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The Skill Good Girls Were Never Taught

*Studying Abroad as Gendered Escape in the Narratives of Young Chinese Women on
Xiaohongshu*

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Abstract

This thesis examines the “escape narrative” (逃离叙事) through which young Chinese women on the lifestyle platform Xiaohongshu (小红书, known abroad as RedNote) recount leaving home—and studying or migrating abroad—as flight from patriarchal family and marriage pressure. Combining computational and qualitative methods, it analyses a corpus of 129 posts and 7,195 comments and replies drawn from the platform. A Chinese transformer classifier (Erlangshen-RoBERTa) measures sentiment; a sentence-level sentiment arc traces each post’s emotional trajectory; a deductive four-dimension lexicon codes every narrative for motivation (why one flees), tool (studying abroad as the means), capital (who can afford to leave), and aftermath (life after departure); and a purposive sample of twenty-five posts, together with their comment threads, is read closely.

The posts are strongly celebratory—76.7 per cent are classified positive—and typically move from trauma toward hope, telling departure as self-rescue. Three findings, however, complicate the genre’s optimism. First, capital is the least articulated dimension (18.6 per cent of posts), even though economic and class resources quietly determine who is able to leave. Second, the “aftermath” narratives carry self-doubt and patriarchal expectation across the border rather than leaving them behind. Third, the comments are markedly less positive than the posts (54.7 per cent, a gap that holds across classification thresholds); read as a feminist counterpublic, they affirm the escape while warning of its costs and its limits.

The thesis argues that the escape narrative offers an individualized, one-woman exit to a problem that is produced collectively and structurally. Framed through theories of individualization, cruel optimism, affect, the new mobilities, and counterpublics, the case clarifies how gender, family, and class together shape both the appeal and the limits of “running” (润) in contemporary China.

Keywords: *Xiaohongshu; young Chinese women; study abroad; escape narrative; gender and family; individualization; feminist counterpublic; sentiment analysis; mixed methods.*

Riassunto

Questa tesi analizza la "narrazione di fuga" (逃离叙事) attraverso cui giovani donne cinesi sulla piattaforma di lifestyle Xiaohongshu (小红书, nota all'estero come RedNote) raccontano l'allontanamento dalla famiglia d'origine — attraverso lo studio o la migrazione all'estero — come fuga dalle pressioni patriarcali della famiglia e del matrimonio. Combinando metodi computazionali e qualitativi, la ricerca esamina un corpus di 129 post e 7.195 tra commenti e risposte raccolti dalla piattaforma. Un classificatore transformer per il cinese (Erlangshen-RoBERTa) misura il sentiment; una curva emotiva a livello di frase (sentiment arc) ricostruisce la traiettoria affettiva di ciascun post; un lessico deduttivo a quattro dimensioni codifica ogni narrazione secondo motivazione (perché si fugge), strumento (lo studio all'estero come mezzo), capitale (chi può permettersi di partire) ed esito (la vita dopo la partenza); infine, un campione ragionato di venticinque post, insieme ai relativi thread di commenti, è sottoposto a lettura ravvicinata.

I post sono nettamente celebrativi — il 76,7 % è classificato come positivo — e tendono a muoversi dal trauma verso la speranza, raccontando la partenza come auto-salvezza. Tre risultati, tuttavia, complicano l'ottimismo del genere. Primo, il capitale è la dimensione meno esplicitata (18,6 % dei post), benché le risorse economiche e di classe determinino silenziosamente chi è in grado di partire. Secondo, le narrazioni dell'esito portano oltre confine i dubbi su di sé e le aspettative patriarcali, invece di lasciarli alle spalle. Terzo, i commenti sono decisamente meno positivi dei post (54,7 %, uno scarto che permane al variare delle soglie di classificazione); letti come un contropubblico femminista, essi avallano la fuga pur avvertendone i costi e i limiti.

La tesi sostiene che la narrazione di fuga offra un'uscita individuale, affidata alla singola donna, a un problema prodotto in modo collettivo e strutturale. Inquadrato attraverso le teorie dell'individualizzazione, dell'ottimismo crudele, degli affetti, delle nuove mobilità e dei contropubblici, il caso chiarisce come genere, famiglia e classe plasmino insieme il fascino e i limiti del "fuggire" (润) nella Cina contemporanea.

Parole chiave: Xiaohongshu; giovani donne cinesi; studio all'estero; narrazione di fuga; genere e famiglia; individualizzazione; contropubblico femminista; sentiment analysis; metodi misti.

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Chapter 1, Introduction

1.1 “The Skill Good Girls Were Never Taught”

On Xiaohongshu (小红书, known abroad as RedNote), one of China’s most rapidly growing lifestyle platforms, a young woman posts a short note. Picking up a refrain that is by now familiar, she writes that the most important skill a “good girl” was never taught is how to run away.¹ The note is brief, but it belongs to a recognisable genre. Scroll the same cluster of hashtags, 逃离原生家庭 (escaping the family of origin), 出国 (going abroad), 留学 (studying abroad), and 润 (run), and thousands of similar notes appear. A daughter records that her mother keeps asking why she will not come home to work; another apologises to her mother and admits that she does not, in fact, miss home; a third reassures her readers that wherever fate points them, they should simply go.² These are small texts, but read together, they make the same move. They open in the language of grievance, namely parental control, the marriage timetable, emotional neglect, and the duty to remain a 乖乖女 (a compliant, dutiful daughter). And they close in the language of hope: an offer letter, a visa, a one-way ticket, a life somewhere else.

What unites the genre is not the destination but the verb. Departure is told as flight. It is not the next planned step in an ambitious life course, but an exit from that life course altogether. “Wherever fate points you, go there openly” is offered not as career advice but as a survival skill, the very skill the good girl was never taught. This thesis takes that genre as its object. It asks what it means that, for a growing number of young Chinese women, studying abroad has come to be told as escape, and what the telling itself reveals about gender, family, and selfhood in contemporary China, given that it is public, collective, and contested in the comment threads beneath each post.

Three features of the genre are worth noting at the outset, because they recur across the data. First, the posts are confessional in form: they address an implied community of women who will recognise the situation without explanation, and they often thank that community in advance for its understanding. Second, they look toward the future even when they dwell on the past, so that an

¹ Throughout, posts and comments are paraphrased in the body and anonymised; representative Chinese originals are given in the notes. This refrain runs: 「乖乖女没有被教过的重要技能——逃跑」. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

² Representative corpus posts, anonymised: 「我妈问我为什么不想回国工作」 (“my mother asks why I don’t want to come home to work”); 「对不起妈妈，我其实并不想家」 (“Sorry, Mum—I don’t actually miss home”). 命运指引你到哪里去 你就大大方方地去」 (“wherever fate points you, go there openly”).

account of a painful childhood functions less as complaint than as justification for a decision already taken. Third, they invite response. The comment threads are not incidental but central, since they are the place where the claim “this counts as escape” is ratified, qualified, or refused. To study the genre is therefore to study not only the posts but the conversation they set going.

1.2 The Subject and Its Interest

Over the past few years a distinctive discourse has formed on Chinese social media around the verb 逃 (to flee) and the neologism 润 (rùn), a pun on the English “run” that names emigration as a way of escaping. 润学, or “runology,” circulates alongside a wider “Sinopessimist” vocabulary of involution (内卷), lying flat (躺平), and a broad refusal of the promised “good life.” Commentators have explicitly tied this vocabulary to Lauren Berlant’s cruel optimism and to Xiang Biao’s sense of suspended life.³ What makes this discourse sociologically interesting is not that young Chinese go abroad, since that is by now an established middle class path, but that a growing share of them tell the journey as flight. The register has shifted. Where overseas study was once told as aspiration, as an investment in a brighter future still anchored at home, it is increasingly told as exit, as a way out of a present that feels suffocating.

The thesis focuses on young women, and on Xiaohongshu in particular, for related reasons. Women now make up roughly sixty percent of students leaving China,⁴ and the pressures the escape narrative names, namely timely marriage, childbearing, and the stigma of the “leftover woman,” fall unequally on daughters. The same young women, as Fran Martin observes, are encouraged as daughters to study abroad yet expected as future wives and mothers to put family care first. It is a contradiction they live rather than resolve. Xiaohongshu, with around three hundred million largely young and female users and a feminine, aspirational look,⁵ is at once the platform on which these pressures are most loudly discussed and one whose visual conventions shape how an escape can be told and made to seem desirable. The object of study, then, is not migration as behaviour but escape as a publicly shared, gendered story, together with the platform community that both amplifies that story and, in its comment threads, contests it.

³ Dino Ge Zhang, “On Sinopessimism, or Junkies of Futility,” *Made in China Journal* 1 (2025): 66–73.

⁴ Fran Martin, *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West* (Duke University Press, 2022), 4, citing Anni Kajanus and Renmin Ribao for the figure that women now constitute roughly 60 percent of outgoing students.

⁵ On Xiaohongshu’s c. 300 million monthly active users and its predominantly young, feminine base, see Wei Wei and Alexandra Georgakopoulou, “Gendered Chronotopes on Social Media Through the Lens of Small Stories and Positioning Analysis: The Case of the ‘Pretty Girl’ on Xiaohongshu (RedNote),” *Signs and Society* 13, no. 4 (2025): 460–478.

It helps to set escape apart from two neighbouring framings. The first is aspiration, the dominant register of an earlier moment, in which study abroad promised distinction, a job, and a cosmopolitan self to be brought home and cashed in. There the home remained the horizon. The second is exile, the language of forced political departure. The women in this data are rarely refugees in any legal sense, and they keep, at least in rhetoric, the option of return. Escape names something between the two: a departure that is voluntary yet felt as necessary, turned away from a present rather than toward a credential, and told in the first person as self rescue. Holding the term at this middle distance is what lets the thesis take the women's own framing seriously without either romanticising it or treating it as illness.

Xiaohongshu is not the only platform on which these stories are told, but it is an unusually fitting one. Its interface rewards the first-person photo essay over the viral hot take, and its culture prizes the fine-grained sharing of lived experience, such as what to pack, which agent to trust, and how a visa interview actually went, so that an escape can be at once an emotional testimony and a practical guide. And because its users tend to be young and female, the reader the genre imagines is built into the platform itself. The same qualities that make Xiaohongshu a marketplace of aspirational lifestyles make it an archive of aspirational exits.

The figure of the 乖乖女, the good girl, is central to the genre and worth pausing on. To be a good girl is to have been, for two decades, the obliging daughter of the family: high achieving but deferential, ambitious but on the family's terms, the bearer of parental hopes who repays investment with compliance. The escape posts are written, overwhelmingly, by women who have played this role well, who got the grades, the degree, the offer, and who find that success inside the script has only tightened it, turning achievement into fresh expectation. Running away, in this idiom, is not the opposite of being a good girl but its sequel. It is the move the dutiful daughter makes when she realises that dutifulness has no exit built into it.

The phenomenon also makes sense against a wider mood, sketched here and developed in the state of the art below. Nowadays the family's demand that a daughter marry on time and stay close can read less as care than as one more case of a society asking the young to absorb its problems. To leave the country is to refuse that demand in the most literal way, to put a border between oneself and the timetable, and to do so, on Xiaohongshu, in full view of others weighing the same move.

1.3 Research Questions and Aims

The thesis pursues four questions; each tied to one part of its analytic model. The first is descriptive and interpretive: how do young Chinese women on Xiaohongshu tell studying abroad as escape, escape from what and toward what? To call a departure "escape" is already to make a claim about

what is being left behind. So, this question treats the posts as accounts that do argumentative work, and it asks which objects of aversion (family, the marriage timetable, the labour market, the nation) and which objects of hope they bring together.

The second question concerns capital and access: what part do economic and cultural resources play in deciding who can actually carry out the escape, as opposed to who wants it? Desire, the data suggest, is widely shared, but the means are not as much. This question asks after the material conditions of a narrative that often presents itself as a pure matter of will.

The third concerns the audience: how do the comment threads affirm, complicate, or contest the celebratory narratives in the posts? Treating the comments as a distinct layer of data rather than as noise, it asks what readers do, whether they endorse, warn, envy, or dispute, and whether the sum amounts to a shared, critical reworking of the escape script rather than a chorus of applause.

The fourth is the broadest: what does the case reveal about gender, family, and individualization in contemporary China? Here the escape narrative becomes a lens onto a larger change in how selves are made and unmade in relation to the family. The overall aim is to read the narrative as a structured practice of feeling, with its own preconditions, limits, and internal disagreements, rather than to celebrate it as freedom or dismiss it as illusion.

1.4 State of the Art

Three bodies of scholarship meet on this project. Reading them together does more than place the study; it also exposes the gap it addresses, because each light up part of the phenomenon, yet none quite captures the public telling of gendered escape that this thesis examines.

A note on scope is needed first. The review that follows is selective rather than exhaustive. It foregrounds empirical work on the specific situation this thesis studies, namely gendered Chinese mobility, family and marriage pressure, and feminist life on Xiaohongshu, and it leaves the concepts (individualization, affect, capital, the counterpublic) for Chapter 2. The point is not to survey everything written on Chinese students or on digital feminism, but to show how three otherwise separate conversations bear on one object that none has quite addressed.

The first strand concerns Chinese student mobility and gendered overseas study. Fran Martin's ethnography of Chinese women students in the West argues that gender cannot be separated from educational mobility, and that the post 1990 generation is caught between a discourse of "striving selfhood" and a "neotraditionalist" gender discourse that pulls the other way.⁶ In a companion study,

⁶ Martin, Fran. *Dreams of flight: The lives of Chinese women students in the west*. Duke University Press, 2022.

Martin describes overseas study as a “zone of suspension,” a partial “time out” from the normative gendered life course, made possible by distance, in which the rigid time markers of proper feminine adulthood are loosened.⁷ This suspension, though, is incomplete. As one of Martin’s participants reflects, the pressure to marry by a certain age does ease abroad, yet at twenty-five she feels social expectation return “with renewed force”. Neighbouring scholarship fills in the structural picture. Wang and Hu show how an “international higher education fever” and a “normative biography” drive middle class parental investment, with study abroad recast as a way of helping children meet expected life milestones.⁸ Chen and colleagues demonstrate that involution itself operates as a social norm propelling youth toward postgraduate study overseas.⁹ And studies of life after migration puncture any assumption that mobility delivers arrival. Catriona Stevens shows Chinese migrants to Australia living in prolonged “limbo,” their life plans frozen and their futures imagined as circular returns.¹⁰ This literature is rich on lived experience. Because it is largely based on interviews and ethnography, however, it attends less to how escape is told publicly and collectively on social media, and less still to the gap in feeling between the promise of departure and its aftermath.

Two emphases in this strand bear directly on the present study. The first is about time: across these accounts, mobility scrambles the timetable of the normative life course, buying time rather than delivering a destination, so that the migrant lives in a present that will not resolve into a settled future. The second is the steady mismatch between desire and outcome, the recurring finding that the elsewhere rarely keeps its promise. What this scholarship does not do, because of its methods and its moment, is examine how the promise is made and circulated in the first place: how, before any plane is boarded, the escape is built as a shareable story and offered to an audience. That public work of composing the story before departure is where this thesis begins.

The second strand concerns gender, family pressure, and the “leftover women” discourse. Scholarship in this strand documents the return of gender inequality in post reform China and the state amplified

⁷ Martin, Fran. "Overseas study as zone of suspension: Chinese students re-negotiating youth, gender, and intimacy." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 39, no. 6 (2018): 688-703.

⁸ Wang, Zhe, and Xuerui Hu. "The Normative Biography: International Higher Education Fever among China's Middle-class Families." *The China Quarterly* 261 (2025): 146-161.

⁹ Bonnie H. Y. Chen, Yuchen Zhou, and Liu Yang, “The Role of Involution on Chinese Youth Pursuit of Postgraduate Education Abroad: Examine through the Lens of Normative Social Behaviour,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 46, no. 3 (2026): 905–18

¹⁰ Catriona Stevens, “Temporary Work, Permanent Visas and Circular Dreams: Temporal Disjunctures and Precarity among Chinese Migrants to Australia,” *Current Sociology* 67, no. 2 (2019): 294–314

media campaign that brands unmarried professional women as “leftover” (剩女),¹¹ while Sandy To analyses late marriage among professional women as something produced by structure rather than an individual failing.¹² Zhong and Wilkinson sharpen the stakes. Although the law grants women marital autonomy, Confucian family and gender norms have “returned” in an evolved form, so that parents still effectively “seal the deal” and women’s happiness is defined in relation to timely marriage and childbearing. They call this a “paradox of marital freedom” and read it through nonlinear individualization.¹³ Tianhan Gui’s interviews with never married professional women in Beijing reveal a sharp generational gap and clear hopes for autonomy. Yet the resistance Gui describes consists largely of staying and negotiating, of delaying or refusing marriage while remaining in place.¹⁴ Xinying Yang, finally, shows how state media reconcile two seemingly incompatible models of approved womanhood, the “filial daughter” and the “all capable princess,” in a way that makes women’s self-empowerment, in Yang’s terms, “cruelly optimistic.”¹⁵ This scholarship is rich on pressure and on resistance. It tends, though, to frame resistance as a matter of negotiating in place, and it rarely connects family and gender pressure to cross border mobility as the chosen escape route, or asks how leaving is told as public narrative.

These studies converge on a paradox that the present case sharpens. Even as marital autonomy expands in law, the value system has not so much loosened as evolved. The daughter is now expected to be accomplished and dutiful at once, to “have it all” and to marry well and on time, so that her very achievements can be recoded as liabilities in the marriage market. Yang’s reading of the celebrated athlete daughter as “cruelly optimistic,” empowered within a frame that all but guarantees her exhaustion, names a structure that the escape narrative tries precisely to exit. If the leftover women discourse makes staying single a stigma and marrying up an obligation, then leaving the country can present itself as the one move that suspends both at once.

¹¹ Sargeson, Sally. “Leftover women: The resurgence of gender inequality in China.” *Gender & Development* 22, no. 3 (2014): 587-589.

¹² Sandy To, “Understanding Sheng Nu (‘Leftover Women’): The Phenomenon of Late Marriage among Chinese Professional Women,” *Symbolic Interaction* 36, no. 1 (2013): 1–20.

¹³ Chensi Zhong and Jennifer Wilkinson, “The Paradox of Women’s Marital Freedom: Nonlinear Individualization in Post-Reform China,” *Theory and Society* 54 (2025): 119–138.

¹⁴ Tianhan Gui, “Coping With Parental Pressure to Get Married: Perspectives From Chinese ‘Leftover Women,’” *Journal of Family Issues* 44, no. 8 (2023): 2118–2137.

¹⁵ Xinying Yang, “Incommensurability Between ‘Filial Daughter’ and ‘All-Capable Princess’: Discursive Legitimation in Chinese Media Coverage of Quan Hongchan and Gu Eileen,” *Communication & Sport* 11, no. 6 (2023): 1080–1101.

What unites this strand is a picture of resistance that is real but bounded. The professional women it describes refuse the script's tempo. They postpone, they decline, they argue with their mothers. Yet they do so largely within the national and familial frame, negotiating the terms of a life lived in place. The cross-border option, when it appears, tends to figure as one variable in a marriage market calculation rather than as a form of refusal in itself. The contribution of the present study is to take seriously the women for whom leaving the country is the resistance, and to ask what becomes of family pressure when the daughter is no longer in the room, but is instead telling her departure to thousands of strangers who answer back.

The third strand concerns Chinese digital feminism and Xiaohongshu. Yue Liu's study of female PhD influencers on RED describes a "neoliberal feminism with Chinese characteristics," an "academic sisterhood" in which elite women draw on cultural capital and urge one another to "help women," even as the stress on individual success leaves structural patriarchy untouched. Collective action, Liu argues, is harder to sustain in an authoritarian setting.¹⁶ Shu Li and Yue Jiang describe "rooted affective publics" and "digital sisterhood" in grassroots feminist livestreaming. They show how consciousness raising turns a private complaint ("my family is difficult") into a structural diagnosis ("patriarchal family systems exploit daughters"), and how such counter publics survive under the constant threat of censorship.¹⁷ Wei Wei and Alexandra Georgakopoulou, for their part, dissect the platform's feminine, postfeminist look through the "pretty girl" chronotope.¹⁸ Together this literature lights up platform aesthetics, neoliberal self-presentation, and the making of feminist counter publics. It has not, however, examined escape and migration narratives in particular, nor combined large scale computational analysis with qualitative close reading on a body of data of this kind.

This scholarship also poses the study's sharpest methodological challenge. The "rooted affective publics" of feminist livestreaming, the "academic sisterhood" of female PhD influencers, and the postfeminist self-making of the "pretty girl" all describe Xiaohongshu and its sister platforms as spaces where private trouble is collectively reworked into something shareable, and sometimes into something critical. Yet these accounts rest largely on close reading of fairly small samples. They have not turned the lens on the escape narrative as a distinct object, nor asked whether the celebratory tone of the posts survives contact with the crowd. Combining computational breadth with interpretive

¹⁶ Yue Liu, "Neoliberal Feminism with Chinese Characteristics: Alternative Self-Representations of Female PhDs on RED," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 37, no. 6 (2023): 728–740.

¹⁷ Shu Li and Yue Jiang, "Digital Sisterhood: Live Streaming Feminism and Network Resilience in China," *Women's Studies International Forum* 116 (2026): 103302.

