from the Philippines, many of whom have renewed their contracts for ten, twenty, or more years. Yet, they remain excluded from the statutory minimum wage, lack adequate medical insurance, and remain ineligible for permanent residency and citizenship with no clear pathways for retirement. In absence of formalised state-based protection in both Macau and the Philippines, how might ageing Filipino domestic workers imagine and prepare for their return?

Centring on vignettes of three older domestic workers, this paper traces the conflicting emotions that emerge as they reassess questions about their bodily capacities, care obligations, ideas of home, and their attachments to their kin, employers and their children and communities they have formed aboard. These vignettes demonstrates that return is imagined not as homecoming, but as a profoundly uncertain and emotionally fraught transition where they navigate and (re)negotiate the tensions between care for others and care for themselves in later life. This paper introduces the concept of chains of indebtedness to explore the accumulating moral, affective, and material obligations that bind domestic workers to prolonged labour across space and time. Their labour reproduces the valuable life-times of others while their own futures remain precarious and insecure as their bodies, emotions, and relationships remain structured around the demands of care, obligation, and survival. I argue that these vignettes are not isolated accounts of personal hardships but rather reveal how temporary labour migration regimes extend conditions of disposability into later life.

By focusing on everyday uncertainties surrounding retirement and return, the paper contributes to broader discussions surrounding gendered (im)mobilities, precarity and ageing within temporary labour migration regimes in contemporary Asia.

Tammie Wong is a PhD candidate from the School of Geography, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Her research examines the ageing futures of Filipina domestic workers in Macau, while also addressing how the production of gendered and racialised forms of labour underpin and shape the foundation of casino capitalism in this post-colonial city. Her research interests include migration and mobilities, geographies of affect and emotion, and the history and politics of Macau.

Micro and Imagined Mobilities: Aging, Care, and Self-Making among Older Working-Class Queer Men in Shanghai
Dr. Qing Shen, Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Berlin

The ubiquity of the expression “going out” (chulai) among older working-class queer men in Shanghai suggests that mobility lies at the heart of their queer subjectivity and everyday experience. But what does mobility mean in later life? This paper examines how small-scale movements—daily trips to parks, short-distance excursions, and casual urban wanderings—constitute forms of micro-queer mobility among older working-class queer men in Shanghai. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2022, it examines how micro and imagined forms of mobility are critical to the men’s queer subjectivity in later life.

The analysis reveals a central tension: these everyday mobilities are at once limited by aging bodies, economic precarity, and domestic constraints, yet profoundly generative as acts of emotional survival and self-making. My analysis focuses on three individuals. Old Zhang, an openly gay man in his late seventies, walks to a local park every afternoon to escape the hostility of his homophobic siblings. Monkey King, a newly retired man, finds renewed meaning in later life through group travel with queer friends after years of marital conflict. Huang, meanwhile, remains committed to his dream of migrating to Europe or North America and invests in fraudulent schemes in pursuit of that aspiration. For all three men, mobility becomes a practice of seeking care, companionship, and forms of kinship beyond the heteronormative family. These micro or imagined mobilities enable older queer men to cultivate hope, sustain aspirations, and forge a sense of selfhood.

This paper builds on and extends cultural geographers Andrew Gorman-Murray and Catherine Nash’s (2016) call to attend to more intimate scales of mobility, such as commuting and everyday movements, within migration and mobility research that has predominantly focused on large-scale displacement.

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Passing as an enabler of mobilities: the in/visibility of disability, race and gender

Bella Choo, University of Melbourne

Within disability studies, the concept of passing describes how disabled persons actively undertake psychological and performative work to conform within hegemonic structures of normalcy (Brune & Wilson, 2013; Cox, 2013; Davis 1995) while dealing with a precarious migration status. This paper demonstrates the relevance of passing as a conceptual tool to understand agency within experiences of im/mobilities across intersecting identities of marginalisation. For disabled asian migrants, passing is used as a strategy to navigate social and structural barriers to mobility posed by gender, disability, race and citizenship. This paper highlights the complex emotional labour undertaken by migrants to enhance their mobilities. Furthermore, it draws attention to how one’s agency varies according to the in/visibility of

one's identity marker, where the visibility of one's gender and race can heighten experiences of immobility. Through 133 hours of life mapping interviews and search conferences, this paper draws on the lived experiences of 15 disabled migrants in Melbourne. In so doing, this paper highlights the importance of intersectionality in reflecting the multifarious structure–agency dynamics within experiences of im/mobilities, as lived.