¹⁸ Wei and Georgakopoulou, "Gendered Chronotopes," 460–478.

depth on a body of data built precisely around escape is what lets this thesis test, rather than assume, the counter public claim.

Read across the three strands, the literature also points ahead to the four dimensions through which this thesis codes its data. The mobility scholarship theorises motivation and tool, why one leaves and by what route (dimensions A and B); the family and gender scholarship specifies what is being escaped and at what social cost; the question of who can leave brings capital to the front (dimension C); and the recurring finding that mobility does not deliver arrival names the aftermath (dimension D). The contribution is to hold these together in one analytic model and to test it against a large body of women's own public accounts.

This thesis sits where the three strands meet and addresses their shared blind spot. It studies how young Chinese women tell studying abroad as escape on Xiaohongshu, the capital that gates who can actually leave, and how the comment section contests the celebratory script. It draws on a set of 129 posts and roughly 7,195 comments and replies, and it combines computational analysis with close reading. The analysis is read through individualization, the “promise of happiness” and cruel optimism, the counterpublic, and the new mobilities paradigm, concepts named here only to place the argument and developed in full in Chapter 2.¹⁹

1.5 Research Approach and Methods

The study uses an explanatory mixed methods design, in which a computational pass establishes patterns across the whole set of data and a qualitative pass interprets them. The data were assembled by searching Xiaohongshu across four keywords (逃离原生家庭, 出国, 留学, 女性). The 200 raw posts were then filtered down to a final set of 129 posts, together with about 7,195 associated comments and replies. Filtering removed posts that matched none of the analytic dimensions, then those not concerned with going or studying abroad, then off topic posts identified by hand.²⁰ The computational pass combined three operations. The first was binary sentiment classification using a Chinese RoBERTa model at a 0.7 confidence threshold. The second was a deductive, keyword based four-dimension coding of each post: A, motivation (escape from what); B, tool (the mobility route); C, capital (who can afford to leave); and D, aftermath (life after leaving). The third was a sentence

¹⁹ These concepts—individualization and its “Chinese path” (Yan Yunxiang), the “promise of happiness” and the feminist killjoy (Sara Ahmed), cruel optimism (Lauren Berlant), counterpublics (Michael Warner), and the new-mobilities paradigm (Sheller and Urry)—are named here only to situate the argument. They are developed in full in Chapter 2.

²⁰ The full research design, coding lexicons, sentiment model, and limitations are set out in Chapter 3; large figures and tables are reproduced in the annexes.

level sentiment arc analysis built to capture the movement from family trauma to hope after departure. The qualitative pass then read a purposive sample of twenty-five posts closely, attending to narrative arc, feeling, and the positioning of self and family. Throughout, the analysis is shaped by the researcher's own position as a young Chinese woman and international student, and by an ethics of working with public posts that anonymises authors and paraphrases quotable text.²¹ Full detail appears in Chapter 3.

Two design choices deserve note here. The four keywords were chosen to approach the phenomenon from different angles, namely its emotional core (逃离原生家庭), its means (出国, 留学), and its gendered subject (女性), rather than to sample study abroad talk in general. The data are thus deliberately weighted toward posts in which leaving and family trouble are already tangled together. Comments and replies are kept as separate layers so that the audience's response can be analysed in its own right. The design also has limits, taken up in Chapter 3. A platform that rewards aspirational self-presentation will over represent those with the resources to aspire, and the data capture what women choose to make public rather than what they privately feel. The analysis therefore speaks to the escape narrative as a public form, not to migration outcomes or to the full range of women who feel family pressure.

Each operation answers a specific question. The four-dimension coding turns the analytic model into something measurable, recording for every post which parts of the escape script it draws on and letting their relative frequency and overlap be compared. The sentiment arc analysis, which splits each post into ten positional bins and tracks the modelled feeling across them, was built to capture the genre's typical movement from grievance to hope and to tell apart posts that rise, fall, or hold steady. The comparison of sentiment between posts and comments turns the counterpublic question into a measurement, before close reading interprets it. The close reading itself follows the twenty-five posts of the close-reading sample in full, attending to how the narrating self-places itself in relation to mother, father, nation, and an imagined future abroad.

1.6 Argument in Brief and Roadmap

The central argument is this: Young women on Xiaohongshu tell studying abroad as a project of self-liberation, charged with feeling. About 76.7 percent of the posts are positive in tone, and the single most common sentiment arc, which accounts for 45 percent of analysable posts, rises from family trauma toward hope after departure. Departure is turned, in Ahmed's sense, toward a happiness

²¹ On positionality—the researcher as a young Chinese woman and international student—and on the ethics of working with scraped public posts (anonymisation, paraphrase of quotable text), see Chapter 3.

located elsewhere.²² The escape is also overwhelmingly framed as motivation and method rather than as cost. Motivation (dimension A) appears in 55 percent of posts and the mobility “tool” (dimension B) in 82.2 percent, and the two occur together tightly, since to recognise the oppression is, in this genre, already to be packing one’s bags.

Yet the escape is gated by capital. Only 18.6 percent of posts take up the question of who can afford to leave, the lowest coverage of the four dimensions, so economic resources quietly decide who can run, even though the wish to run is almost universal in the data. The geography of participation makes the point. Domestic commenters cluster in affluent coastal provinces, while a sizeable diaspora (about 22 percent of located comments) writes back from the destinations themselves. And the escape is often incomplete. The “aftermath” narratives (dimension D) carry self-doubt and patriarchal expectations across the border rather than leaving them behind, a finding that echoes Stevens’s migrants in limbo and Martin’s contradictions reshaped rather than resolved.

Most tellingly, the gap between celebratory posts (76.7 percent positive) and clearly more ambivalent comments (54.7 percent positive) shows Xiaohongshu working as a feminist counterpublic. The audience does not simply applaud but warns, disputes, and reframes, working out together the limits of an individualized escape, much as Li and Jiang’s livestream viewers turn “my family is difficult” into a structural claim. Read through Yan Yunxiang’s account of disembedded individualization and Lauren Berlant’s cruel optimism, this is leaving the family institution without arriving at a new social settlement: an escape told as the promise of happiness, and quietly qualified, in the comments, as something closer to cruel optimism.²³ The contribution of the thesis is to bring a large social media data set and a mixed methods design to bear on a phenomenon that interview based scholarship has approached only indirectly, and to show that the public telling of gendered escape is itself a place where the terms of Chinese individualization are being worked out.

Two further patterns support the reading. In the posts, the language of the escape script clusters around family, the self, and a future tense of becoming. The most frequent terms in the comments, by contrast, lean toward evaluation and address, with readers speaking to the poster and to one another, weighing whether the escape is wise, enviable, or naive. The spread of sentiment arcs is telling too. Rising trajectories dominate, but a sizeable minority of posts fall or swing back and forth, registering exactly

²² All quantitative figures cited in this section derive from the study’s own analysis of the final corpus (N = 129 posts; c. 7,195 comments and replies); see Chapter 3 and the annexes.

²³ The concepts of disembedded individualization (Yan) and cruel optimism (Berlant) are introduced here only to frame the argument and are developed in Chapter 2.

the incomplete arrivals that the aftermath dimension names. The escape narrative, in other words, is mixed within itself. The data contain their own dissent, and the comment layer amplifies it.

Taken together, these findings describe an individualized solution to a problem that is produced collectively. The pressures the women describe, the marriage timetable, the hostile labour market, the duty to be a dutiful daughter, are social and structural. The remedy the genre offers is personal mobility, a one person exit told as self-rescue. That mismatch is the source of both the genre's energy and its limits, and it is what the comment section keeps worrying about. When readers warn that the destination has its own patriarchies, or that not everyone can afford the ticket, they are quietly turning a private remedy back into a shared one, turning "my escape" into "our condition." The fuller theoretical account of this movement, between individualization, feeling, and the counterpublic, belongs to Chapter 2.

On method, the case makes a modest argument for scale. A handful of posts could be read as confession or as bravado. Only across a large set of data does the patterning become visible: the near presence of motivation and tool in almost every post against the scarcity of capital, the dominance of the rising arc against its dissenting minority, the steady gap between what posts celebrate and what comments concede. Computation does not interpret these patterns, but it makes them available to interpretation, and it disciplines the close reading that follows by showing which posts are typical and which exceptional. The thesis thus offers not only a reading of a contemporary Chinese genre but a worked example of how a large social media data set and feminist close reading can be made to inform one another.

The thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 sets out the theoretical framework. The contextual ground, namely family, gender, and mobility in post socialist China, is treated within this Introduction's state of the art rather than in a separate chapter. Chapter 3 details the research design and methodology. Chapter 4 presents the first findings, the escape narrative itself (dimensions A and B). Chapter 5 turns to capital, aftermath, and the counterpublic (dimensions C and D, together with the comment analysis). Chapter 6 discusses the implications, and a short conclusion closes the study.

Chapter 2, Theoretical Framework

This chapter assembles the conceptual vocabulary through which the thesis reads its material, namely the stories that young Chinese women tell on the platform Xiaohongshu, about leaving home to study abroad. The analysis that follows is theory led, and the computational results serve as supporting evidence rather than as the engine of the argument. It is therefore necessary to set out, before the data, the concepts that make the data readable. The framework proceeds in seven moves. The first four approach the central problem of the thesis, escape, from four angles: as a structural condition (individualization), as a practice (mobility), as a feeling (the promise of happiness), and as a privilege (capital). The final three then place the escape narrative within its discursive space and its relational mechanism. These are counterpublics and narrative identity (2.5), intergenerational ambivalence (2.6), and the analytic model that draws the concepts together and grounds the four coding dimensions (2.7).

2.1 Individualization and Its Chinese Path

The master concept of this thesis is individualization, in the sociological sense given to it by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. For Beck, individualization is not the moral self-interest of an egoistic subject but a structural change in late modernity, captured in his deliberately paradoxical phrase: individualization means “disembedding without reembedding.”²⁴ Individuals are released from the historically prescribed forms and commitments of class, status, gender role, and family, but they are not offered a new, stable set of collective bonds in their place. What remains is the obligation to author one’s own life. The standard biography becomes an “elective” or “do it yourself” biography, which is always also a “risk biography” and can at any moment tip into a “breakdown biography.” Individuals are thus compelled to seek, in Beck’s words, “biographical solutions to systemic contradictions.” Structural problems, such as a sexist labour market or an unequal family, are handed back to the individual to be solved as if they were personal projects.²⁵

Applied without care, this European theory would misdescribe the Chinese case. Yunxiang Yan’s account of the Chinese path to individualization supplies the needed correction. Yan accepts Beck’s structural definition, namely the dissolution of given social forms and the rise of the individual as a basic unit of social reproduction. He insists, however, that in China this process has unfolded under

²⁴ Beck, Ulrich, and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. "Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences." (2002): 1-222.

²⁵ Beck, Ulrich, and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. "Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences." (2002): 1-222.

different conditions and through different mechanisms.²⁶ In the post-Mao decades the party state withdrew from much of private life and offloaded onto individuals the responsibility for their own welfare, education, housing, and careers, while retaining its grip on political power. The result, Yan argues, is individualization managed by the party state, a process that proceeds without the cultural democracy, the welfare state safety net, and the classic individualism and political liberalism that, in Western Europe, accompanied and cushioned it.²⁷ The Chinese individual is disembedded from the work unit, the village collective, and increasingly from the extended family, yet remains, in a sense, a means to the modernization of the nation rather than an end bearing rights that cannot be touched. Alongside this structural shift Yan tracks a subjective one: the emergence of an “enterprising self” oriented to self-development and calculation, and of a “desiring self” for whom intimacy, emotion, and the open pursuit of personal happiness have become legitimate.²⁸

This twofold reading, Beck’s structural logic as inflected by Yan’s attention to the absent welfare state and the managing party state, is the spine of the thesis. The young women studied here are model individualized subjects. They tell their departure as a do-it-yourself biography, an act of authoring a life of one’s own against the demands of family and gender. But no reembedding institution waits at the destination, there is no welfare state, and a stay abroad is temporary and insecure, so the structural risk of the breakdown biography is acute. The escape from the family is a disembedding. Whether it leads to any lasting reembedding is precisely the open question that the “aftermath” narratives (Dimension D) will be made to answer.²⁹

One caution is built into the framework from the start. As Matt Dawson observes in his review of the empirical literature, the language of individual self-realization may work less as an accurate description of how people actually live, still embedded in families, classes, and obligations, than as a “common vocabulary of motives,” a culturally available script for explaining one’s actions.³⁰ This distinction matters for a study of self-presenting social media texts. When a poster tells her departure as pure self-liberation, the thesis does not take this as a transparent report of her circumstances. It reads it, rather, as a claim staged within a particular discursive economy. The gap between the disembedded script and the embedded reality is, in fact, one of the central findings of the thesis.

²⁶ Yan, Yunxiang. “The Chinese path to individualization.” *The British journal of sociology* 61, no. 3 (2010): 489-512.

²⁷ Yan, “Chinese Path,” 510.

²⁸ Yan, “Chinese Path,” 505.

²⁹ The four narrative dimensions — Motivation (A), Tools (B), Capital (C), Aftermath (D) — are defined and operationalized in chapter 3.

³⁰ Dawson, Matt. “Reviewing the critique of individualization: The disembedded and embedded theses.” *Acta Sociologica* 55, no. 4 (2012): 305-319.

2.2 Mobilities

If individualization names what the escape is, the new mobilities paradigm names how it is performed. Mimi Sheller and John Urry argue that the social sciences have long been “a-mobile,” treating movement as a black box and favouring a “sedentarist” metaphysics that takes stability, boundedness, and place as normal and movement as secondary or deviant.³¹ Against this, the mobilities paradigm makes movement basic to social life: institutions, relationships, and identities are produced through the circulation of people, objects, images, and information, not merely disrupted by it. Importantly, though, the paradigm refuses to celebrate mobility as freedom. Sheller and Urry insist that the right to move is deeply uneven, that the flows of the mobile depend on fixed infrastructures and on labour held in place, and that any analysis must attend to the economic pressures and political guarantees that channel who may circulate and who may not.³²

Looking back on the paradigm a decade later, Sheller distinguishes several interdependent modes of mobility, namely bodily, physical, imaginative, virtual, and communicative, and notes that bodily travel itself runs along a spectrum from daily commuting to migration and escape.³³ The vocabulary fits this thesis exactly. Studying abroad is bodily escape, supported by the imaginative and virtual mobilities of the platform itself, on which images of an elsewhere circulate and are rehearsed long before anybody moves. The paradigm’s insistent questions, in Urry’s formulation, who is moving, who has to move, and who can stay put, framing the thesis’s attention to the unequal distribution of the capacity to leave.

Fran Martin’s research on Chinese women students turns these abstractions into a precise case. Martin rejects the dominant push and pull model, which treats students as particles passively driven by outside forces and reduces their motives to a practical calculation about jobs and migration.³⁴ In its place she offers mobile self-fashioning: educational mobility as a project of reflexive identity work and, for women in particular, of gendered risk management. These are, in her terms, “minor” uses of mobility tactics, by which subjects made marginal in matters of gender try to negotiate the contradictions of a system that at once demands, they become self-determining individuals and blocks

³¹ Sheller, Mimi, and John Urry. “The new mobilities paradigm.” *Environment and planning A* 38, no. 2 (2006): 207-226.

³² Sheller and Urry, “New Mobilities Paradigm,” 210–211; on the unevenness of “rights to travel,” 211.

³³ Sheller, Mimi. “From spatial turn to mobilities turn.” *Current sociology* 65, no. 4 (2017): 623-639.

³⁴ Martin, Fran. “Mobile self-fashioning and gendered risk: Rethinking Chinese students’ motivations for overseas education.” *Globalisation, societies and education* 15, no. 5 (2017): 706-720.

them from doing so.³⁵ Two of Martin's findings carry weight here. First, she documents a re-traditionalization of gender relations in post reform China, with sharpening labour market discrimination against women, so that mobility is used against a tightening, not a loosening, of gendered constraint. Second, the self-individualizing practices of these women remain thoroughly tangled up with family loyalties and family money, producing not a clean line from tradition to freedom but "a convoluted web of intensifying contradictions."³⁶ Mobility, in short, is the tool of escape (Dimension B). But it is a tool the escapee does not fully control, and one that does not deliver her cleanly out of what she flees.

2.3 Affect and the Promise of Happiness

Why is leaving framed as hopeful? In the data, roughly three quarters of posts carry a positive feeling, and the most common narrative arc moves from trauma to hope.³⁷ To read this structure of feeling, the thesis turns to Sara Ahmed. For Ahmed, happiness is not a private inner state but an orientation. To be happy is to be turned toward certain objects imagined to cause happiness, so that those objects become "happy objects" and gather our attention and desire.³⁸ What organizes this orientation is the "promise of happiness," the promise that happiness is what will follow, if we draw near the right objects and follow the proper path.³⁹ The promise is also a demand. Where happiness is held to be a duty, the obligation to be made happy by the conventionally happy objects, namely the family, marriage, and the dutiful daughter's life course, takes on a coercive force.⁴⁰

Ahmed's most useful figure for this thesis is the feminist killjoy. She is the one who refuses to be made happy by what is supposed to cause happiness, who names the sexism at the family table rather than smiling through it, and who is therefore heard to ruin the shared mood and marked as the cause of unhappiness. The killjoy is an "affect alien," out of line with the feeling the room prescribes.⁴¹ The young women of this study are killjoys in exactly Ahmed's sense. Their narratives begin by withdrawing consent from the family as a happy object, refusing the daughter's duty to be happy, and

³⁵ Martin, Fran. "Mobile self-fashioning and gendered risk: Rethinking Chinese students' motivations for overseas education." *Globalisation, societies and education* 15, no. 5 (2017): 706-720.

³⁶ Martin, "Mobile Self-Fashioning,".

³⁷ Computational results (chapters 4–5): posts are 76.7% positive (99 of 129), and the modal sentiment arc is the rising, trauma-to-hope shape at 45.0% of analysable posts.

³⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 21–49.

³⁹ Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*.

⁴⁰ Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 7–8 ("the happiness duty").

⁴¹ Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 50–87 (chap. 2, "Feminist Killjoys"); on the "affect alien," 49.

turning the promise of happiness toward an elsewhere, the life that studying abroad is imagined to make possible.

But an orientation toward a promised object can sour. Here Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism completes the lens of feeling. A relation is cruelly optimistic, Berlant writes, when something one desires is in fact an obstacle to one's flourishing, when the very object one clings to as the bearer of the good life is what blocks the change it seems to promise.⁴² What sustains such attachments, even as the evidence of their cost piles up, is fantasy, the cluster of promises bound up in conventional good life genres, fantasies that are increasingly "fraying" under conditions of insecurity.⁴³ Read together, Ahmed and Berlant supply the thesis's account of the feeling that runs between posts and comments: the buoyant orientation of the posts toward the promise of a freed life abroad, and the more ambivalent register of the audience, who half sense that the promised object may not deliver. The framework anticipates that escape, for at least some of these women, takes the shape of cruel optimism, a hope organized around the very mobility that cannot resolve the structural contradictions it is asked to solve.

2.4 Capital and Class

The promise of happiness is not equally affordable. Who can actually turn the wish to leave into a departure is a question of class, and for it the thesis draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital. Bourdieu begins from the premise that the social world is accumulated history. To treat agents as interchangeable particles in a game of pure chance, where anyone might become anything at any moment, is to misdescribe a world shaped by the unequal distribution of accumulated resources.⁴⁴ Capital, in his account, appears in three basic forms: economic capital, which converts immediately into money; cultural capital, which converts under certain conditions and is institutionalized above all in educational qualifications; and social capital, the lasting network of useful connections.⁴⁵ Cultural capital itself exists in three states: embodied (the long lasting dispositions of body and mind, acquired only through time invested by and in the person), objectified (cultural goods), and institutionalized (the credential, which lends its holder a guaranteed and transferable value).⁴⁶

⁴² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

⁴³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1–2.

⁴⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (Greenwood, 1986), 241–258, here 241.

⁴⁵ Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital," 243.

⁴⁶ Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital," 243–248.

Two features of this scheme do the analytic work. The first is convertibility: the different forms of capital change into one another, but at a cost and only under certain conditions. The link between economic and cultural capital, Bourdieu stresses, runs through the time needed to acquire it. Cultural capital accrues fastest and most durably to the children of families wealthy enough to give them time free from economic necessity.⁴⁷ An overseas education is exactly such a conversion. Economic capital, often the family's and built up over a lifetime, is exchanged, through fees and the funded time of study, for the embodied and institutionalized cultural capital of a foreign degree. The second feature is the way capital governs possibility itself. Because capital takes time to build and tends to reproduce itself, its distribution means that not everything is equally possible, or equally impossible, for everyone.⁴⁸

This is why Dimension C, the question of who can escape, is the hinge of the thesis's critical argument, even though, or precisely because, it is the least represented of the four narrative dimensions in the data, appearing openly in under a fifth of posts.⁴⁹ Escape is desired by many and told by most. The economic and cultural preconditions that make it possible, however, are named by few. That silence is itself sociologically telling. Where a poster does bring capital to the front, the ordinary salaried woman working out whether she can afford France, or the "rural girl" without family backing mapping a budget route out, the celebratory grammar of self-liberation is interrupted by the Bourdieusian reminder that the field is not a roulette wheel. Studying abroad as an individualized project of self-making is, at the same time, a privilege stratified by class. The promise of a life of one's own is gated, in the end, by the volume and composition of the capital a woman and her family can bring to bear.

2.5 Counterpublics and Narrative Identity

The escape narrative does not circulate in a vacuum. It lives in a particular discursive space, and Michael Warner's theory of counterpublics specifies what kind. A public, for Warner, is not a bounded community but a relation among strangers that comes into being through the circulation of discourse and is organized by its own address rather than by membership defined from outside. A counterpublic is the same kind of stranger relational space, but with a difference. It keeps an awareness, conscious or not, of its subordinate status; it marks itself against not merely a wider but a dominant public; and it carries its conflict into the very speech genres and modes of address that make

⁴⁷ Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital," 244–246; the time needed for acquisition links economic and cultural capital (246).

⁴⁸ Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital," 241.

⁴⁹ Dimension C (Capital) is the least represented of the four, occurring in 18.6% of posts (24 of 129); see chapters 3 and 5.

it up, circulating an idiom that, in dominant settings, would be met with hostility or a sense of impropriety.⁵⁰ Taking part in such a space is not the expression of an identity formed elsewhere. It is one of the ways identity is formed and transformed. One enters, in Warner's phrase, at one's own risk, and the work it does is poetic and world making, transformative rather than merely repetitive.⁵¹

The Xiaohongshu discourse on leaving home is a feminist counterpublic in exactly this sense. It circulates an oppositional script, namely escape, "running," and a life elsewhere, among unknown strangers, in a marked idiom (the sisterly address, the vocabulary of "run") that the dominant public of filial, marriageable daughterhood would find improper. Its counterpublic signature can be read in the data. The audience does not simply applaud. Where posts are about three quarters positive, the comments fall to barely half, as readers affirm, qualify, warn, and dispute.⁵² The comment section is thus not an echo but a negotiation, the scene where the escape script is at once amplified and contested, and where a cross border membership (a fifth of commenters write from overseas) does identity work across the divide between those who have left and those who have not.

What circulates in this counterpublic is, in form, a story, and here the framework draws on narrative theories of identity. Following Dan McAdams, Kate McLean and Moin Syed treat identity as a constructed, evolving life story through which a person draws past, present, and future into a sense of continuity. Crucially, personal stories are told against culturally shared master narratives, the templates for being a "good" member of a culture, marked by how widespread they are and by their compulsory, often invisible authority, which individuals take in, negotiate, or resist through alternative, counter narratives.⁵³ The escape narrative is, in content, an alternative narrative. It resists the dominant Chinese gendered life course master narrative of the good daughter who marries on time and reproduces the family. Yet in structure it borrows the culture's most authoritative shape. The most common arc in the data, opening trauma resolving into closing hope, is exactly the redemption sequence McLean and Syed identify as a structural master narrative, whose recognized subtypes include liberation and upward mobility.⁵⁴ The escape story thus tells an oppositional content in a

⁵⁰ Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49–90, here 85–88.

⁵¹ Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 56–57 (stranger-sociability) and 87–88 (world-making as poesis).

⁵² Computational results reported in chapters 4–5: posts 76.7% positive against comments 54.7% positive; the rising (trauma-to-hope) arc is the modal shape at 45.0% of analysable posts (N = 100).

⁵³ Kate C. McLean and Moin Syed, "Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives: An Integrative Framework for Understanding Identity Development in Context," *Human Development* 58, no. 6 (2015): 318–349, here 318–321. On narrative identity, see Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By* (Guilford, 1993).

⁵⁴ McLean and Syed, "Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives," 332 (redemption as a structural master narrative; types include liberation and upward mobility).

redemptive form. It wins assent by sounding like the tragedy to triumph story the culture already trusts. This is the hinge between the platform's buoyant feeling and its quiet politics.

2.6 Intergenerational Ambivalence

If individualization is the structural condition of escape, intergenerational ambivalence is its relational mechanism, the reason escape is almost never clean. Kurt Lüscher and Karl Pillemer argue that family relations between the generations should be read neither through solidarity nor through conflict alone, but through ambivalence: relationships are built in such a way that contradictory orientations are present at the same time. They identify three recurring sources: the tension between dependence and autonomy, the conflict between competing norms, and the ambivalence that arises from solidarity itself.⁵⁵ At its heart is a present-day paradox. Individuals are urged to become autonomous and self-reliant even as family life remains, in structure, a relation of interdependence.⁵⁶ Developed since as a “sensitizing concept,” ambivalence directs attention not to whether families are close or hostile but to how members manage a contradiction they cannot dissolve.⁵⁷

The concept was formulated for parent and child relations in later life. This thesis extends it to the launching phase, the daughter's departure. The extension is warranted precisely because escape, in these narratives, is structured as ambivalence rather than as a clean break. The young woman flees the family yet is funded by it and stays loyal to it; she asserts autonomy from within a relation of dependence; she loves and resents in the same breath. This is why the data are shot through with apology and guilt as often as with defiance, the daughter who says she does not want to come home, the one who apologizes to her mother for not missing her, and why the fullest arcs pair the motivation to flee with an aftermath that keeps the family in the frame. Ambivalence names what such narratives are doing. They do not resolve the contradiction between filial obligation and self-determination but manage it, carrying it across the border rather than leaving it behind. Read this way, the family that is escaped reappears as the family that funds, judges, and is mourned, a shifting but persistent institution, in dialogue with Beck's biographical solutions to structural contradictions and Yan's account of the Chinese family in transition.

⁵⁵ Kurt Lüscher and Karl Pillemer, “Intergenerational Ambivalence: A New Approach to the Study of Parent-Child Relations in Later Life,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60, no. 2 (1998): 413–425, here 416–419 (the three aspects: dependence vs. autonomy; conflicting norms; ambivalence arising from solidarity).

⁵⁶ Lüscher and Pillemer, “Intergenerational Ambivalence,” 417, citing the paradox that adults are expected to become autonomous and self-reliant even as family life remains structurally interdependent (after Cohler and Grunebaum 1981).

⁵⁷ Kurt Lüscher, “Intergenerational Ambivalence: Further Steps in Theory and Research,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64, no. 3 (2002): 585–593, treating ambivalence as a “sensitizing concept.”

2.7 Synthesis: The Analytic Model

The six concepts converge on a single model, which both organizes the framework and grounds the four coding dimensions that structure chapters 4 and 5. The escape narrative, the model proposes, has a recurring shape: a Motivation (escape from), a Tool (mobility), a question of Capital (who can), and an Aftermath (what arrival actually delivers). Figure 2.1 sets out this structure and the lens each stage needs.⁵⁸

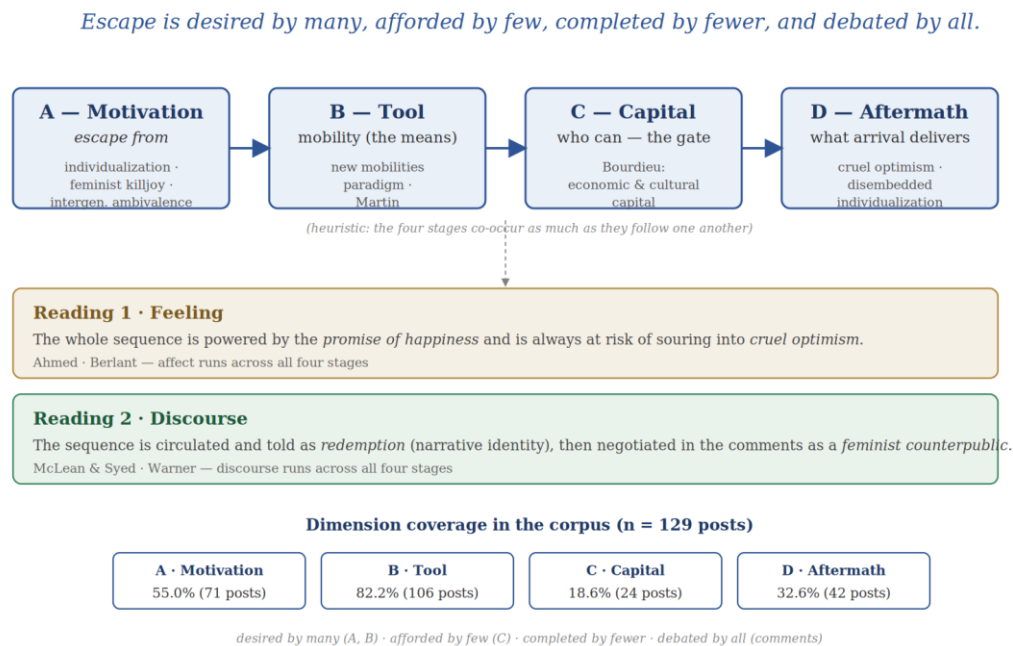


Figure 2.1. *The analytic model of the escape narrative.* Source: author’s own elaboration.

Each stage carries a dimension of the framework. Motivation (A) is read through individualization, Ahmed’s feminist killjoy, and intergenerational ambivalence: the daughter withdraws consent from the family as a happy object. The Tool (B) is read through the mobilities paradigm and Martin: bodily escape, used tactically against a tightening gendered constraint. Capital (C) is read through Bourdieu: the gate that decides who can turn the wish into a departure, the least represented dimension in the data yet the most decisive. The Aftermath (D) is read through cruel optimism and disembedded individualization: a disembedding with no guaranteed reembedding, in which the promised object may fail to deliver what it promised.

⁵⁸ The model is heuristic, not causal: the four dimensions co-occur rather than strictly sequence (A and B are tightly coupled). It is offered as a reading instrument for chapters 4 and 5; see chapter 3 for operationalization.

Two readings run across all four stages. The first is about feeling: the whole sequence is powered by the promise of happiness and is always at risk of souring into cruel optimism. The second is about discourse: the sequence is circulated, told as redemption (narrative identity), and negotiated in the comments as a feminist counterpublic. Together they yield the one sentence spine of the thesis, which the dimension coverage turns into a measurement: escape is desired by many, afforded by few, completed by fewer, and debated by all. The model is heuristic rather than causal. Its stages occur together as much as they follow one another, and Figure 2.1 is offered not as a finding but as the instrument with which the findings of chapters 4 and 5 will be read.

Chapter 3, Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Research design and rationale

This chapter sets out the design used to study how young Chinese women on Xiaohongshu tell the story of studying abroad as a gendered escape from family and society. The study uses an explanatory, sequential mixed methods design with a netnographic orientation. It runs two passes of analysis over one body of platform data. The first pass is computational. A set of user posts and their comment threads is scraped from the platform and then run through automated sentiment classification, a sentence level sentiment arc analysis, and a deductive, multi label coding across four narrative dimensions. The second pass, by contrast, is interpretive. Here a purposively selected subset of the most widely shared posts is read closely and analysed by theme. The computational pass establishes the shape and scale of the discourse: how much of it is hopeful, which narrative elements recur, and who takes part. The close reading then recovers the meaning, feeling, and rhetorical positioning that aggregate measures cannot capture. The two passes are ordered on purpose, because the computational findings, and above all the gap they reveal between celebratory posts and ambivalent comments, drive the choice of cases for close reading and the questions put to them.

The overall design follows the logic of netnography, the way of bringing an ethnographic sensibility to the stored traces of an online community that Kozinets developed.⁵⁹ Netnography treats the everyday data of a social media community, its posts, comments, and reactions, as cultural texts to be read for shared meaning, rather than as answers to be tallied or as a neutral sample to be measured. It suits this project well, because the “escape” discourse on Xiaohongshu is not something produced for a researcher. It is a living, jointly written genre that women circulate, imitate, and argue over among themselves. Reading such a genre, then, needs both the distant view of computational summary and the close, context bound reading typical of ethnographic interpretation. Netnography allows the two to be combined, on the view that even large bodies of digital traces are still communicative acts that belong to a cultural world.

The design is explanatory and sequential in spirit, though the two passes work on one shared body of data rather than on separately gathered samples.⁶⁰ The computational pass comes first. This is not because numbers outrank interpretation, but because, in a body of texts this size, they are the only practical way to find where the interpretively interesting material lies. Aggregate sentiment, arc shape,

⁵⁹ Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, 2nd ed. (SAGE, 2015).

⁶⁰ John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd ed. (SAGE, 2018).

and dimensional coverage work as a survey instrument turned on the texts themselves. They map the contours of the discourse so that close reading can be directed rather than arbitrary. In effect, this is the familiar pairing of “distant” and “close” reading. Distant reading establishes pattern and prevalence across the whole, and close reading restores the density of single cases.⁶¹ The order matters for one reason specific to this study. The central finding is itself a gap between two measured quantities, the high positivity of posts and the clearly lower positivity of their comments, and only a measure across the whole body of data could bring that gap to the surface as something to be explained.

A mixed methods design is needed because the research questions are themselves mixed. Some, for one thing, are questions of prevalence. How dominant is the celebratory framing of leaving? How often does the matter of class enter the conversation? Who, by location, takes part? These call for measurement across the whole set of texts. Others, however, are questions of meaning. What is escape said to be *from* and *toward*? How is the story of leaving put together? How does a narrator place herself in relation to family and nation? These call for interpretation that no aggregate can supply. Neither a purely quantitative nor a purely qualitative design, therefore, would answer both. The computational part places the study within the now established field of Chinese language computational text analysis, whose methods and limits have recently been set out in detail,⁶² and it follows a growing body of work that reads the experience of Chinese women today through the textual traces they leave on platforms.⁶³ The interpretive part adds to, rather than replaces, the rich qualitative scholarship on why Chinese women study overseas, work done through interviews and long term ethnography.⁶⁴ That scholarship gains depth from sustained contact with a small number of participants. The present design gains breadth and naturalness from a large set of unprompted, self-written posts, and it reads the two registers, the measured and the interpreted, against one another.

The choice to work from posts that occur naturally, rather than from interviews or surveys, is deliberate and has consequences. An interview asks a woman to explain her departure to a researcher. A Xiaohongshu post is the account she chose to publish, in her own time, to an audience of peers, in the language of a recognisable genre. The first gives depth and the chance to probe. The second, by contrast, gives the discourse as it actually circulates, with its conventions, its silences, and the way

⁶¹ Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (Verso, 2013).

⁶² Zhaoxia Wang, Donghao Huang, Jingfeng Cui, Xinyue Zhang, Seng-Beng Ho, and Erik Cambria, “A Review of Chinese Sentiment Analysis: Subjects, Methods, and Trends,” *Artificial Intelligence Review* 58 (2025): art. 75.

⁶³ Xiang, Jing, and Xuan Sun. “Digital insights: Analyzing the reproductive intentions and influencing factors among urban women in China through online platforms.” *PloS one* 20, no. 7 (2025): e0327570.

⁶⁴ Fran Martin, “Mobile Self-Fashioning and Gendered Risk: Rethinking Chinese Students’ Motivations for Overseas Education,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 15, no. 5 (2017): 706–720.

the platform shapes performance left intact. This study is concerned precisely with how the escape is told in public, with how a shared story is told, affirmed, and contested among women, so the natural, unprompted character of the data is a strength rather than a limitation, as long as its performed quality is kept in view.⁶⁵

In terms of epistemology the study leans realist but stays aware of construction, in the sense Braun and Clarke give those terms. It takes the women's accounts of their motives and feelings seriously as reports of experience, while staying alert to the constructed, performed quality of telling one's own story on a public, image conscious platform.⁶⁶ That double stance runs through every choice below, from the strict thresholds set on the sentiment classifier to the attention paid, in the close reading, to what a post performs as much as to what it states. It also sets the standard of validity that fits the work. The aim is not to estimate a population figure but to describe a discourse with enough rigour, openness, and cross checking that another reader working from the same data could re-examine the patterns claimed.

It is also worth marking what this design is not. It is not a purely computational social science study that would treat the sentiment scores and coverage rates as results in themselves. Here those figures are the start of the analysis, not its end, and they are held open to revision by the close reading.⁶⁷ Nor, on the other side, is it a small sample interpretive study that would drop measurement altogether. The scale of the data is part of the argument, since a claim about a collective narrative pattern is more convincing when it holds across more than a hundred posts than when it is shown through a handful. The value of the design lies in the disciplined movement between these registers, using computation to find the pattern and the exceptions to it, and using interpretation to say what the pattern means, so that neither the numbers nor the readings stand alone.⁶⁸

3.2 Data collection: scraping Xiaohongshu

Data were collected from Xiaohongshu, a Chinese lifestyle sharing and social commerce platform whose users tend to be young, female, and urban, and on which the discourses of “escaping the family of origin” and “running” (润) are unusually dense and thoroughly feminised. The platform, though, was chosen not as a neutral container but as a specific public with its own look and norms, a point

⁶⁵ Kozinets, Netnography.

⁶⁶ Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative research in psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77-101.

⁶⁷ Wang et al., “Review of Chinese Sentiment Analysis”.

⁶⁸ Kozinets, Netnography.

returned to in the discussion of self-presentation bias below, because it is exactly where the genre under study is written and read. Its mix of confessional first person writing and aspirational lifestyle images makes it a distinctive site for the gendered self-narration this study examines, and one whose conventions actively shape what can be said and how.

The data were gathered through a keyword search using one compound query that combined four Chinese terms: 逃离原生家庭 (escaping the family of origin), 出国 (going abroad), 留学 (studying abroad), and 女性 (women / female). These were chosen to capture the meeting point of family escape, cross border mobility, and gender that sits at the heart of the research questions. The compound query was used instead of four separate searches precisely so that the returned set would lean toward posts in which these themes occur together, which is the object of study. A keyword search was used rather than a platform research interface, however, because no openly available interface exposes the relevant fields at the level of detail needed. The trade-off, discussed in the ethics and limitations sections, is that the harvest is shaped by the platform's own ranking and retrieval logic rather than by a transparent sampling frame.⁶⁹

Scraping was done with a custom Python routine that queried the platform's search interface and parsed the returned records into three structured datasets: posts, first level comments, and threaded replies. Each post record carries a post identifier, an author identifier and nickname, the title and body text, the publication time, the like, comment, and collect counts, and the post URL. Each comment and reply record carries the parent post identifier, a comment identifier, the date, the like count, the platform assigned IP location label, and the text.

Importantly, the time span of the data is a property of a keyword search rather than a designed sampling window. The query returned posts, and through them comment threads, reaching back several years up to the point of collection, with each comment carrying its own date. This lets the feeling of the discussion be tracked over time, a timeline drawn on in Chapter 5, but it also means the data reflect whatever the platform chose to surface for the query at the moment it was run, rather than an even sweep across a fixed interval. The collection is therefore best understood as a single time slice of an ongoing, still growing discourse: a snapshot of how the escape narrative stood at the time of harvesting, not a complete archive of everything ever posted under these terms. This point is carried

⁶⁹ Brown, M. A., Gruen, A., Maldoff, G., Messing, S., Sanderson, Z., & Zimmer, M. (2025). Web scraping for research: Legal, ethical, institutional, and scientific considerations. *Big Data & Society*, 12(4).

forward into the limitations, where what it means for reproducibility and for any claim about change over time is set out.⁷⁰

The raw harvest came to 200 posts, 5,197 first level comments, and 7,377 replies. And because Xiaohongshu attaches a rough IP location label to comments, the comment data also support a geographic reading of who takes part in the discussion, used in Chapter 5. This label is at the level of province or country and is assigned by the platform, so it is treated throughout as a rough signal of where the conversation is taking place rather than as a precise measure of any one person's location. The legal and institutional questions raised by collecting platform data this way, namely terms of service, the status of "public" data, and the reproducibility of scraped data, are taken up in the ethics section (3.9), following recent guidance on research web scraping.⁷¹

3.3 Corpus construction and filtering

A broad keyword search is bound to return off topic material: advertisements, study abroad, agency, marketing, and unrelated lifestyle content that happens to share a keyword. A three layer "classify then filter" protocol was therefore applied to the 200 raw posts in order to build an analysable set, while keeping every exclusion open and checkable, a direct response to the reproducibility problems that beset research on scraped data.⁷²

The order of operations, classify first and then filter, is itself a methodological choice, not an incidental one. Rather than dropping posts on a quick impression of relevance, each post was first described against the analytic model, the four dimensions, and only then judged for inclusion. This way the inclusion decision rests on the same clear criteria that structure the later analysis. It keeps the boundary of the data set continuous with its coding scheme and avoids the circular move of defining the topic informally and then "discovering" it.

So, in the first layer, posts that matched none of the four narrative dimensions were removed as topical noise, on the reasoning that a post engaging none of the dimensions of the escape narrative is not, for the purposes of this study, part of that narrative. In the second layer, posts with no clear reference to studying or going abroad were removed. The thirty posts excluded at this layer were kept in a separate audit file so that the boundary decisions stay open to a reader or examiner. In the third layer, the

⁷⁰ Brown, Megan A., Andrew Gruen, Gabe Maldoff, Solomon Messing, Zeve Sanderson, and Michael Zimmer. "Web scraping for research: Legal, ethical, institutional, and scientific considerations." *Big Data & Society* 12, no. 4 (2025): 20539517251381686.

⁷¹ Brown et al., "Web Scraping for Research".