Bella Choo (she/her) is PhD candidate at University of Melbourne (Sociology) and Young NUS Fellow at National University of Singapore (Geography). As a disability inclusion practitioner and researcher, her work is informed by past employment at international organisations including Special Olympics Asia Pacific and United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Bella's interdisciplinary PhD project examines the notion of the "Australian Dream" for young disabled migrants from Asia-Pacific. Her research interests include disability, mobilities, inclusive technologies, intersectionality and participatory methodologies.

Transfemininity and the Promise of Migration

Jean Aaron De Borja, Monash University

In recent years, there has been a growing literature on the lived experience of queer and transgender migrants from the Philippines, especially as it connects to labor, forced displacement, and the formation of migrant communities. I extend this literature by including not only "mobile" migrants but also those that navigate immobility. Through life history interviews with Filipina transfeminine individuals who desire to migrate but remain in stasis in the Philippines, this paper explores what is at stake when transfemininity is attached to the promise of mobility.

I look at how transfeminine Filipinas with migration desires perform labors of the emotion and of the imagination in navigating forms of immobility when migration desires remain unfulfilled. My interviews with these subjects reveal how (im)mobility is the gendered embodiment of a wish—for the political recognition of transness and queerness, and the fulfillment of a sexual and romantic fantasy. However, in stasis, these subjects must hold this wish in places that serve as a constriction of gender expression and where time is experienced as a delay in becoming. As such, in order to sustain their migration desire, one that is layered with socioeconomic precarity and a reckoning with one's "gender-becoming," these transfeminine subjects re-orientate themselves vis-a-vis the Philippine and global migration imaginary as they develop strategies for emotional resilience.

Jean Aaron de Borja is a PhD candidate at Monash University researching on the intersection of gender and migration. Before coming to Australia, he taught literary studies in the University of the Philippines Diliman.

Good Employers? Moral Claims and Hidden Hierarchies Among Indonesian Migrant Women in Singapore

Dr. Charlotte Setjadi, University of Melbourne

This paper examines the inter-class dynamics and contested narratives of diasporic solidarity among different types of migrant Indonesian women living in Singapore. Focusing on Indonesian migrant families who employ Indonesian female domestic workers, the study interrogates how gendered labour relations unfold within transnational households marked by shared national origin yet starkly unequal socio-economic positioning. While existing scholarship often frames co-national ties as a basis for empathy and mutual support, this research asks a more complicated question: do Indonesian female employers (who are most often the person in the household in charge of managing domestic workers) treat their Indonesian domestic workers well because of a sense of gendered, co-ethnic, or diasporic solidarity, and how do these solidarities manifest in practice?

Drawing on interviews with 25 Indonesian women residing in Singapore who currently employ Indonesian domestic workers, the paper explores how these employers view their responsibilities for the management, wellbeing, and moral conduct of their employees. Respondents frequently articulate a narrative of being “good employers,” emphasising their protective role in what they characterise as a precarious migration environment. They cite practices such as advising workers on financial matters, offering emotional support and life guidance, and enforcing behavioural expectations as evidence of care grounded in a sense of shared identity as Indonesian migrant women.

However, the study finds that these narratives of benevolence often coexist with, and implicitly justify, problematic employment practices. Employers describe withholding passports or mobile phones, paying lower wages, and restricting government-mandated rest days as necessary forms of “protection” rather than as violations of rights. These justifications expose how inter-class hierarchies and moralised constructions of responsibility enable employers to reproduce gendered precarity even within co-national relationships.

By analysing these tensions between professed solidarity and lived labour practices, this paper highlights the limits of diasporic and gendered affinity in shaping ethical employer–employee relations. The findings complicate assumptions about co-ethnic support, revealing how intimacy, care, and control intertwine within Southeast Asia’s transnational domestic labour regimes.

*Charlotte Setijadi is a Lecturer in Asian Studies at the Asia Institute, the University of Melbourne. She researches Chinese identity politics in Indonesia and Indonesian diaspora politics. Charlotte’s first book *Memories of Unbelonging: Ethnic Chinese Identity Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia* was published by University of Hawai’i Press in 2023. She is currently working on a new book project on highly-skilled Indonesian professional migrants.*

Playing the Platformized Game: Migrant Riders, Class Displacement, and Masculinities in Australia

Dr Lutfun Nahar Lata, Murdoch University

Dr. Tingting Liu, University of Technology Sydney

This article examines and theorises migrant masculinities as dynamic identity work within the algorithmic labour regimes of food-delivery platforms in Melbourne and Sydney, where a large

proportion of riders are recent migrants on temporary visas who engage in this work. Drawing on in-depth interviews with young male riders on temporary visas working for Uber Eats and Hungry Panda, we read these platforms as arrival infrastructures of platform capitalism that externalise risk while narrating autonomy (Holtum et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2019). Many riders experience downward class displacement: despite middle-class or elite family backgrounds in their countries of origin, their Australian lives position them as working-class platform labourers. They narrate this disjuncture through playful, “boyish” metaphors—likening platform work to “playing a video game”—which reframe precarity as skill and strategic mastery and sustain a sense of neoliberal masculine self-making under algorithmic control. Language barriers and migrant status further mediate encounters with Australian society; fear of English-speaking customers and “unfriendly locals” drives some toward Hungry Panda despite poorer conditions, reinforcing a bifurcated imagination of “local Australians” and migrant enclaves (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). At the same time, riders cultivate a datafied habitus, meticulously tracking incentives, optimising routes, and sharing tactics in WeChat and Xiaohongshu groups that foster fraternal solidarity and subtle care-inflected masculinities (Papacharissi, 2016; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These practices convert cultural and social capital into economic survival while negotiating vulnerability and aspiration. Our analysis shows how migrant men reassemble masculine value through breadwinning, entrepreneurial self-fashioning, and collective care even as ratings regimes and legal precarity subordinate them, advancing a model of capital conversion under algorithmic control that explains the paradoxical appeal of “flexible” gig work in the Global North.

Dr Lutfun Nahar Lata is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at Murdoch University. Her primary research area focuses on the Sociology of work and employment including the gig economy and the future of work. Lutfun is the author of Spatial Justice, Contested Governance and Livelihood Challenges in Bangladesh (Routledge 2023). Her research has been published in a number of high-ranking international journals such as The Sociological Review, Current Sociology, Sociology Compass, Gender, Work & Organization, Cities, and Government Information Quarterly.

Dr Tingting LIU is a Chancellor’s Research Fellow at School of Design, Faculty of Design & Society, University of Technology Sydney. Completing her PhD in Anthropology from the University of Queensland in 2018, Dr. Liu’s doctoral research garnered notable support from the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship and the Chinese Society for Women’s Studies (CSWS) Scholarships for Junior Feminist Scholars. Subsequent to her doctoral studies, she served as an ARC Postdoctoral Research Fellow at The Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University and subsequently an Associate Professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Jinan University, China. Her research interests centre on new media, gender, sexuality, and their intersections.