⁷² Brown et al., "Web Scraping for Research".

researcher reviewed the remaining set by hand and removed the off-topic posts that were left, mainly commercial and agency content, that had slipped past the automated filters. This procedure brought the set down from 200 to 129 final posts, a retention rate of 64.5 per cent. Keeping the excluded set, rather than dropping it silently, means the building of the data set can be reconstructed and questioned, which is the practical meaning of reproducibility for a set put together by hand in this way.⁷³

Turning to the audience, the 7,195 comments and replies attached to these 129 posts, that is 3,276 first level comments and 3,919 replies, make up the comment data. The full comment set for each kept post was retained, rather than a sample, so that the feeling of the audience's response could be measured at scale and compared, post by post, against the sentiment of the original post. Keeping the complete threads also preserves the conversational structure, comment and reply, claim and qualification, on which the later reading of the comment section as a site of collective negotiation depends. It also lets the post against comment sentiment comparison be computed without the distortions a partial sample of comments would bring.

3.4 Computational sentiment analysis

Posts and comments were classified for sentiment using a Chinese language transformer fine-tuned for binary sentiment classification. The choice of method reflects the state of the field. Lexicon based approaches to Chinese sentiment, which assign polarity by matching words against a sentiment dictionary, face well documented trouble with a language that has no spaces between words and that leans heavily on context, negation, and implied meaning. Recent reviews accordingly report a clear shift toward deep learning methods, and in particular toward pre trained transformer models, for Chinese sentiment tasks.⁷⁴ Within that family, models built on the RoBERTa architecture have become a standard base, both for document level and for finer grained aspect level Chinese sentiment analysis,⁷⁵ and recent hybrid designs pair RoBERTa's context aware representations with sequence models to capture longer range patterns in informal text.⁷⁶

⁷³ Brown et al., "Web Scraping for Research".

⁷⁴ Wang, Zhaoxia, Donghao Huang, Jingfeng Cui, Xinyue Zhang, Seng-Beng Ho, and Erik Cambria. "A review of Chinese sentiment analysis: subjects, methods, and trends." *Artificial Intelligence Review* 58 (2025): 1.

⁷⁵ Liao, Wenxiong, Bi Zeng, Xiuwen Yin, and Pengfei Wei. "An improved aspect-category sentiment analysis model for text sentiment analysis based on RoBERTa." *Applied Intelligence* 51, no. 6 (2021): 3522-3533.

⁷⁶ Rahman, Md Mostafizer, Ariful Islam Shiplu, Yutaka Watanobe, and Md Ashad Alam. "RoBERTa-BiLSTM: A context-aware hybrid model for sentiment analysis." *IEEE Transactions on Emerging Topics in Computational Intelligence* (2025).

The reasons such models suit the present data are concrete. For one thing, a transformer reads each word in the light of the whole sentence, so it can tell that a phrase like “finally free” is positive while “free from them at last, supposedly” is not, where a dictionary would simply tally “free”.⁷⁷ And for Chinese in particular, the absence of word boundaries means a lexicon must first commit to a way of splitting the text into words that may itself be wrong, while a sub word transformer gets around the problem by learning units below the level of the written word.⁷⁸ These properties matter for Xiaohongshu text, which is informal, full of emoji, often mixes in English, and carries the irony and understatement that defeat word counting methods.

A pre trained Chinese model suited to the domain was therefore preferred over a sentiment dictionary or an English language classifier. The specific model used was IDEA-CCNL’s Erlangshen-RoBERTa-110M-Sentiment, a binary sentiment classifier released as part of the open Fengshenbang model series.⁷⁹ It was chosen because it is built for Chinese sentiment, openly available for inspection and reuse, and of a size that makes classifying several thousand texts workable while staying strong on the casual register of social media.

Automated classification of this kind, even so, is not treated as infallible. Because the model was trained on general Chinese text rather than on Xiaohongshu in particular, its outputs were spot checked by the researcher against a reading of a sample of posts and comments, with special attention to the cases the literature flags as hard: irony, rhetorical questions, and negated positives.⁸⁰ These checks are not a substitute for a formally labelled test set, which a larger study should build, but they establish that the classifier’s labels track the plain sentiment of the texts closely enough to do their job here, which is to summarise the feeling of the data and to direct, rather than replace, the interpretive reading.

The model returns a probability for each polarity. Rather than simply assigning the higher probability label by default, a text was labelled positive only when its modelled positive probability reached 0.7, and negative otherwise. The reason is analytic rather than borrowed. The study’s interest lies in the clearly celebratory register of the genre, so the classifier is tuned on purpose for precision over recall. The “positive” category then holds only clearly stated positive feeling, at the admitted cost of pushing

⁷⁷ Rahman et al., “RoBERTa-BiLSTM”.

⁷⁸ Wang et al., “Review of Chinese Sentiment Analysis”.

⁷⁹ Zhang, Jiaxing, Ruyi Gan, Junjie Wang, Yuxiang Zhang, Lin Zhang, Ping Yang, Xinyu Gao et al. "Fengshenbang 1.0: Being the foundation of chinese cognitive intelligence." *arXiv preprint arXiv:2209.02970* (2022).

⁸⁰ Wang et al., “Review of Chinese Sentiment Analysis”.

vague, neutral, or weakly positive text into the negative category.⁸¹ The same strict cut off has been used in comparable work on Xiaohongshu data, which supports the choice but is not itself the warrant.⁸² A further check, in turn, addresses a separate worry, that the lower positivity of the comments might simply reflect their brevity, with short, supportive remarks such as a quick “go for it” or “thank you” falling below the positive threshold and so being counted as negative. Among the comments labelled negative, only 3.2 per cent contain a clearly supportive token (such as 加油 “go for it,” 谢谢 “thank you,” or 姐妹 “sis”), and their median length, sixteen characters, is close to that of the positive comments at nineteen, so the gap is not an artefact of short well wishing being misclassified. A further, threshold-level check points the same way. The post-comment gap holds at every plausible cut-off, never falling below about seventeen points and never reversing—17.2 points at 0.5, 20.1 at 0.6, 22.0 at 0.7, and 26.8 at 0.8—and in fact widens as the threshold rises, because the comments’ modelled probabilities sit nearer the decision boundary; the gap is therefore not an artefact of the 0.7 cut-off in particular. The sentiment arc analysis described next further recovers the gradations that a single threshold label discards. One consequence is worth stating plainly. The “negative” category is mixed, holding genuinely negative text together with the merely ambivalent or muted, and it is the close reading, not the label, that tells them apart.

Applied to the data, the classifier labelled 99 of the 129 posts (76.7 per cent) positive and 30 (23.3 per cent) negative. Among the 7,195 comments and replies, 3,937 (54.7 per cent) were positive and 3,258 (45.3 per cent) negative. The gap of about twenty-two points between the positivity of posts and that of comments is introduced here as a measurement. A chi-square test confirms that the gap is highly unlikely to arise by chance: posts are labelled positive far more often than comments, $\chi^2(1, N = 7,324) = 23.97, p < .001$, a test that treats each post and comment as an independent observation. Its interpretation, as evidence of an audience that affirms and complicates the escape narrative at once, is developed in Chapter 5. Binary sentiment has well known limits. It collapses ambivalence into a single label, mishandles irony and sarcasm, and cannot register the mixed feeling that runs through much of this material.⁸³ Two design choices soften these limits, however. First, the sentiment arc analysis (§3.5) recovers the movement of feeling within a post that a single label erases. Second, the qualitative close reading (§3.7) restores the ambivalence and irony that the classifier flattens, treating

⁸¹ Wang et al., “Review of Chinese Sentiment Analysis”.

⁸² Shiyi Fu, “The Rise of the ‘Full-Time Children’ Phenomenon in China: A Text Analysis of Xiaohongshu Data” (master’s thesis, University of Helsinki, 2025).

⁸³ Wang et al., “Review of Chinese Sentiment Analysis”.

the computational labels as a map of the ground rather than the ground itself. The labels are thus used as a structuring summary that guides interpretation, never as a verdict that closes it off.

3.5 Sentiment-arc analysis

To move beyond one polarity label per post and capture the movement of feeling within a narrative, which is central to the idea that these are stories that run from trauma to hope, each post was put through a sentiment arc analysis adapted from computational narrative analysis, which shows a story as a curve of emotional value running from beginning to end. Each post was split into sentences at terminal punctuation (., !, ?). Every sentence was scored for positive probability with the same model used for polarity classification. The resulting sequence was resampled to a fixed ten points so that posts of different lengths could be compared on a common scale. The arc shape was then classified by comparing the smoothed opening of the post against its ending and locating the high and low points of the curve. In practice the rule is a simple threshold on the end minus start change in modelled positivity (Δ). A post was typed as rising when Δ went above +0.10 and as falling when it dropped below -0.10. Within the band between those two values, where opening and close are effectively level, the shape was read from the middle of the curve: a clear mid story dip gives a valley, a mid story high gives a peak, and neither gives a flat arc. The cut off is deliberately modest, and the five shapes are well separated by it. In this data the rising posts have a smallest Δ of +0.11 and the falling a largest of -0.10, so no post sits unclearly on the boundary. One approximation must be stated plainly. The model is a document level binary classifier, so using its positive probability output as a per sentence value treats a classification score as if it were a calibrated continuous measure of feeling.⁸⁴ The arc is therefore best read as an emotional contour, a relative rise or fall in modelled positivity across the post, rather than as a precise measure of feeling. This is enough for the only claim made of it, namely sorting the movement into shapes. Resampling to a common length and light smoothing are what make different posts comparable, turning each particular text into a curve that can be sorted and counted. Posts of fewer than three sentences were too short to give a meaningful movement and were excluded ($n = 29$, each with one or two sentences), leaving 100 analysable posts.

Showing a narrative as a sequence of sentiment values has an established line in computational narrative analysis, where the shape of a story's emotional movement, its rises, falls, and turning points, is treated as a meaningful formal property that recurs across many texts.⁸⁵ The procedure used here is a deliberately simple version of that tradition, fitted to short social media posts rather than to novels.

⁸⁴ Zhang et al., "Fengshenbang 1.0".

⁸⁵ Reagan, Andrew J., Lewis Mitchell, Dilan Kiley, Christopher M. Danforth, and Peter Sheridan Dodds. "The emotional arcs of stories are dominated by six basic shapes." *EPJ data science* 5, no. 1 (2016): 31.

Sentence level scoring captures local movement, resampling to ten points sets aside sheer length, and light smoothing damps down sentence by sentence jitter so that the underlying contour, rather than incidental noise, drives the sorting into one of the five shapes. The simplicity is intended, since an over elaborate model of the arc would impose more structure than these brief texts can bear and would make the resulting shapes harder, not easier, to read against the close reading.

Five shapes emerged in all. The rising (trauma to hope) arc accounted for 45 posts (45.0 per cent), the falling arc for 20 (20.0 per cent), the flat arc for 16 (16.0 per cent), the valley (fall then rise) arc for 13 (13.0 per cent), and the peak (rise then fall) arc for 6 (6.0 per cent). The dominance of the rising shape, in turn, gives quantitative support to the collective narrative pattern of opening in family pain and closing in liberation after departure. The mean arc across all analysable posts shows this movement and is reproduced in the annex.

Read through the framework of narrative identity, the recurring rising arc is not merely an emotional curve but the mark of a shared story form: an alternative narrative that departs from the culturally dominant script of the dutiful daughter and retells the life as a movement out of constraint and toward a self the woman authors.⁸⁶ On this view, an arc shape is a compact index of narrative positioning. A rising curve acts out the claim that leaving was redemptive, while the falling and valley arcs that a fifth of posts show register the stories in which departure did not resolve into liberation. The arc analysis thus puts to work, at the scale of the whole data set, a claim that the close reading then examines case by case, and it points out in advance the cases that do not fit, the non-rising arcs, that the qualitative pass is obliged to take seriously rather than treat as noise.

3.6 Four-dimension multi label coding

The analytic model developed in Chapter 2, Motivation, then Tool, then Capital, then Aftermath, was turned into four binary dimensions and applied to every post through deductive, lexicon based multi label coding. Deductive coding was chosen, rather than a purely inductive scheme, because the dimensions come from theory and the aim was to test how a model derived from theory maps onto a large set of texts. The multi label form, which lets a post register on several dimensions at once, reflects the fact that these narratives routinely weave motivation, means, cost, and consequence together. Each dimension matches a strand of the conceptual framework, indicated briefly here and developed fully in Chapter 2.

⁸⁶ McLean, Kate C., and Moin Syed. "Personal, master, and alternative narratives: An integrative framework for understanding identity development in context." *Human Development* 58, no. 6 (2015): 318-349.

Dimension A (escape motivation) captures what is being fled, namely parental control, gendered expectation, emotional neglect, and the “good girl” script. It is grounded in the literature on filial piety as a shifting, ambivalent institution^{87 88} and in the concept of intergenerational ambivalence that names the solidarity and conflict of parent and child ties at the same time,⁸⁹ read alongside Ahmed’s figure of the feminist killjoy who breaks the family’s contract of feeling.⁹⁰ Dimension B (escape tool) captures the means, namely studying abroad and other migration routes, and the vocabulary of “running.” It is grounded in the new mobilities paradigm^{91 92} and in Martin’s account of overseas study as a gendered project of making the self.⁹³ Dimension C (escape capital) captures who is able to leave, namely money, the cost of overseas study, and class. It is grounded in Bourdieu’s account of the forms of capital.⁹⁴ Dimension D (escape aftermath) captures what follows departure, namely the rebuilding of identity, reflection, and disillusion. It is read through Berlant’s cruel optimism⁹⁵ and through Yan’s and Beck’s accounts of individualization, in which leaving an institution need not mean arriving at a settled new self.^{96 97}

For each dimension a Chinese keyword lexicon was built by hand, combining terms drawn from a close reading of a sample of posts with terms drawn from the theory above, so that each dictionary answers both to how the women actually write and to the concept it is meant to capture. The full dictionaries, with their term counts and the match frequency of each term, are reproduced in the annex, so that the relative coverage of the four dimensions can be weighed against the relative size of their lexicons. Matching was done directly on the cleaned text of each post by checking whether a term appears anywhere in the text. A lexicon term counted as a match when it appeared anywhere in the

⁸⁷Yeh, Kuang-Hui, and Olwen Bedford. "A test of the dual filial piety model." *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 6, no. 3 (2003): 215-228.

⁸⁸Bedford, Olwen, and Kuang-Hui Yeh. "The history and the future of the psychology of filial piety: Chinese norms to contextualized personality construct." *Frontiers in psychology* 10 (2019): 100.

⁸⁹Lüscher, Kurt. "Intergenerational ambivalence: Further steps in theory and research." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (2002): 585-593.

⁹⁰Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010).

⁹¹Sheller, Mimi, and John Urry. "The new mobilities paradigm." *Environment and planning A* 38, no. 2 (2006): 207-226.

⁹²Sheller, Mimi. "From spatial turn to mobilities turn." *Current sociology* 65, no. 4 (2017): 623-639.

⁹³Martin, “Mobile Self-Fashioning”.

⁹⁴Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (Greenwood, 1986), 241–258.

⁹⁵Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011).

⁹⁶Yan, Yunxiang. "The Chinese path to individualization." *The British journal of sociology* 61, no. 3 (2010): 489-512.

⁹⁷Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences* (SAGE, 2002).

text. Two features of the lexicons keep this simple rule from producing false hits. Almost every term is a word or phrase of two or more characters, which makes accidental matches inside unrelated words rare in Chinese. And the lexicons were built with exactly this risk in mind. The single character 穷 (“poor”), for instance, was left out because it would falsely match 穷游 (“budget travel”), and the clear two character forms 贫穷 (poverty) and 没钱 (no money) were used instead. Word splitting and stop word filtering were used in the pipeline only for the word frequency and word cloud analyses reported in Chapter 5. They play no part in the dimension coding. A dimension was coded as present only when at least two different lexicon keywords matched, a deliberately strict rule that cuts the false positives produced by a passing single word mention, at the cost of missing posts that point at a dimension only indirectly. The two-keyword threshold is the coding level counterpart of the 0.7 sentiment threshold. In both cases the design accepts lower recall in exchange for labels that can be trusted.

To make this concrete, the Motivation lexicon gathered terms for parental control, household conflict, and the gendered “good girl” script. The Tool lexicon gathered the vocabulary of studying abroad, visas, and “running,” including the platform specific shorthand the genre has built up. The Capital lexicon gathered references to tuition, exchange rates, savings, and family financial support. The Aftermath lexicon gathered terms for arrival, identity, loneliness, reinvention, and regret. Building each list from both the posts and the theory keeps the coding answerable in two directions at once, and the rule that two different terms must occur together means a passing mention of money, or a single keyword used in an unrelated sense, does not by itself trigger a dimension. The complete lists, with frequencies, are given in the annex so that the coding can be inspected and, in principle, re-run.

Turning to the results, across the 129 posts coverage was as follows: Tool (B) 106 posts (82.2 per cent), Motivation (A) 71 (55.0 per cent), Aftermath (D) 42 (32.6 per cent), and Capital (C) 24 (18.6 per cent). The strongest overlaps were A and B in 55 posts (recognising oppression and acting on it), B and D in 30 (the migration as freedom success story), A and D in 25 (the full movement from trauma to liberation), and B and C in 20 (the material thresholds of studying abroad). A and C appeared together in 12 posts and C and D in 8. Because the first filtering layer (§3.3) kept only posts that already matched at least one dimension, these coverage rates are conditional proportions within the escape narrative set rather than prevalence estimates across study abroad talk in general. By construction, every post hits at least one dimension. Read correctly this sharpens, rather than softens, the capital finding. Even among posts that are already about escape, fewer than one in five raises the question of who can afford it. This distribution is telling in its own right, because escape is overwhelmingly told through the tool of mobility and driven by family and gender pressure, yet the question of who can afford it surfaces in fewer than one post in five. Capital is the least spoken

dimension even though it quietly gates the whole project, a silence the analysis returns to in Chapter 5. Read against the theoretical frame, the way capital goes under stated is not a gap in the data but a finding about the discourse. A precondition of the whole project in Bourdieu's sense is exactly what the genre tends to leave unsaid.⁹⁸ One caution belongs here, since the argument leans on a comparison of coverage rates. A dimension's coverage depends partly on the size and frequency of its lexicon, so the annex reports those figures, and the low coverage of Capital is read alongside, not instead of, the qualitative evidence in §5.1 that the women who do raise the question of money are out of all proportion those who have least of it.

Two cautions attach to this method. Deductive lexicon coding is built by the researcher and carries the subjectivity of the term lists. Furthermore, because the coding was done by a single researcher, no formal inter coder reliability statistic is reported. Independent double coding of a sample, with a reliability coefficient, is recommended for future work. The two keyword rule and the manual audit partly offset these risks but do not remove them, and the close reading is treated throughout as the interpretive check on the coding, a qualitative form of validation in which the labelled patterns are tested against a sustained reading of the texts themselves rather than against a second coder.

3.7 Qualitative close reading and thematic analysis

To recover the meaning the numbers cannot hold, the close reading worked from a purposive sample of twenty-five posts, put together to combine three of Patton's purposeful sampling strategies rather than to rank posts by popularity alone.⁹⁹ The twenty most engaged posts, by likes plus comments, formed the spine of the sample. This is intensity sampling, which foregrounds the texts that most shaped the discourse, the ones other women read, liked, and answered. The sample was then extended to twenty five by adding maximum variation and deviant cases, posts with falling or negative arcs, together with ambivalent borderline cases whose positive probability fell in the uncertain 0.50 to 0.65 band, so that the reading would be forced to test the genre against its own exceptions rather than confirm it from its greatest hits.¹⁰⁰ This is the textual version of attending, in an ethnography, both to the stories a community tells most insistently and to the ones that complicate them. The cost of any criterion weighted by engagement, admitted here and revisited in the limitations, is that it favours the most resonant and so most conventional posts. Building the deviant and ambivalent cases into the sample is the deliberate counterweight. One correction to the sampling pool should be recorded: an

⁹⁸ Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital".

⁹⁹ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 4th ed. (SAGE, 2015), 264–272, on purposeful-sampling types.

¹⁰⁰ Kozinets, *Netnography*.

earlier de-duplication step keyed on post title collapsed nine untitled posts into a single record, so de-duplicating by unique post identifier instead restores the full set of 129 posts. Re-running the selection on the corrected pool surfaces one further eligible post, whose close reading is consistent with the existing analysis, so the sample is held at twenty-five. Comments themselves were not sampled by any metric. Within the threads of these posts, and across the wider comment set, they were read in full, and those quoted were chosen to illustrate the recurring stances the analysis identifies—affirmation, qualification, and contestation—rather than for their rhetorical force, so that a pointed comment is cited as an instance of a pattern, not as a typical reaction.

Each selected post was read for three things in turn. The first is its narrative arc, how the story of leaving is put together, where it begins and where it ends. The second is its feeling, what emotions are claimed, performed, or pointedly held back. The third is its positioning, how the narrator places herself in relation to family, nation, other women, and the imagined reader. The reading of positioning draws on the narrative identity framework, which treats personal stories as told against a background of *master narratives* whose authority a narrator may reproduce or resist. The escape post is read as a personal narrative working against, and often departing from, the master narrative of the filial daughter.¹⁰¹ The comment threads were read alongside each post for the work they do, affirming, complicating, or contesting its claims, so that the analysis could attend to the comment section as a space of collective negotiation as well as to the post itself. This dimension is theorised, in Chapter 2, through the concept of the counterpublic.¹⁰²

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six phases of reflexive thematic analysis: getting to know the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming them, and producing the written account.¹⁰³ The approach is reflexive in the particular sense Braun and Clarke intend. Themes are understood as analytic constructions made through the researcher's engagement with the data, not as objects lying in wait to be found, which puts a premium on the openness and self-awareness discussed in the next section.¹⁰⁴ Themes were generated abductively, in dialogue with the four-dimension model and the theoretical frame rather than apart from them, so that the qualitative reading both shows and tests the patterns found computationally. When a theme ran against the computational picture, where, for instance, an apparently celebratory post revealed a buried ambivalence on close reading, that tension was kept as a finding rather than resolved in favour

¹⁰¹ McLean and Syed, "Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives".