Ethical Labour at the Border: Gender, Risk, and Informal Logistics in Jastip

Dr. Arum Budiastuti, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia

This paper examines jastip (entrusted shopping and courier networks) through the framework of migration infrastructure (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), which understands mobility as enabled

by distributed systems of technology, brokerage, regulation, and social relations rather than individual agency alone. While much of the literature highlights recruitment brokers, state regimes, and commercial intermediaries, I draw attention to a quieter but equally consequential layer: the informal, gendered logistical infrastructures maintained by migrant women. In this context, jastip operates as a micro-infrastructure of mobility, where Facebook groups, airport baggage rules, trust networks, and emotional labour converge to sustain transnational life. I argue that these practices constitute a form of “ethical labour at the border,” in which women transform bureaucratic uncertainty and logistical risk into stable, everyday routines that hold transnational mobility together. The analysis draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2020, including participation in Indonesian migrants’ Facebook groups, observations of packing routines, and interviews with women who operate jastip on a regular basis. Building on my earlier work on jastip (2025), which centred on ethnic food access and circulation, this paper shifts attention to the labour, affect, and risk that women shoulder in sustaining these informal logistical systems. The findings show how women jastipers manage digital orders, curate what goods are “safe” to carry, negotiate trust, and perform time-intensive tasks such as sourcing, packing, and delivering items between Sydney and Indonesia. These activities blur the line between commerce and care, revealing how informal mobility economies are held together through gendered labour, obligations of reciprocity, and careful emotional negotiation. Women also absorb risk as part of care: when clients mis-declare items or push regulatory boundaries, jastipers often take on the consequences to avoid reputational damage or conflict in migrant social media groups. Risk, here, becomes ethical labour that protects trust, relationships, and social belonging.

Arum Budiastuti is a lecturer in the Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Airlangga – Surabaya (Indonesia), who received her PhD from the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, The University of Sydney. Prior to her doctoral study, she actively participated in the Consortium of Inter-Asia Cultural Studies representing Universitas Airlangga, and was part of the committee hosting the IACS conference in 2015. In Universitas Airlangga, she is a member of ‘Border, Mobilities, and Area Engagement’ research cluster. Her research interests are material culture, food studies, religion and culture, and STS (Science, Technology, and Society) studies.

Emotional Navigation in a Precarious City: Gendered (im)mobility and Labor in Shanghai’s Music Industry among Young Female Creative Workers

Yixuan Yang, Shanghai Conservatory of Music

While the relationship between creative cities and the creative class has been widely examined globally, how creative workers experience (im)mobility in contemporary China remains underexplored. Focusing on Shanghai’s music industry, this study addresses the intersection of creativity, (im)mobility, and gender dynamics in China’s cultural economy. Drawing on an ethnographic approach, it combines 25 semi-structured interviews with four years of participant observation and professional experience. Thematic analysis reveals how young female creative workers navigate gendered mobility and emotional precarity. First, facing social expectations of traditional heterosexual marriage, many participants embraced long-term singlehood as a strategy of resistance against patriarchal family structures and

fertility pressures, prioritizing career autonomy. Second, local and non-local workers displayed contrasting mobility patterns: locals emphasized rootedness and a strong Shanghainese identity, whereas non-locals faced higher living costs, familial obligations, and aspirations for career advancement and self-development in the metropolis. Third, shaped by the one-child policy, only daughters were expected to embody both masculine and feminine roles, bearing dual emotional and social responsibilities in a modern “Mulan dilemma.” Fourth, the precarious and low-paid nature of creative labor intensified women’s emotions of stress, resilience, and hope, revealing tensions between economic rationality and artistic aspiration. These findings suggest that emotional practices are central to understanding gendered (im)mobility in urban China. Therefore, I argue that young women have constructed an anti-patriarchal utopian space, grounded in artistic imagination and freedom of mobility, within constrained social and occupational structures. Moreover, intersections of social capital, generation, and urban identity reproduce disparities in women’s experiences of (im)mobility.

Yixuan Yang is a Master’s student in Arts Administration at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. In 2024, she was an exchange student at Taipei National University of the Arts. Her research interests include gender, creative labour, mobility, and cultural production in contemporary China. Her work has been published in Frontiers in Sociology and the American Journal of Arts Management, as well as in several Chinese-language journals. She is a professional pianist and has gained practical experience in arts management and concert production.

Illness in motion: Coping as Kinetic Practice in Urban India

Sanjana Santosh, University of Melbourne

Major or chronic illnesses disrupt bodily routines, social tempo and mobility in everyday lives, as participants reflected a varied sense of movement, such as “Our life’s pace has slowed down... we are lagging behind” or “The wheel is always spinning in my head...” These reflections from households in Pune city suggest the extant literature on the sociology of illness strains to explain how illness within households living in precarious urban contexts is an unwanted motion. This paper argues that coping with major and chronic illness is a kinetic social practice, an emotionally saturated negotiation between disruption, suspension, and forward movement embedded in the unstable socio-material terrain of urban India.

Based on shadowing with community health workers and in-depth interviews with thirty low-income households, we explore the coping practices of households suffering from long-term major illnesses. Bury’s (1982) concept of ‘biographical disruption’ explains how chronic illness unsettles everyday structures and sense of self. Drawing on Vigh’s (2009) idea of ‘social navigation’ and ‘motion squared’, we interrogate the premise of ‘ontological security’ in ‘Biographical Disruption’. We develop and propose the ‘Grinding Stone’ framework to capture the motion and emotional texture of what navigating illness in resource-poor urban contexts feels like.

The three layers of the grinding stone structure the analysis. The (moving) base represents illness temporalities and urban precarity, which focus on health system inadequacies and informal urban infrastructures. The upper stone captures the heavy weight of gendered social norms and filial obligations that produce emotional and reflexive churn as households

negotiate social support. The lever illustrates agency of participants formulating strategies in a moving context, relying on circulating urban credit and patchwork forms of support. Coping through the grinding of the three layers, we argue, produces abrasive motion without progress, wearing down biographical coherence, relational capacity, and emotional resources of households.

Sanjana is an interdisciplinary public health researcher from India, currently a doctoral researcher at Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne. She holds a master's degree in 'Development' from Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. Her previous work as a development professional and researcher focused on the domains of urban health, maternal health, and health policy system research. She has worked with several non-profit organisations and research institutes such as the Public Health Foundation of India and Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune. She is experienced in qualitative research, and her interests lie broadly in the fields of Sociology of Health and Illness, Urban Theory and Health Systems.

'Enamoured with this turbulent journey': queer quest for identity in the gay capital of China

Bin Wang, University of Melbourne

LGBTQ+ movements have taken on global importance for the past decades. By taking on personal journey from one place to another, queer individuals quest for identity in movement and motion. Relocation does not lead to the completion of one's quest for queer identity – it is the beginning. Diving into the narrative of Neon, a university student in Chengdu, who seized the opportunity of Gaokao (college entrance examination), and relocated to the city known as the gay capital of China, this paper will make salient of how individuals' quest for identity can be limited, destabilised, and complicated, both in terms of cross-regional movements, movements within the city, and the venturing between 'home' and their destined city of living. This paper will highlight the complexity of such quest for queer identity, which consists of three key stages – envisioning, grounding, inhabiting. The narrative presented in this paper provides an opportunity for exploring how a queer individual acquired and fostered vernacular knowledge to queer spaces and communities, and the implicit as well as discreet affects they experienced when imaginaries do not map onto the material world. Between the heteronormative world and the homonormative world, queer individuals developed their unique set of cultural cues and practices – and thrive in repressions. In this paper, I argue that multiple scale mobility is core to queer quest for identity. To study this complex process of making meaningful identity via movements, we must also pay attention to the aftermath of relocation – the everyday lives and practices of questing for queer identity.

Bin Wang (They/Their) is a PhD candidate at the School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne. Their research focuses on the complex intersections of sexuality, identity, space and culture, with a special interest in the affective geography of sexuality in diverse socio-cultural contexts. Their PhD project seeks to explore how queer nocturnal spaces shape the ways individuals inhabit and imagine the city in urban China.

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