¹⁰² Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Zone Books, 2002).

¹⁰³ Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis" (the six phases).

¹⁰⁴ Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis".

of either pass. In line with the departmental guideline, Chinese language excerpts appear in English translation in the body of the thesis, with the original Chinese given in the footnotes.

The comment threads were put through the same phased analysis as the posts, but with a different guiding question: what does the audience do with the escape narrative the post offers? Comments were read and grouped by the stance they took, ratifying the narrator's account and supplying their own parallel stories, qualifying it with cautions about cost or aftermath, or contesting it outright, so that the comment section could be described as a patterned field of response rather than an undifferentiated mass of reactions.¹⁰⁵ This treatment is what lets the post against comment sentiment gap reported in §3.4 be read in Chapter 5 not merely as a number but as a relationship between a published story and the collective work of affirmation and qualification it sets going.

3.8 Reflexivity and positionality

The researcher is herself a young Chinese woman studying abroad, and therefore an insider to the community under study. This positionality is at once an analytic resource and a risk. As a resource it brings cultural and linguistic fluency and the ability to recognise implicit references, in jokes, and the feeling of the posts, a recognition on which both the lexicon building and the close reading depend. As a risk it invites over identification and the projection of the researcher's own narrative onto the data. The very readability of these stories to an insider can make how constructed they are harder to see, a danger made sharper by the fact that the women's overseas education narratives are themselves exercises in reflexive self-making.¹⁰⁶

In line with the reflexive commitments of both netnography¹⁰⁷ and thematic analysis,¹⁰⁸ the researcher treats her own position as part of the analytic instrument. It is named rather than set aside, and it is guarded against through several concrete practices. The strict coding rules and the 0.7 sentiment threshold limit the room for the researcher's expectations to inflate the positive, celebratory reading the genre invites. The documented audit trail of exclusions keeps the building of the data set open to challenge. And a deliberate attention to cases that do not fit, the falling and valley arc posts, the openly negative accounts, the comments that puncture a post's optimism, works against the pull toward confirming a story the researcher already half believes. Reflexivity here is not a confessional

¹⁰⁵ Kozinets, *Netnography*.

¹⁰⁶ Martin, "Mobile Self-Fashioning".

¹⁰⁷ Kozinets, *Netnography*.

¹⁰⁸ Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis".

preface but a set of procedures meant to make the insider's fluency an asset that is checked again and again.

Translation is one site where this reflexive discipline is especially called for. Putting the women's words from Chinese into English for the body of the thesis is itself an act of interpretation. Tone, register, and the loaded connotations of terms like 润 ("to run," with its overtones of flight and refusal) do not survive translation untouched. The departmental convention of giving the English in the body and the original Chinese in the footnotes is followed precisely so that this mediation stays visible and open to challenge, so that a reader with Chinese can see what was said and judge the rendering, rather than receiving the researcher's English as transparent. Treating translation as a reported, checkable decision rather than an invisible service fits the wider commitment of the chapter, which is to keep the points where the researcher's judgement enters the analysis open to view rather than folded silently into the result.

3.9 Research ethics

Although the data are drawn from publicly visible posts, they were written by identifiable individuals who did not consent to research use, and many concern intimate family conflict. The study is therefore governed by the Association of Internet Researchers' Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0,¹⁰⁹ and by recent guidance specific to research web scraping.¹¹⁰ Three commitments organise the ethical reasoning. The first is the AoIR principle, drawn from the guidelines' grounding in respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, that the online distinction between public and private is not a clean split. A woman who posts about family trauma to a lifestyle application has a context bound expectation of privacy that academic scrutiny can breach even when the post is technically public, so the mere public availability of data does not amount to consent to its research use.^{111 112} The second is attention to the full life of the data, from collection through analysis to dissemination, rather than to the moment of collection alone.¹¹³ The third is a recognition that scraping can run against platform terms of service and that scraped data pose distinctive reproducibility and re-identification risks, which must be weighed rather than ignored.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ aline shakti franzke, Anja Bechmann, Michael Zimmer, Charles Ess, and the Association of Internet Researchers, Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (AoIR, 2020), <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>.

¹¹⁰ Brown et al., "Web Scraping for Research".

¹¹¹ franzke et al., Ethical Guidelines 3.0.

¹¹² Brown et al., "Web Scraping for Research".

¹¹³ franzke et al., Ethical Guidelines 3.0.

¹¹⁴ Brown et al., "Web Scraping for Research".

The guiding test was one of contextual integrity: whether the flow of a woman's words from a peer facing lifestyle feed into an academic thesis honours or breaches the norms under which she shared them.¹¹⁵ Because that flow plainly shifts the audience and purpose of the original post, the burden falls on the research to minimise harm at every stage rather than to assume that public posting settles the matter. Where a graduate project of this kind sits in relation to formal ethics board review varies by institution. The design proceeds on the more demanding assumption that the absence of a formal review requirement does not lessen the substantive obligations the AoIR framework describes.¹¹⁶

Several concrete measures follow. Data were kept to a minimum, with only the fields needed for analysis retained. Author identifiers and nicknames are stripped or given pseudonyms in anything reported. Text that could identify someone is not quoted word for word. Quotable excerpts are paraphrased or lightly altered and, where possible, made hard to trace through search. URLs and access tokens are treated as sensitive and are not published. Posts that indicated an underage author were left out of the close reading. No private or friends only content was accessed. The thesis reports on aggregate patterns and de-identified illustrative cases, never on identifiable individuals, and the platform's terms of service and the ongoing legal debate over scraping are acknowledged rather than ignored.¹¹⁷

3.10 Limitations of the method

Several limitations bound the claims of this study. It draws on a single platform whose users tend to be young, female, urban, and aspirational, and is therefore not generalisable to all Chinese women or to migration discourse as a whole. Xiaohongshu also rewards polished self-presentation oriented toward success, which very likely inflates the measured positivity. For this reason, the negative and falling arc posts are treated as especially revealing. Both the search query and the dimension lexicons are built by the researcher, so a different vocabulary would yield a different set of posts and different coverage figures.

It is therefore important, even so, to be precise about what the study does and does not claim. The figures reported, the share of positive posts, the distribution of arc shapes, the coverage of each dimension, describe this set of escape themed posts as retrieved, not the views of Chinese women in general, and they are offered as a description of a discourse rather than as estimates of a population. The form of validity that matters here is accordingly interpretive and procedural: whether the

¹¹⁵ franzke et al., Ethical Guidelines 3.0.

¹¹⁶ franzke et al., Ethical Guidelines 3.0.

¹¹⁷ Brown et al., "Web Scraping for Research".

constructs are operationalised openly, whether the coding and thresholds are applied consistently, and whether the reading is disciplined by the evidence and open to being disproved.¹¹⁸ These are, in effect, the markers of qualitative quality that Tracy gathers under her “big tent” criteria: rich rigour, sincerity about the researcher’s own position, credibility through thick description and cross checking, and meaningful coherence among aims, methods, and claims, against which this design is meant to be judged.¹¹⁹ Generalisation, where it is invoked at all, is analytic rather than statistical, a claim that the narrative pattern found is intelligible beyond the immediate cases because it is anchored in a wider theoretical and cultural frame, not an inference from a representative sample to a population.

The sentiment classification is binary, collapsing ambivalence and mishandling irony, a limit built into the method,¹²⁰ which the arc analysis and close reading only partly offset. The classifier was also applied to Xiaohongshu text without a domain specific validation set. Its labels were spot checked against the researcher’s own reading, but no formal evaluation, namely accuracy, macro F1, and a confusion matrix against a hand labelled gold standard, is reported. A stratified manual validation of roughly 150 posts and comments, double annotated with an agreement coefficient, is the right next step, and the present figures should be read with that caveat. And, as noted, no inter coder reliability statistic is reported, so the coding’s consistency rests on the strict rules and the qualitative check rather than on a measured coefficient. The IP location data are rough, at the level of province or country, assigned by the platform, with a large unknown share, so any geographic and diaspora estimates are indicative rather than precise. They also locate commenters, not the women whose departures the posts narrate, and the coastal provinces that dominate are among the most populous and most active on Xiaohongshu; their prominence is therefore read as consistent with the capital argument rather than as proof of it, and as a claim about where the conversation takes place rather than about who can afford to leave. The data, being scraped, also carry the reproducibility cautions common to such material, since the platform and its rankings change over time, and a repeat of the same query at a later date would not return an identical set.¹²¹

Finally, the design is also cross sectional. It captures how escape is told at one moment, not whether the promised liberation later came about, a question that interviews or long term tracking of the kind

¹¹⁸ Braun and Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis”.

¹¹⁹ Tracy, Sarah J. “Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research.” *Qualitative inquiry* 16, no. 10 (2010): 837-851.

¹²⁰ Wang et al., “Review of Chinese Sentiment Analysis”.

¹²¹ Brown et al., “Web Scraping for Research”.

used in the qualitative literature would be better placed to answer.¹²² None of these limitations is fully removable, but the main safeguard against them is the cross checking built into the design itself, computational breadth disciplined by interpretive depth, the four dimension coding checked against the close reading, the celebratory posts read against their more ambivalent comments, so that each measure is read against the others rather than on its own, and no single method is asked to carry more weight than it can bear.

¹²² Fran Martin, *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West* (Duke University Press, 2022), a five-year longitudinal ethnography of precisely this kind.

Chapter 4, Findings I: The Escape Narrative

4.1 Quantitative overview

This chapter and the next present the analysis of the 129-post data set and its 7,195 comments and replies. The two findings chapters are organised around the analytic model set out in Chapter 2: this chapter examines the first two dimensions of the escape narrative, its motivation (Dimension A) and its tool (Dimension B), while Chapter 5 turns to capital (C), aftermath (D), and the collective negotiation of these narratives in the comment threads. The division follows the grain of the data, since A and B are the two dimensions through which the genre most consistently constitutes itself. The close readings throughout draw on the most highly circulated posts in the data, the twenty-five selected for close reading, because these are the texts that other women read, liked, and answered, and so the ones that most shaped the discourse.

Two features of the data frame everything that follows. First, then, the discourse is overwhelmingly hopeful: 99 of the 129 posts (76.7 per cent) were classified positive and only 30 (23.3 per cent) negative (Figure A.1). Departure is narrated not as misfortune but as an emancipatory project oriented toward a better life. Second, the genre is organised around the means of leaving more than around any other element: the Tool dimension appears in 106 posts (82.2 per cent), making it by some distance the most pervasive dimension, while Motivation appears in 71 (55.0 per cent) (Figure A.2). The two occur together in 55 posts, the strongest pairing in the data (Figure A.3), so that the single most common move in the genre is to name an oppression and, in the same breath, to name the route out of it.

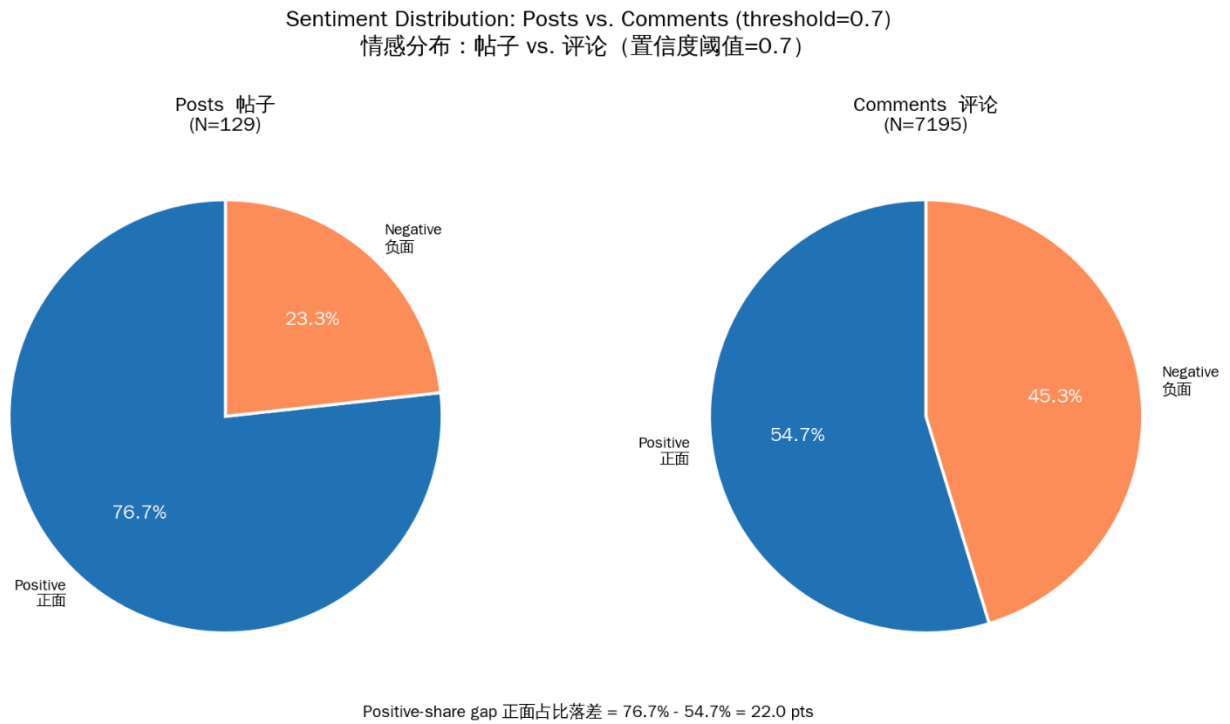


Figure A.1. Sentiment distribution of posts versus comments (positive vs. negative). Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

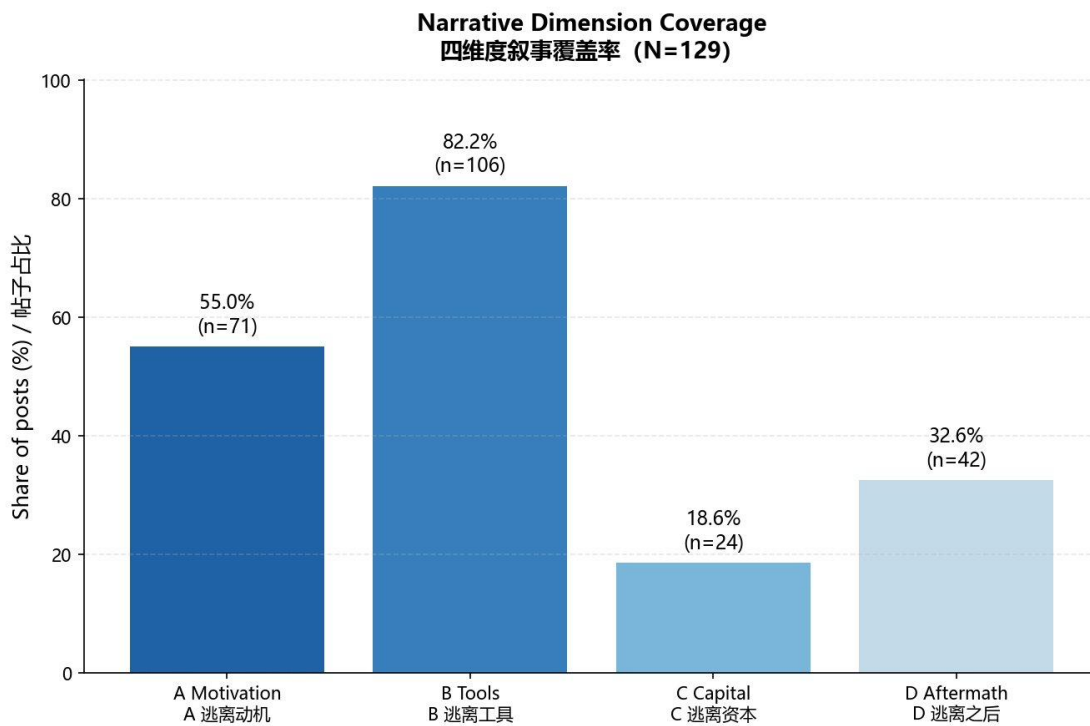


Figure A.2. Coverage of the four narrative dimensions across the 129-post corpus. Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

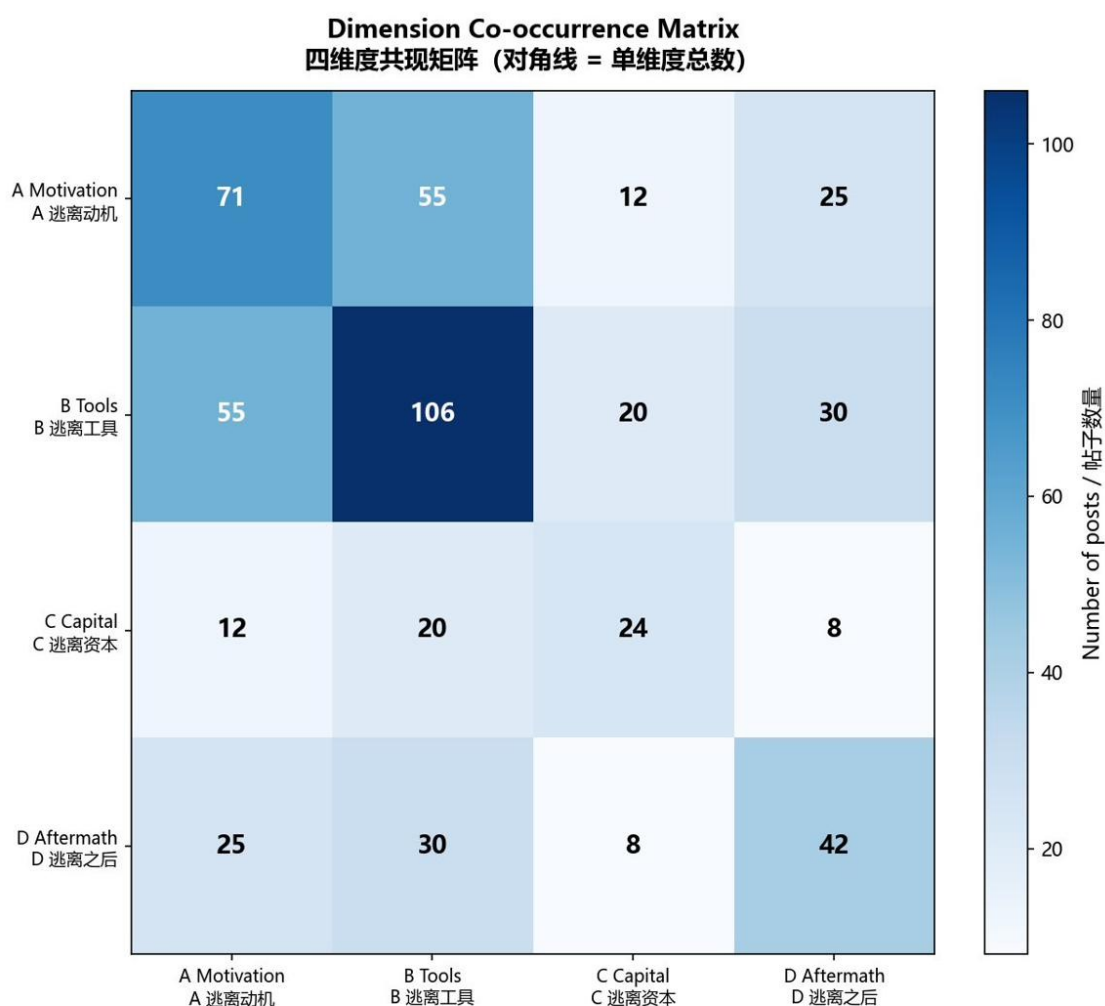


Figure A.3. Co-occurrence of the four narrative dimensions. Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

Still, it is worth being precise about what the high positivity does and does not mean. A label of “positive” records the dominant affective register of a post, not the absence of pain within it; many of the most positive posts open in difficulty and close in hope, and it is exactly this movement that the sentiment arc analysis captures and that this chapter’s readings trace. The positivity is therefore best understood not as the erasure of suffering but as its narrative resolution, the genre’s characteristic conversion of a story of constraint into a story of release. This chapter reads that conversion in three steps: first what is being fled, then the mobility through which flight is imagined, and finally the affective structure that makes the whole so relentlessly hopeful.

A word on how the evidence is read. The four dimensions and the sentiment arc described in Chapter 3 are treated here not as results to be reported but as instruments that direct interpretation: the coverage figures tell us which elements of the escape narrative recur and how often, the co-occurrence counts tell us which elements travel together, and the arc shapes tell us how feeling moves within a post. Each of these computed patterns is then tested against a close reading of the posts that most

exemplify it, and, where relevant, against the comment threads those posts provoked. The result is an account that moves continually between the distant view of the whole set of data and the close view of single texts, so that no claim about the genre rests on the numbers alone or on a handful of vivid quotations alone.

4.2 Escaping from what: motivation (Dimension A)

What the posts flee is not the family in general but the family as a gendered institution, one that allocates care, obligation, marriage, and worth differently to daughters and sons. The motivations that recur are parental control, the demand to marry and bear children, son preference, emotional neglect, and the script of the obedient “good girl.” Read through the framework developed in Chapter 2, these are not merely complaints about particular parents but instances of intergenerational ambivalence, the binding together of love and control in the parent–child tie, and of the feminist refusal Ahmed names the killjoy, the daughter who breaks the family’s affective contract by declining to be made happy on its terms.^{123 124}

The starkest statement of motivation in the data is also one of its bluntest titles: a post arguing flatly that one cannot break free of the family of origin without leaving the country.¹²⁵ Its few lines claim that the methods by which parents extract compliance are “too easy” to escape by domestic means alone.¹²⁶ The post is interesting less for its argument than for the debate it triggers, examined in Chapter 5; here it matters because it makes explicit the premise the rest of the genre assumes, that the family’s reach is such that only physical, national distance can interrupt it. Escape, in other words, is motivated by a perception of control so total that ordinary boundaries will not hold, and the imagined remedy is correspondingly extreme: not a room of one’s own but a continent of one’s own.

Where that post argues, however, others narrate. In a widely circulated post written from solo life in South Korea, the narrator addresses an apology to her mother, she does not, in fact, miss home.¹²⁷ Abroad, she writes, she has been able to tear off every label and let the “social clock” fall silent; the people around her ask whether she might get a dog for company rather than why she is still not

¹²³ Lüscher, Kurt. “Intergenerational ambivalence: Further steps in theory and research.” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (2002): 585-593.

¹²⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010).

¹²⁵ Original (Chinese): “不出国，你不可能摆脱原生家庭。” Translation: “Without going abroad, you cannot break free of your family of origin.”

¹²⁶ Original (Chinese): “他们让你妥协的方法太简单了。” Translation: “The methods they use to make you give in are all too easy.”

¹²⁷ Original (Chinese): “对不起妈妈，我其实并不想家。” Translation: “Sorry, Mum — I don’t actually miss home.”

married.¹²⁸ Most tellingly, she describes shedding the self that lived to please others whose habitual answer to everything had been “whatever’s fine.”¹²⁹ The motivation here is precisely gendered: what is escaped is the interrogation of the unmarried daughter and the trained compliance of the good girl.

This post repays a second look, because it shows with unusual clarity how the motivation to escape is bound up with a theory of the self. The narrator does not say that her family mistreated her; she says that at home she could not stop performing a self-organised around others’ approval, and that only in a place where the questions changed could that performance lapse. In Ahmed’s terms, the elsewhere is valued as the place where she can stop orienting her happiness around the family’s expectations and live, as the post puts it borrowing from Thoreau, more truthfully.¹³⁰ The good girl script she sheds, the reflexive “whatever’s fine”, is a small but exact emblem of the gendered docility the genre as a whole sets out to leave behind; the motivation is less to flee a person than to retire a role.

The control that motivates escape is rarely experienced as overt domination; far more often it arrives, as the literature on intergenerational ambivalence predicts, in the idiom of love.¹³¹ A post written from New York and titled around the impossibility, for an East Asian daughter, of escaping the family of origin by distance alone records a single message from the narrator’s father in the otherwise quiet family group chat: New York, is everything alright, your mother worries, come home.¹³² She reads the concern as control in disguise, care that carries an expectation she return, marry, and work near home.¹³³ Her reply, that there is, after all, no throne waiting for her to inherit, is met with silence in the group chat.¹³⁴ The exchange is a miniature of ambivalence as the theory describes it: the father’s message is simultaneously solicitous and controlling, and the daughter’s sardonic retort is

¹²⁸ Original (Chinese): “这里的人问我“一个人独居要不要试着养只狗”却不会问“你为什么还不结婚生孩子？”” Translation: “Here people ask me, ‘living alone, why not try keeping a dog?’ rather than ‘why aren’t you married with children yet?’”

¹²⁹ Original (Chinese): “把“都行”当口头禅的讨好型人格。” Translation: “A people-pleasing personality whose stock phrase was ‘anything’s fine.’”

¹³⁰ Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*.

¹³¹ Lüscher, “Intergenerational Ambivalence”.

¹³² Original (Chinese): “路路，纽约还好吗？你 xx 又担心你了，叫你回来了。” Translation: “Lulu, is everything alright in New York? Your mother is worrying about you again and wants you to come home.”

¹³³ Original (Chinese): “打着“爱你关心你”的旗号，其实满满都是控制。” Translation: “Under the banner of ‘loving and caring for you,’ it is in fact all control.”

¹³⁴ Original (Chinese): “回去没有皇位要继承吧。” Translation: “It is not as if there is a throne waiting for me to inherit back home.”

simultaneously a refusal and an acknowledgement that the tie still binds. The post is one of the data's negative cases, and it is doubly instructive: it shows the gendered grammar of the motivation with unusual clarity, and it already registers that distance does not sever the tie, a recognition this study returns to under the aftermath dimension in Chapter 5.

Son preference, the most explicitly gendered of the motivations, surfaces in several of the most engaged posts. A narrator who left for the United States at thirty-four describes growing up in a household where “yielding to and covering for my younger brother” was, as she puts it, the main theme of her childhood, and where she had understood early that in such a family a daughter must rely on herself to carve out a life.¹³⁵ The motivation here is not an episode of conflict but a structural position, the daughter as the one who defers, against which departure is the only available correction. A second narrator, from a mountain village in Hunan, names the same structure in harsher terms, recalling that her parents held a girl's schooling to be useless and early marriage her proper path.¹³⁶ Such posts make plain that the “family of origin” being fled is, for these narrators, inseparable from the patriarchal distribution of care and expectation within it; what is escaped is gendered subordination wearing the face of kinship.

Taken together, the motivation posts describe a remarkably consistent object of flight. It is not poverty as such, nor the family as such, but a specific gendered settlement: the daughter who must defer to a brother, marry on schedule, stay near home, and answer for her choices to a kinship network that frames its demands as love. Against that settlement the posts mobilise the affect Ahmed theorises, the killjoy's willingness to cause unhappiness by refusing the script, and they do so, crucially, without renouncing the family altogether; several narrators speak of eventual reconciliation rather than rupture.¹³⁷ The motivation, that is, is ambivalent in precisely Lüscher's sense: it seeks distance from a bond it does not entirely wish to sever.¹³⁸

The good girl script deserves separate emphasis, because it is the form in which the gendered family settlement is internalised rather than merely imposed. Across the motivation posts the daughter is figured as someone trained to be agreeable, to defer, and to want what she is supposed to want, so that the work of escape is as much about unlearning a disposition as about leaving a place. This is

¹³⁵ Original (Chinese): “在这个重男轻女的家庭里，我早就知道，得靠自己才能闯出一片天。” Translation: “In this son-preferring family, I knew long ago that I had to rely on myself to carve out a place.”

¹³⁶ Original (Chinese): “在父母看来，女孩子读书没用，早点嫁人才是正道。” Translation: “In my parents' eyes, schooling is useless for a girl and marrying early is the proper path.”

¹³⁷ Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*.

¹³⁸ Lüscher, “Intergenerational Ambivalence”.

why so many narrators describe departure as a release into a more truthful self rather than simply as a change of address: the family's power is registered as having shaped who they are, not only where they live. Ahmed's killjoy is the apt figure here precisely because she names the affective labour involved, the willingness to be the one who disappoints, who declines to perform contentment, who breaks the family's emotional contract by refusing to be made happy on its terms.¹³⁹

A distinct strand of motivation, by contrast, is emotional neglect rather than active control. Several of the most affecting posts come from narrators who were children left behind, raised by grandparents while their parents worked elsewhere, or who grew up sensing that the family's care was reserved for a son. The narrator who invites others to share how strong they have become describes herself simply as having been raised by her grandmother, with parents who did not look after her and could offer no support.¹⁴⁰ For such narrators the motivation to escape is not a reaction to suffocating closeness but to its opposite, an absence of recognition that departure is meant to convert into self reliance. The two strands, control and neglect, are not contradictory: both describe a family that fails to see the daughter as an end in herself, whether by binding her too tightly or by overlooking her entirely.

Underlying the particular grievances, control, neglect, son preference, is a single structuring pressure that recurs across the motivation posts: the gendered life course timetable. What the family demands, in post after post, is that the daughter return, marry on schedule, bear a child, and remain within reach, and it is this timetable, more than any individual cruelty, that the escape is designed to interrupt. The demand is rarely framed by the family as coercion; it is framed as love, concern, and common sense, which is what makes it so difficult to refuse and so total in its reach. The motivation to study abroad is, in this light, the motivation to step outside a schedule that would otherwise organise the whole of a woman's twenties and thirties, to buy, with distance and a degree, a suspension of the clock. This reading connects the data directly to the context set out in Chapter 2, where the marriage timetable and the figure of the "leftover woman" are examined as the social machinery the genre's narrators are reacting against.

The audience corroborates and extends these motivations in the comment threads, where the family's gendered economy is named with a bluntness the posts sometimes avoid. Beneath one motivation post a reader objects that parents are forever fond of using their own narrow thinking to cage the next

¹³⁹ Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*.

¹⁴⁰ Original (Chinese): "跟着奶奶长大，父母不管，无法托举。" Translation: "Raised by my grandmother, with parents who did not look after me and could give no support."

generation.¹⁴¹ Beneath another, a commenter recounts that her parents sold their flat and gave the proceeds to her elder brother, leaving her with barely twenty thousand yuan and a student loan to repay.¹⁴² These responses, examined more fully in section 5.3, show that the motivation to escape is not an idiosyncrasy of a few unhappy posters but a shared grievance the audience recognises instantly and elaborates with its own cases.

4.3 Studying abroad as the tool (Dimension B)

If motivation answers the question “escape from what,” the Tool dimension answers “by what means,” and its near universal presence (82.2 per cent) is the clearest formal signature of the genre. Studying abroad, and the wider vocabulary of migration and of “running” (润) that surrounds it, is not narrated as one option among many but as the route, the concrete, actionable form that liberation takes. Read through the new mobilities paradigm and through Martin’s account of overseas study as a gendered project of self-fashioning, mobility here is not mere transport but the medium through which a self is authored.^{143 144}

The vocabulary of “running” (润, a homophone borrowed to mean fleeing the country) deserves note, because it carries a charge that “studying abroad” alone does not. To “run” is to frame departure as escape rather than opportunity, as flight from an untenable situation rather than the pursuit of an advantage; its presence in the data is part of what distinguishes this genre from the conventional study abroad narrative of credential seeking and upward mobility. When the women of this set of posts reach for the language of running, they signal that the degree is the vehicle and the escape is the point, that mobility is being enlisted in the service of a project that is, at root, about the self and the family rather than the curriculum vitae. This reframing is documented in recent scholarship on runxue (润学, literally the “study of running”), the online lexicon through which young people rationalise outbound migration as a response to domestic impasse; Zhang reads it not as a neutral pursuit of opportunity but as an affectively charged refusal, at once a pessimistic disavowal of life in China and

¹⁴¹ Original (Chinese): “父母总是喜欢用自己狭隘的思想去禁锢下一代。” Translation: “Parents are always fond of using their own narrow thinking to cage the next generation.”

¹⁴² Original (Chinese): “我父母卖房子然后把钱都给了我哥，我就只有两万多。” Translation: “My parents sold the flat and gave all the money to my elder brother; I was left with just over twenty thousand yuan.”

¹⁴³ Sheller, Mimi, and John Urry. “The new mobilities paradigm.” *Environment and planning A* 38, no. 2 (2006): 207-226.

¹⁴⁴ Martin, Fran. “Mobile self-fashioning and gendered risk: Rethinking Chinese students’ motivations for overseas education.” *Globalisation, societies and education* 15, no. 5 (2017): 706-720.

a utopian hope for a meaningful escape elsewhere.¹⁴⁵ The present data set both confirms and inflects that reading: where Zhang frames runxue largely as a generational, Sinopessimist exit from a stagnant nation, the women of this study gender it, turning the language of running toward the specific project of leaving a patriarchal family.

The tool is frequently told in the register of destiny realised through will. One widely liked post takes as its premise that if you have spent your life vaguely sensing you will one day study abroad, then you almost certainly will.¹⁴⁶ The narrator recounts having her offers rescinded twice, believing she would never leave her small hometown, then quitting a secure state sector job and flying to Los Angeles.¹⁴⁷ The arc is characteristic: the tool of study abroad converts a diffuse longing into a decisive act, and the act is narrated as self authorship, the soul's desire, in the post's own phrase, as the prophet of fate. That she leaves a coveted "system" job, the very position a filial daughter is supposed to want, underlines that mobility here is enlisted against the conventional script, not in fulfilment of it. This is mobility doing exactly the work the framework predicts, turning a felt constraint into a story of agency.¹⁴⁸

The same structure recurs, at greater emotional pitch, in a post written by a twenty-eight-year-old in the second year of a PhD in the United States, framed as a letter to her eighteen-year-old self. She is, she writes, braver, stronger, and happier than she was, and the post closes on the promise that as long as one keeps walking boldly forward, there will always be new spring light ahead.¹⁴⁹ Here the tool of mobility is fully fused with the temporal structure of hope that Ahmed describes: happiness is oriented toward a future that the journey is imagined to secure.¹⁵⁰ Read as narrative identity, the post is an exemplary alternative narrative, a life retold as ascent, told against, and in deliberate departure from, the master narrative of the daughter who stays.¹⁵¹ The letter to the younger self form is itself a

¹⁴⁵ Dino Ge Zhang, "On Sinopessimism, or Junkies of Futility," *Made in China Journal* 1 (2025): 70.

¹⁴⁶ Original (Chinese): "如果你这辈子就是隐隐约约觉得你以后会出国留学, 那大概率你以后会真的是这样。" Translation: "If all your life you have vaguely sensed you will one day study abroad, then in all likelihood you really will."

¹⁴⁷ Original (Chinese): "辞掉体制内的工作, 真的飞来了洛杉矶。" Translation: "I quit my state-sector job and really did fly to Los Angeles."

¹⁴⁸ Martin, "Mobile Self-Fashioning".

¹⁴⁹ Original (Chinese): "28 岁的我更勇敢、更坚强、也更幸福。只要不断大胆往前走, 总会遇到新的明媚春光。" Translation: "At twenty-eight I am braver, stronger, and happier. As long as you keep boldly walking forward, you will always meet new bright spring light."

¹⁵⁰ Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*.

¹⁵¹ McLean, Kate C., and Moin Syed. "Personal, master, and alternative narratives: An integrative framework for understanding identity development in context." *Human Development* 58, no. 6 (2015): 318-349.

narrative identity device: it imposes coherence and progress on a life by addressing its earlier chapter from the vantage of arrival, converting contingency into destiny retold.

Mobility in the genre is also often serial and improvised rather than singular. A post inviting other women to share how strong they have become after “cutting their way out” of the family of origin offers the narrator’s own itinerary: a child left behind raised by her grandmother, with absent parents and no family backing, who opened a nail salon, left as a digital nomad bound for Malta, moved on to a year of work in France, and then went to the United States.¹⁵² The tool here is not one degree at one university but a chain of moves, each a further extension of distance from the origin; mobility has become a way of life rather than a single passage. The post’s call and response form, soliciting others’ stories of escape, also shows the genre reproducing itself, a dynamic the next chapter develops as the work of a counterpublic.

The tool is also narrated, repeatedly, in the explicit language of courage. One narrator who suspended her studies after a year of a French master’s programme insists that, whatever else she is, she is a brave child, and that her headlong temperament has opened up more possibilities for her.¹⁵³ The framing matters: by coding the act of leaving as bravery, the genre converts a decision that might be read as flight or even failure into an achievement of character, and it offers that recoding to its readers as a model. Mobility is thus not only a route out but a source of self-worth, proof, in the narrator’s telling, of a courage the family had never credited her with.

Finally, the tool is often narrated as something achieved against the grain of family support rather than with it. A post recounting how a close friend boarded a flight to Australia stresses that the friend’s family was in no position to fund her, that every cent spent since deciding to leave had come from her own part time work, and that even the move itself required a loan; the friend’s trajectory, the narrator observes, ran from self-doubt and self-denial to self-acceptance and, eventually, a reconciliation with the family.¹⁵⁴ Posts like this one begin to braid the Tool dimension into the questions of capital and aftermath that Chapter 5 takes up: the route out is real, but it is paid for, and where it leads is not yet settled.

¹⁵² Original (Chinese): “跟着奶奶长大，父母不管，无法托举。” Translation: “Raised by my grandmother, with parents who did not look after me and could give no support.”

¹⁵³ Original (Chinese): “我从来不觉得自己是一个多棒的小孩 但我真的是一个勇敢的小孩。” Translation: “I have never thought of myself as a great kid, but I really am a brave one.”

¹⁵⁴ Original (Chinese): “从质疑自己、否定自己，再到接纳自己、与家庭和解。” Translation: “From doubting and denying herself to accepting herself and reconciling with the family.”

The tool, like the motivation, is co-authored in the comments, where readers turn a single departure into a practical template. Beneath the post by the woman leaving on a modest salary, the thread becomes a workshop in method, how much to save, which countries waive tuition, how to combine study with work, so that the tool is not merely admired but transmitted. Beneath the post inviting stories of escape, a reader replies that she too left through a paid work and travel scheme to the United States, financing her own postgraduate study after her parents sold their home for her brother.¹⁵⁵ The comment threads thus do more than react; they accumulate a shared repertoire of routes, so that the Tool dimension is sustained collectively rather than authored post by post. This circulation of method is one of the clearest senses in which the genre functions as a public rather than a series of isolated confessions, a point developed in Chapter 5.

Read through Martin's account, the mobility on display is a gendered project of self-fashioning, and the abroad functions as something like a moratorium, a zone of suspension in which the ordinary timetable of the daughter's life, the schedule of marriage and childbearing and proximity to parents, is held at bay long enough for a different self to be assembled.¹⁵⁶ This is why study abroad, specifically, is such a serviceable tool: it is socially legible as ambition and self-improvement, and so it grants the daughter a sanctioned reason to leave that a bare wish for distance could not. The degree is, in this sense, both the genuine object and the alibi, a respectable form under which a more fundamental refusal can travel. The premise that study abroad is socially legible in this way is not merely assumed: Wang and Hu show that international higher education has become, for China's middle class families, a sanctioned step in what they call the "normative biography," a pathway parents actively fund precisely because it conforms to societal expectations about a young adult's life course.¹⁵⁷ The irony this set of posts exposes is that the very legitimacy of the tool is what makes it available for the opposite purpose: the same parental and social endorsement that frames study abroad as dutiful self-improvement is what lets a daughter leave under its cover, so that an act of apparent conformity carries an act of refusal beneath it.

Finally, the tool is consistently narrated within a temporal grammar of destiny and forward motion that binds Dimension B to the genre's prevailing affect. The recurring figures, the soul's desire as the prophet of fate, the bold step that will always meet new spring light, the letter from a braver future self, all convert a contingent and often precarious decision into the fulfilment of something that was

¹⁵⁵ Original (Chinese): “我也是通过带薪赴美逃离了原生家庭。” Translation: “I too escaped my family of origin through a paid work-and-travel scheme to the United States.”

¹⁵⁶ Martin, “Mobile Self-Fashioning”.

¹⁵⁷ Wang, Zhe, and Xuerui Hu. “The Normative Biography: International Higher Education Fever among China's Middle-class Families.” *The China Quarterly* 261 (2025): 146-161.

always going to happen. This retrospective inevitability is a hallmark of narrative identity: a life is made coherent by being told as a journey whose destination was implicit from the start.¹⁵⁸ It is also, as the next section argues, exactly the structure that exposes the genre to disappointment, since a future loaded with this much promise is a future that can fail to arrive.

The breadth of what counts as the “tool” is itself a finding. Although study abroad is the genre’s emblematic route, the Tool dimension in practice encompasses a wider repertoire of exits, postgraduate study, work and travel schemes, the digital nomad visa, skilled emigration, even suspending a programme to take seasonal work in another country. The narrator who left as a digital nomad bound for Malta before moving to France and then the United States exemplifies this pragmatic eclecticism: the point is not the credential but the leaving, and any institutionally sanctioned mechanism that produces distance will serve. Study abroad predominates because it is the most respectable and the most widely available of these mechanisms, but the genre treats it as one tool among several for the same project, which is why the vocabulary of “running” attaches as readily to a work visa as to a degree.

The self-authoring force of the tool is captured with particular economy by a post whose very title casts the narrator as her own parent: she recounts how, without relying on her mother and father, she sent herself abroad as soon as she finished her degree.¹⁵⁹ The phrasing is telling: to “send oneself abroad” is to occupy the position the parents in these narratives so often refuse to occupy for a daughter, becoming at once the child who leaves and the parent who funds and authorises the leaving. The tool of mobility here does double duty, severing dependence on the family while symbolically replacing the family’s withheld support with the woman’s own. It is the clearest possible statement of escape as self-making: she does not merely leave her parents; she parents herself out the door.

4.4 The affective structure of departure

Why is the genre so overwhelmingly positive? The sentiment arc analysis offers part of the answer. Of the hundred analysable posts, the rising, trauma to hope shape is the single most common, accounting for forty-five per cent (Figures A.4, A.5, and A.6). The dominant emotional form of the genre is thus ascent: a story that begins in constraint and ends in release. One qualification about the averaged picture is in order, since it bears on how the result should be visualised: the mean arc taken across all analysable posts does climb across the body of the post, but it begins already on the positive

¹⁵⁸ McLean and Syed, “Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives”.

¹⁵⁹ Original (Chinese): “我如何不靠爸妈 研究生一毕业就送自己出国。” Translation: “How I sent myself abroad as soon as I finished my master’s, without relying on my parents.”

side of neutral, because averaging together five different shapes, including the falling and flat arcs, mutes the very opening pain the rising story stages. The trauma to hope movement is far clearer in the mean arc of the rising posts alone, which begins genuinely below the neutral line and rises steeply to a high valence close; it is that subset curve, reproduced alongside the all-posts average (Figure A.4), that should be read as the visual signature of ascent. This is the formal counterpart of the A×B coupling described above, the structure of recognising an oppression and acting on it, played out across the body of a single post, and it is why so many texts can open in pain yet still be classified, on balance, as positive.

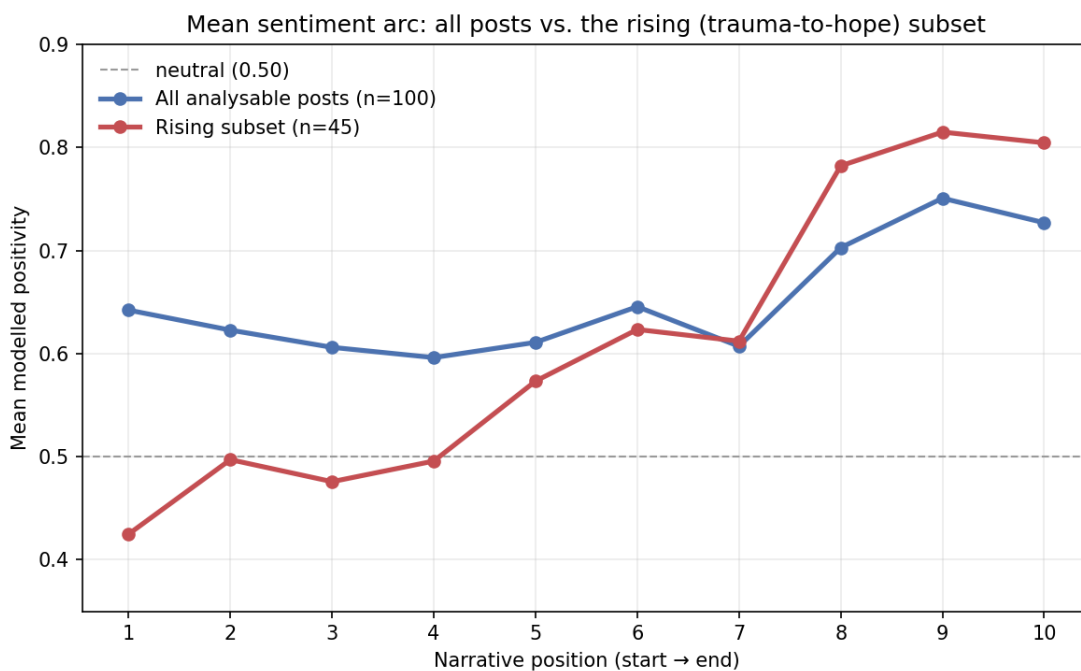


Figure A.4. Mean sentiment arc: all analysable posts ($n=100$) versus the rising, trauma-to-hope subset ($n=45$). The all-posts mean begins above the neutral line; only the rising subset begins genuinely below it. Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

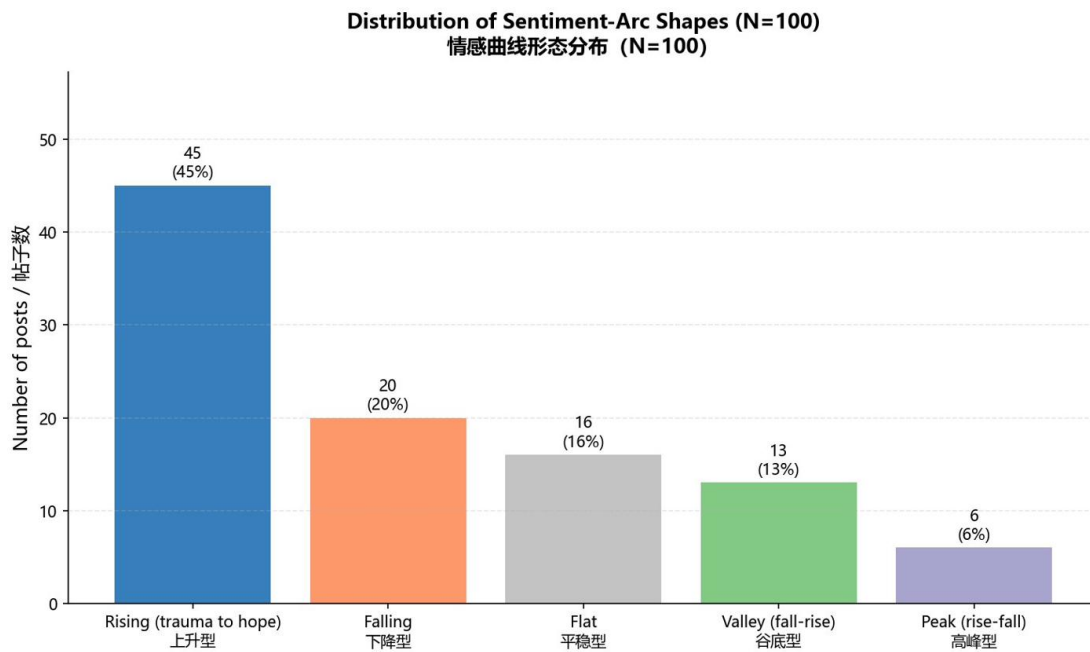


Figure A.5. Distribution of sentiment-arc shapes (rising, falling, flat, valley, peak). Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

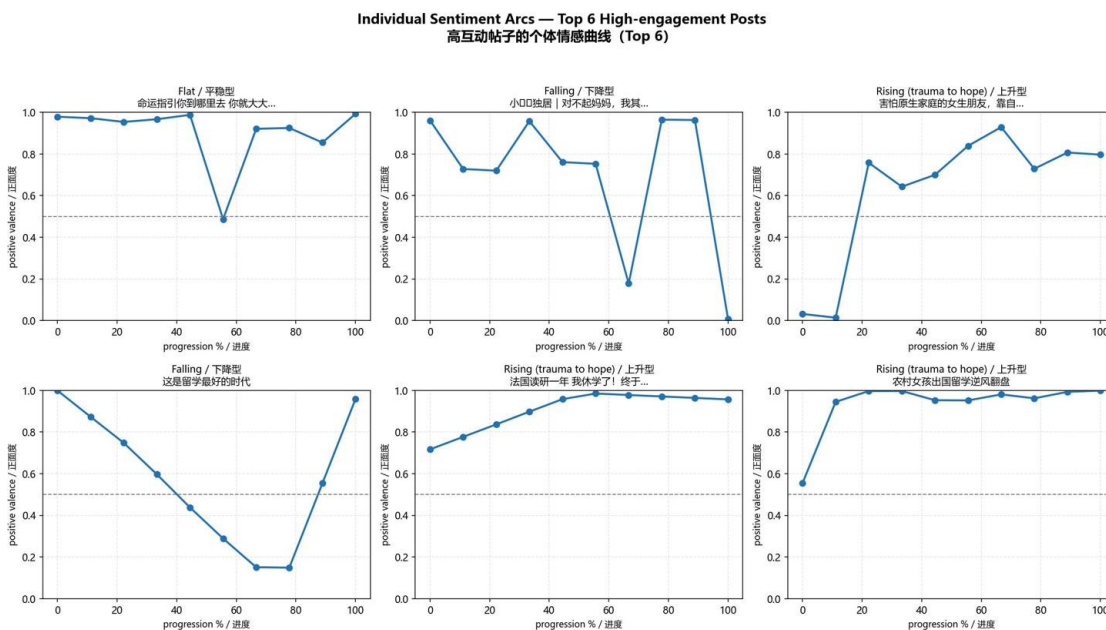


Figure A.6. Representative individual sentiment arcs. Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

The minority of non-rising arcs is just as telling. Twenty percent of posts fall, and a further thirteen percent trace a valley that drops before recovering (Figure A.5); these are the texts in which the escape does not resolve cleanly, and they cluster, as one would expect, among the data's negative cases, the New York daughter for whom distance proves insufficient, the returnees and “hollow” narrators of Chapter 5. The arc distribution thus does double duty: it confirms that the genre's prevailing form is

redemptive while flagging, in advance, the disconfirming cases that the qualitative reading is obliged to take seriously rather than treat as noise.

Read through the framework of Chapter 2, the prevailing affective structure is an instance of happiness oriented toward an object: the abroad becomes the thing whose attainment is imagined to deliver the good life, and the positive affect of the posts is the felt charge of that orientation.¹⁶⁰ The temporal grammar is consistent across the most celebratory texts, the better self is always just ahead, in the next country, the next year, the thirty-eighth birthday that will be better than the twenty-eighth, so that hope is structurally deferred onto a future the journey is meant to secure. But this same structure is what makes the genre vulnerable to disappointment, for a happiness pinned to an object can be undone if the object fails to deliver, the condition Berlant calls cruel optimism, in which the very attachment that sustains a person also wears them out.¹⁶¹ The celebratory surface of the data, in other words, is not the whole story; it is a structure of hope with a predictable fault line, and the negative cases already visible in this chapter mark where that fault line runs.

This sets the agenda for Chapter 5. If escape is, as this chapter has shown, widely motivated by gendered family pressure (Dimension A) and almost always routed through the tool of mobility (Dimension B), two questions remain that the celebratory surface tends to leave unspoken: who can actually afford to leave, and what becomes of those who do. The next chapter turns to the capital that gates the escape and the aftermath that complicates it, and then to the comment threads, where the audience affirms, qualifies, and contests the very narratives this chapter has described, and where the genre's structure of hope meets its most searching test.

The dominance of the A×B coupling repays a closer look, because it is the genre's engine. To narrate a motivation and a tool in the same post is to perform a small but complete argument: here is what is wrong, and here is what I am doing about it. Fifty-five of the 129 posts make exactly this move, more than any other combination in the data, and it is this move that gives the rising arc its content, the low valence opening supplies the motivation, the high valence close supplies the tool enacted. The genre's characteristic pleasure, for writer and reader alike, lies in the closure this coupling provides: a grievance that might otherwise sit unresolved is discharged into an action, and the action is mobility. That the third and fourth dimensions, who can pay, and what follows, are so much rarer is precisely what lets the coupling feel complete; the questions that would complicate it are, on the celebratory surface, simply not asked.

¹⁶⁰ Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*.

¹⁶¹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011).

It is worth marking what the close reading adds to the sentiment classifier here, since the two are designed to work together. The classifier can tell us that a post is, on balance, positive; it cannot tell us that the positivity is the resolution of a pain narrated earlier in the same text, nor that an apparently buoyant post harbours a concealment or a deferral that a reader notices at once. The hollow person and returnee posts examined in the next chapter are the sharpest cases, several were not classified negative, yet read as anything but triumphant, but the principle holds across the data: the numbers locate the genre's prevailing shape, and the reading recovers what that shape contains. With the escape's motivation and tool now established, and its affective fault line identified, the analysis turns to the capital that gates the journey and the aftermath that tests it.

What the abroad promises is, moreover, specifically gendered, and naming its content clarifies why the effect is so intense. The good life the posts orient toward is not wealth or status in the abstract but a cluster of freedoms coded female: release from the marriage timetable, exemption from the question of when one will have a child, autonomy over one's own space and hours, and permission to pursue a self not defined by daughterly duty. When the Korea narrator marvels that no one asks why she is not yet married, or when the doctoral student writes herself a letter promising steadily better decades, the happiness in play is the happiness of a woman released from a script written for women.¹⁶² The genre's positivity is thus not generic optimism but the particular elation of stepping outside a gendered order, which is also why its disappointments, when the order proves to follow the women abroad, cut as deep as they do.

Read at the level of narrative form, the genre constitutes a collective alternative narrative set against a powerful master narrative.¹⁶³ The master narrative is the story of the filial daughter who stays, marries, and cares for her parents in place; the alternative narrative, told and retold across these posts, is the story of the daughter who leaves in order to become herself. What makes the data sociologically interesting is that this alternative narrative is not improvised anew by each writer but is increasingly available as a readymade template, complete with its characteristic arc, its vocabulary of running, and its repertoire of tools, that women adopt, adapt, and pass on. The genre is, in effect, in the process of hardening into a counter script, a culturally legible way of narrating a female life that did not exist in this form a generation ago.

¹⁶² Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*.

¹⁶³ McLean and Syed, "Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives".

4.5 A case in close: the apology that is a manifesto

To show how motivation, tool, and affect operate together within a single text, it is worth dwelling on one post at length. Written from solo life in South Korea and addressed to the narrator's mother, it is among the most circulated motivation and tool posts in the data, and its rhetorical construction repays close attention. The post opens on the night of arrival at Incheon, the mother's voice on the phone asking whether she misses home; the narrator, staring at a steaming sweet potato in a convenience store, realises that for some people homesickness was finished long ago, at the moment of weaning.¹⁶⁴ The image is precise and unsentimental, and it sets the post's central reversal in motion: the daughter who is supposed to long for home announces, gently but unmistakably, that she does not.

The motivation (Dimension A) is then specified as a release from gendered surveillance. Borrowing a line from Thoreau, that one can live truthfully only in a faraway place where one has no kin, the narrator describes tearing off every label and silencing the "social clock"; abroad, people ask whether she might keep a dog for company rather than why she is not yet married with children.¹⁶⁵ What is fled, in other words, is not the mother as a person but the regime of questions the mother's world imposes on an unmarried daughter. The post makes this explicit in its most striking figure, in which the foreign language itself becomes the instrument of escape: learning to live in another tongue is described as a major personality correction surgery that excises the gene for docility built into the mother language.¹⁶⁶ Here the tool (Dimension B) and the motivation fuse completely: mobility is not merely a means of physical departure but the medium through which the trained, agreeable self is surgically undone and a more assertive one, able to refuse advances in formal speech, to demand an apology from a bigot, assembled in its place.¹⁶⁷

The post also stages, in miniature, the genre's quarrel with the gendered timetable examined earlier. At thirty in China, the narrator writes, a woman is a discounted item near its sell by date, whereas abroad she is still within the fresh tasting period, surrounded by classmates who quit jobs to study or

¹⁶⁴ Original (Chinese): “原来有些人的乡愁，早在断奶那刻就提前完成了。” Translation: “For some people, homesickness was completed early—at the very moment of weaning.”

¹⁶⁵ Original (Chinese): “人只有在举目无亲的远方才能够真诚地活着。” Translation: “One can live truthfully only in a faraway place where one has no kin.”

¹⁶⁶ Original (Chinese): “外语像是大型人格矫正手术，切除掉了母语自带的温顺基因。” Translation: “A foreign language is like major personality-correction surgery, excising the gene for docility that came with the mother tongue.”

¹⁶⁷ Martin, “Mobile Self-Fashioning”.

restarted their degrees, in a place seemingly free of the curse of what one ought to do at what age.¹⁶⁸ The bitter commodity metaphor names exactly the logic of the marriage timetable, the woman as a good with an expiry date, and the abroad is valued precisely as the place where that logic is suspended. The arc is the genre's signature rising shape: a low valence opening in a homesickness that is not homesickness resolves into a high valence close in self-possession.

What makes the post a manifesto rather than a mere confession is its final move, in which the language of filial transgression is turned inside out. Everything the mother sees as wilful running away, the narrator declares, is the most solemn birth certificate she has submitted to the world.¹⁶⁹ The metaphor is doing precise theoretical work: a birth certificate is the document by which a family registers a child as its own, and the narrator reclaims it to register herself, by her own authority, as a person. This is escape narrated as self-authorship in its purest form, the daughter issuing her own papers, and it is why the post resonates as it does. Read through narrative identity, it is a fully achieved alternative narrative, one that does not merely deviate from the filial master narrative but openly contests its terms, recoding the very act the master narrative would call betrayal as the act of coming into being.¹⁷⁰ The single post thus contains the whole machinery of the genre this chapter has described: a gendered motivation, mobility as the tool that undoes the trained self, the rising affective arc, and the reframing of transgression as authenticity, compressed into one woman's letter to her mother.

4.6 Summary

This chapter has established the first half of the analytic model against the data. The escape narrative is motivated, overwhelmingly, by a gendered family settlement, control, neglect, son preference, and above all the life course timetable, and it is routed, almost universally, through the tool of mobility, with study abroad as its emblem and "running" as its idiom. The two are tightly coupled: the genre's signature move is to name an oppression and an exit in a single breath, and its signature emotional form is the rising arc from family pain to hope after departure, an instance of happiness oriented toward the abroad as the object that will deliver a freer, more authentic self. Yet the same chapter has surfaced the fault line in this structure of hope, the minority of falling and valley arcs, the negative cases in which distance does not sever the tie, and so has set the questions the next chapter must

¹⁶⁸ Original (Chinese): “三十岁在国内是保质期将过的打折商品，在这里却还在新鲜赏味期。” Translation: “At thirty in China you are a discounted item near its sell-by date; here you are still within the fresh tasting period.”

¹⁶⁹ Original (Chinese): “所有你眼中的“任性出走”都是我向世界递交的最庄重的出生证明。” Translation: “Everything you see as ‘wilful running away’ is the most solemn birth certificate I have submitted to the world.”

¹⁷⁰ McLean and Syed, “Personal, Master, and Alternative Narratives”.

answer: who can actually afford this escape, what becomes of those who complete it, and how the community of women who read these stories responds to them.

Chapter 5, Findings II: Capital, Aftermath, and the Counterpublic

Where Chapter 4 examined what the escape narrative flees and the mobility through which it imagines flight, this chapter turns to the two dimensions the celebratory surface tends to leave unspoken, who can afford to leave (Dimension C) and what becomes of those who do (Dimension D), and then to the comment threads, where the audience affirms, qualifies, and contests these narratives. Together these complete the spine of the argument: an escape desired by many, afforded by few, completed by fewer, and debated by all.

5.1 Who can escape: capital (Dimension C)

Capital is the least spoken dimension of the data. It appears in just 24 of the 129 posts (18.6 per cent), fewer than one post in five, even though the economic threshold it names silently conditions the entire project (Figure A.2). This is the chapter's first finding about capital: in a genre saturated with the desire to leave and the means of leaving, the question of who can pay is conspicuously under told. Read through Bourdieu, the understatement is itself revealing: a precondition that operates most powerfully when it goes unsaid is precisely the kind of structuring constraint his account of the forms of capital was designed to expose.¹⁷¹ Two more deflationary explanations should be weighed against this reading: the silence might reflect a platform decorum in which talking about money is unfashionable, or it might be an artefact of the capital dictionary's limited coverage, a limitation acknowledged in §3.10. A robustness check speaks against the second of these: relaxing the coding rule from two keyword matches to one, which enlarges the set to 140 posts, leaves Capital the least-coded dimension by a wide margin (42.9 per cent, against 95.7 for Tool, 75.7 for Motivation, and 65.0 for Aftermath), so its low coverage is not an artefact of the two-keyword threshold. The structural interpretation is preferred here not because these alternatives are impossible but because the silence is corroborated in the qualitative close reading rather than merely inferred from keyword counts. The decisive pattern is one of distribution: when capital does surface, it tends to be named by the women who have least of it, while those who evidently possess it pass over it, so that the dimension is spoken from below rather than from the comfortable centre of the genre, exactly the asymmetry a Bourdieusian reading predicts.

For those without family backing, the escape is narrated as an explicit feat of accounting. A widely shared post by a woman earning a modest monthly salary who has decided to study in France reduces the decision to a simple equation: if the cost can be saved, if part time work is possible, and if the

¹⁷¹ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (Greenwood, 1986), 241–258.

language can be learned, then the answer is yes.¹⁷² The choice of France is not incidental: it indexes the low cost, public university route through which women of limited means make the sums work, a clear instance of capital shaping not whether one leaves but by which path. The post's tone is brisk and practical, she describes herself as a person of strong execution and hopes her drive will give others a push, and its comment thread, discussed below, fills with women reporting the same salary and the same plan, evidence that this budget conscious version of escape circulates as its own subgenre.

Where the route is more expensive, the cost is named as a weight rather than a boast. A post reflecting on spending six hundred thousand yuan from an ordinary family to study in the United Kingdom is candid about the anxiety and the sense of unworthiness the figure carries, describing study abroad as a kind of survival on a desert island.¹⁷³ Here capital is not a silent precondition but an openly acknowledged burden, and the post's affect, pride shadowed by guilt, hashtagged with "the feeling of not deserving", registers the class strain of an escape that an ordinary family can fund only at cost. Such posts are the exception that proves the rule: the women most likely to speak the language of money are those for whom money is least taken for granted.

The clearest articulations of capital come from narrators who name their class origin directly. One post by a woman who grew up in a mountain village in Hunan recounts a son preferring household in which she was treated as the overlooked daughter, in which her parents held that schooling was useless for girls, and in which she nonetheless funded four years of university through scholarships and street vending before leaving for Europe.¹⁷⁴ Another, narrating a rural childhood of hand-me-down clothes and poverty, frames her overseas trajectory as a reversal of fortune achieved against that floor.¹⁷⁵ In these accounts, capital absent from the family is substituted by the woman's own labour and academic merit, scholarships, vending, part time work, and, in a further post by a twenty-seven-year-old leaving to pursue a doctorate, three fully funded offers that convert academic capital directly into the means of departure.¹⁷⁶ Bourdieu's point is visible across these cases in negative relief:

¹⁷² Original (Chinese): "费用能存到+能兼职+语言能学会= OK。" Translation: "If the cost can be saved, part-time work is possible, and the language can be learned—then it is OK."

¹⁷³ Original (Chinese): "留学是一场孤岛求生。" Translation: "Studying abroad is a matter of survival on a desert island."

¹⁷⁴ Original (Chinese): "靠着奖学金和摆地摊度过了四年的大学时光。" Translation: "I got through four years of university on scholarships and street-vending."

¹⁷⁵ Original (Chinese): "因为穷，父母也没有钱买新衣服。" Translation: "Because we were poor, my parents had no money to buy new clothes either."

¹⁷⁶ Original (Chinese): "混申收到三个全奖 offer。" Translation: "Applying broadly, I received three fully funded offers."

those born with economic capital need not mention it, while those without it must assemble a functional equivalent, and narrate the assembling as part of the achievement.¹⁷⁷

The decisive role of family capital is occasionally stated outright, and revealingly it is stated by those analysing the field rather than confessing their own means. A post offering strategic advice on timing one's study abroad pauses to observe that family backing matters enormously, that the students who succeed are often those whose parents planned early, and that some who began at a vocational college nonetheless finished with a strong overseas degree because the family could underwrite the path.¹⁷⁸ The phrase "family backing" (托举, literally a lifting up from below) recurs across the data as the genre's own folk term for inherited capital, and its prominence in the comment threads, examined below, shows that the women themselves theorise the class structure of escape even where the posts do not. The aggregate picture is therefore one of a privilege that is unevenly distributed and only intermittently named: escape is a class stratified opportunity whose stratification the genre mostly keeps quiet about, surfacing chiefly when a narrator without capital must account for how she assembled it.

If the posts under-tell capital, the comment threads more than compensate, theorising the class structure of escape with a candour the posts often lack. Beneath the account of spending six hundred thousand yuan to study in Britain, the most liked replies turn the thread into a debate about whether such an escape is advisable at all. One seasoned commenter counsels that anyone from ordinary means who chooses the costly Anglo-American route must find local work to recoup the cost through the favourable exchange rate, rather than drifting on a take it or leave it attitude.¹⁷⁹ Others are blunter: that for a working class family studying abroad is like being sent into exile, and that with means this slender one ought not to study abroad at all.¹⁸⁰ The audience, in other words, enforces a class realism that the celebratory posts suppress, insisting that the question of who can afford to leave is not incidental to the escape but constitutive of it.

The sharpest statement of capital in the entire data set appears not in a post but in a comment, and it fuses capital with son preference in a single sentence. Replying to a post about cutting one's way out of the family, a reader recounts that her family bought her younger brother a flat outright for twenty

¹⁷⁷ Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital".

¹⁷⁸ Original (Chinese): "家庭托举太重要了。" Translation: "Family backing matters enormously."

¹⁷⁹ Original (Chinese): "家境很一般，就要想尽办法拿到本地工作。" Translation: "If your family means are very ordinary, you must do everything possible to land local work."

¹⁸⁰ Original (Chinese): "工薪家庭出国留学宛如流放。" Translation: "For a working-class family, studying abroad is like being sent into exile."

million yuan, registered in his name, while telling her there was no money; her brother's several million yuan study abroad costs could be met, but her own living expenses could not.¹⁸¹ The comment lays bare the mechanism the dimension names: economic capital in these families is not scarce in the abstract but allocated by gender, so that the daughter's escape must be self-financed precisely because the household's resources are reserved for the son. Capital and motivation, separated for analytic clarity into Dimensions C and A, are revealed in such testimony to be two faces of the same patriarchal settlement.

Capital also structures the geography of escape, sorting women into different routes by what they can pay. The recurrence of France and other continental, low tuition destinations among the budget conscious posts, set against the six-hundred-thousand-yuan Anglo-American route, is not a matter of taste but of means: the public university systems of the Continent are the path by which women without family backing make the arithmetic work, while the expensive Anglophone destinations presuppose either family wealth or a willingness to shoulder debt and recoup it through overseas work. The escape narrative thus contains, beneath its uniform language of departure, a quiet class map, one that the comment threads read fluently even where the posts do not draw it.

Capital in the genre is not only economic but academic, and the two are convertible. Where economic capital is absent, a strong academic record can substitute, opening the funded routes, scholarships and fully funded doctorates, that let women without family wealth leave on someone else's budget. The twenty-seven-year-old who reports three fully funded doctoral offers exemplifies this conversion: academic capital, accumulated through years of work and study, becomes the means of an escape her salary alone could not buy. Yet the comment threads keep even this route honest. Beneath her post, readers temper the triumph with a wry realism about whether the credential pays off, one notes that in a doctorate only the moment of the offer and the moment of graduation are truly pleasant, another that the wider world is, in any case, one vast amateur operation.¹⁸² The audience, here as elsewhere, will neither deny the achievement nor let it stand as an unqualified promise; the funded escape is real, but its payoff is held open to doubt.

5.2 Life after escape: aftermath (Dimension D)

The aftermath dimension appears in 42 posts (32.6 per cent) and splits, on close reading, into two opposed movements: reconstruction and disillusion. On the reconstruction side are the posts in which

¹⁸¹ Original (Chinese): “我弟几百万留学钱出得起，同样上学，我生活费就出不起。” Translation: “My brother's several-million-yuan study-abroad costs could be met; for the same schooling, my living expenses could not.”

¹⁸² Original (Chinese): “世界就是巨大的草台班子。” Translation: “The whole world is one big amateur operation.”

departure delivers something like the promised self, the South Korean solo dweller of Chapter 4 who sheds her people pleasing habits, the narrators who report independence, healing, and a life finally their own. On the disillusion side are the posts in which the abroad fails to deliver, and it is these that most sharply test the genre's celebratory premise. Read through Chapter 2, the split is exactly what the pairing of Berlant and Yan would predict: the promise of happiness meeting a disembedded reality in which leaving the family institution does not amount to arriving at a new social settlement.^{183 184}

The reconstruction posts are worth taking on their own terms before turning to their darker counterparts, because the genre's hope is not merely naive. One widely shared post reflects on an interview with a film actress who left Taipei for France, admiring her candour in saying that she chose France simply because she wanted to move away from her family and escape a strict environment.¹⁸⁵ The narrator's admiration is pointedly framed: in an age that praises the family as a harbour, she writes, admitting that one needs space and distance has become hard to say aloud, and she reads the actress's refusal to equate leaving with betrayal as a model of contemporary women's self-development.¹⁸⁶ The aftermath imagined here is a reconstructed self that can hold attachment and independence at once, both the harbour and the ship that sails from it. This is the genre's most articulate statement of escape as legitimate self-making rather than filial failure, and it shows that the hope the data circulates has a worked out ethical defence behind it.

The disillusion is stated most plainly in a post whose narrator calls herself a "hollow person" on whom study abroad seems to have changed little.¹⁸⁷ Eating alone in a Chinese restaurant in Spain, she finds an old song summoning a complicated homesickness, expectation laced with discomfort, and concludes that relocation has not produced the transformation it promised. This is a textbook narrative instance of cruel optimism: the object whose attainment was to remake the self leaves the self intact, and the attachment to escape persists even as it fails to pay out.¹⁸⁸ If the post sits at the edge of Berlant's concept rather than at its centre, that is because cruel optimism describes, in the first instance, an attrition the subject does not register as such, whereas here the narrator registers it precisely; the value of the post is that it makes legible, in a single voice, the disappointment the

¹⁸³ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁸⁴ Yunxiang Yan, "The Chinese Path to Individualization," *British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 3 (2010): 489–512.

¹⁸⁵ Original (Chinese): "选择法国，只是因为想要搬离家庭，逃离那种严格的环境。" Translation: "I chose France simply because I wanted to move away from my family and escape that strict environment."

¹⁸⁶ Original (Chinese): "她不将'离开'等同于'背叛'。" Translation: "She does not equate 'leaving' with 'betrayal.'"

¹⁸⁷ Original (Chinese): "留学对我这种空心人似乎也没什么改变。" Translation: "For a hollow person like me, studying abroad seems to have changed nothing either."

¹⁸⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

concept holds to be ordinarily imperceptible. The post is not, strikingly, a renunciation of the journey; the narrator does not regret leaving so much as register that leaving was not enough, which is exactly the structure of an optimism that cannot be relinquished even when it disappoints.

A second post, written a year after returning to China from the United Kingdom and classified negative, locates the disappointment in the return rather than the departure: sharing domestic space with family again has become unbearable after the autonomy of living alone abroad, where even in agitation she could find quiet and plan.¹⁸⁹ The post reveals the structural limit of escape by mobility: the family one left is still there to be returned to, and the autonomy granted abroad turns out to have been a lease rather than a purchase. The aftermath, in such cases, is not arrival but the discovery that the escape was reversible, that a degree abroad buys time and space without dissolving the relations one left.

Even the most triumphant reconstruction can carry the mark of incompleteness. The post by the thirty-four-year-old who left for the United States describes the take off as a kind of rebirth, a casting off of more than thirty years of shackles, and then discloses, almost in passing, that she has not told her parents or brother she is already in America.¹⁹⁰ The new self is built, but it is built on a concealment that keeps the family tie active in the very act of evading it; the secrecy is the ongoing labour the escape requires. This is what Yan's disembedded individualization names with precision: the individual has exited the institution without the institutional supports or social recognition that would let the exit settle into a new form of belonging.¹⁹¹ Across the aftermath posts, then, the patriarchy and the self-doubt the women sought to leave behind have a way of travelling with them; the escape is real, but its completion is partial, deferred, or quietly undone, and it is this gap between the promise and the arrival that the comment threads, to which the chapter now turns, take up most insistently.

A particularly telling feature of the aftermath, visible across both posts and comments, is that material success abroad does not buy the recognition the daughter left to seek. Beneath the post about the impossibility of escaping by distance, a commenter recounts earning a hundred thousand US dollars by twenty-five and a million by twenty-seven, only to meet, in her father, nothing but negation and

¹⁸⁹ Original (Chinese): “回国之后住在家里，跟家人共享空间特别不习惯。” Translation: “After returning to China and living at home, sharing space with family again is really hard to get used to.”

¹⁹⁰ Original (Chinese): “直到现在，我都没告诉父母和弟弟我已经在美国了。” Translation: “Even now, I have not told my parents or my brother that I am already in America.”

¹⁹¹ Yan, “Chinese Path to Individualization”.

an insistence on his own control.¹⁹² The escape was completed in every measurable sense, distance, income, independence, and yet the relation it was meant to resolve persists unchanged, the father's withholding of approval reaching across an ocean. This is disembedded individualization at its most poignant: the daughter has left the institution and prospered outside it, but the recognition that would let the departure feel like an arrival is exactly what the institution refuses to grant.¹⁹³

The aftermath is also marked by reversibility, the discovery that the family's claims can reassert themselves even after a successful exit. A commenter from the same coastal province as one narrator describes having been called home years earlier to be matched, married, and have a child, and now, after all that, planning to leave for the United States again, with the household in uproar over it.¹⁹⁴ The trajectory she describes is not a clean line out but a loop, escape, recall, compliance, and a second attempt at escape, and it captures something the celebratory posts cannot: that for many the family of origin is not left once and for all but negotiated, re-entered, and fled again. The aftermath, on this evidence, is less a destination than an ongoing condition.

The reconstruction pole of the aftermath deserves its due, lest the dimension be read as uniformly disillusioned. A substantial share of the aftermath posts narratee genuine self-transformation: the shedding of the people pleasing self, the discovery of an autonomous daily life, a healing distance from a household that had defined the narrator by her deficits. In these posts the abroad does deliver, at least in part, not the seamless rebirth the most euphoric texts promise, but a real enlargement of the space in which a self can be assembled. The point of distinguishing reconstruction from disillusion is not to tally wins against losses but to show that the aftermath is genuinely bimodal: the same tool, applied by different women in different circumstances, produces both the woman who finds herself abroad and the woman who finds that nothing has changed. What separates them is rarely the strength of the escape and often the weight of what travelled with them.

What is consistently gendered about the aftermath is that the incompleteness has a female shape. The recognition withheld is the recognition owed a daughter; the timetable that reasserts itself is the marriage and childbearing schedule; the autonomy that proves to be a lease is autonomy from a family order that allocates freedom by gender. Yan's account of disembedded individualization describes the general Chinese condition of leaving institutions without the supports that would let the exit settle,

¹⁹² Original (Chinese): “在我爸那儿全是否定，强调他的掌控感。” Translation: “With my father it was all negation, an insistence on his own sense of control.”

¹⁹³ Yan, “Chinese Path to Individualization”.

¹⁹⁴ Original (Chinese): “结完婚生完娃打算再来美国，家里闹得天翻地覆。” Translation: “Having married and had a child, I now plan to come to the United States again, and the household is in uproar over it.”

but the data shows this condition inflected by gender at every point: these women are individualizing out of a specifically patriarchal family, and what fails to arrive is specifically the standing of an autonomous female adult whom the family will recognise as such.¹⁹⁵ The cruel optimism of the genre is, in the end, the optimism that a plane ticket can purchase a recognition that the social order still withholds.¹⁹⁶

5.3 The counterpublic in the comments

The headline finding of the study lies in the gap between the posts and their audience. While 76.7 per cent of posts are positive, only 54.7 per cent of the 7,195 comments and replies are, a difference of some twenty-two points (Figure A.1). The comment section is markedly more ambivalent than the posts it responds to, and reading the threads shows why: the audience is not a passive chorus but an active public that affirms, qualifies, and contests the escape narrative. This is the comment section working as what Warner calls a counterpublic, a space constituted through the circulation of discourse that runs against a dominant public's norms, here the master narrative of the filial daughter, and that brings its members into being precisely through their participation in that circulation.¹⁹⁷ Three stances recur.

The first is affirmation, in which commenters ratify the narrator's account and supply their own parallel stories. Beneath the post by the woman planning to study in France on a modest salary, readers write that they too earn the same and have saved to go, one announcing her own departure in August, another reporting that she planned hers the previous year and leaves in a month, a third pointing to the narrator as "another walking example" that it can be done.¹⁹⁸ Affirmation of this kind is how the genre reproduces itself: each confirming comment is a small act of recruitment that turns one woman's departure into a shared template, and the thread becomes a chain of "me too" that constitutes the counterpublic as a community of the like-minded and those soon to leave.

The second stance, in turn, is qualification, in which the audience tempers the promise without rejecting it. The post by the self-described hollow person draws a thread of commenters who extend rather than dispute its disillusion: one writes that she is uncomfortable wherever she is, wanting B while in A and C while in B; another that seeking outward by changing one's environment is fruitless,

¹⁹⁵ Yan, "Chinese Path to Individualization".

¹⁹⁶ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

¹⁹⁷ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Zone Books, 2002).

¹⁹⁸ Original (Chinese): "俺也是 月薪 4k+, 攒了钱去法国留学, 今年 8 月就要出发了!" Translation: "Me too—a monthly salary of 4k+, saved up to study in France, and I leave this August!"

and that only deep emotional connection makes one feel alive; a third that abroad she misses home and at home she misses abroad, at ease in neither.¹⁹⁹ These comments do the genre's emotional accounting in public, naming the rootlessness that the celebratory posts elide and circulating it as shared knowledge; they are the counterpublic's way of marking the limits of escape from inside the community that practises it.

The third and sharpest stance is contestation, in which commenters puncture the post's framing outright. The most striking instance gathers beneath a glossy post about the comforts of life abroad, where the top replies dispute the implied contrast with China: that the amenity on display is simply a free feature of the building, that the standard of living shown is unremarkable by domestic measures, and, most pointedly, that those who grind in China do not magically get to soak in hot springs once abroad.²⁰⁰ One commenter asks how the narrator would answer the fact that some state sector jobs in China also let one leave work at five, refusing the post's neat opposition between a stifling home and a liberating abroad.²⁰¹ A comparable debate unfolds beneath the blunt claim that one cannot escape the family without leaving the country, where some commenters insist the same severance is achievable domestically by cutting contact and withholding one's address, while others reply that only going abroad truly cuts the tie.²⁰² Contestation of this kind polices the aspirational self-presentation the platform rewards, holding the escape narrative to account against other women's experience and refusing to let the genre's most flattering claims pass unchallenged.

That these three stances coexist in the same threads is the point. The counterpublic is not of one mind; it is a space in which the escape script is simultaneously propagated, tempered, and disputed, and the twenty-two point sentiment gap is the aggregate trace of that argument. The posts supply the genre's confident, redemptive version of escape; the comments supply the collective second opinion, sometimes echoing, sometimes warning, sometimes flatly disagreeing, that the posts on their own conceal.

The counterpublic is also geographically structured. The IP locations attached to the comments place 43.7 per cent of participants in mainland China and a substantial 22.0 per cent in the diaspora (20.6

¹⁹⁹ Original (Chinese): “出国了想家 在家了想出国 在哪里都过不好。” Translation: “Abroad I miss home, at home I miss being abroad—I am not at ease anywhere.”

²⁰⁰ Original (Chinese): “生活水平放到国内也是正常享受。” Translation: “This standard of living would be an unremarkable comfort in China too.”

²⁰¹ Original (Chinese): “某些体制内工作也可以 5 点下班。请问你如何应对？” Translation: “Some state-sector jobs also let you leave at five—so how do you answer that?”

²⁰² Original (Chinese): “只有出国可以隔绝这种方式。” Translation: “Only going abroad can cut off this kind of reach.”

per cent overseas and 1.4 per cent in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan), with the remainder unlabelled (Figures A.9–A.14). As noted in §3.10, these locations are partial, roughly a third of comments carry no usable location, so the proportions are best read as indicative rather than exact. The top mainland provinces are Guangdong, Shanghai, and Beijing, among the country’s most affluent, which is consistent with the capital reading of who is positioned even to contemplate study abroad, while the leading overseas locations are the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, the very destinations the posts describe. The comment section thus joins two populations: the aspiring, clustered in wealthier domestic regions, and the arrived, writing back from abroad. The most frequent content words in the comment data set, work, parents, children, study abroad, life, going abroad, and home country, map the recurring concerns of this exchange (Figures A.7 and A.8). What circulates in the threads, in short, is not only encouragement but a continual, transnational negotiation of the terms and limits of escape, conducted between those who hope to leave and those who already have.

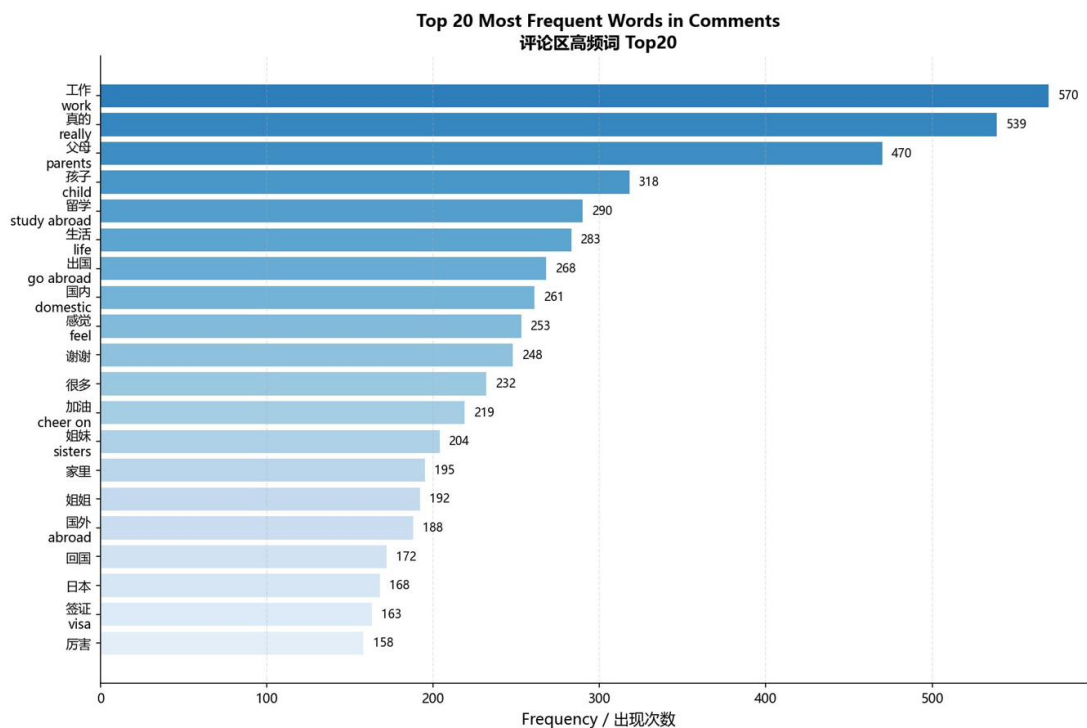


Figure A.7. Twenty most frequent content words in the comment corpus. Source: author’s analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

Figure A.8. Word cloud of the comment corpus. Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

Geographic Type Distribution of Comments & Replies (N=7195)
评论+回复地理类型分布 (N=7195)

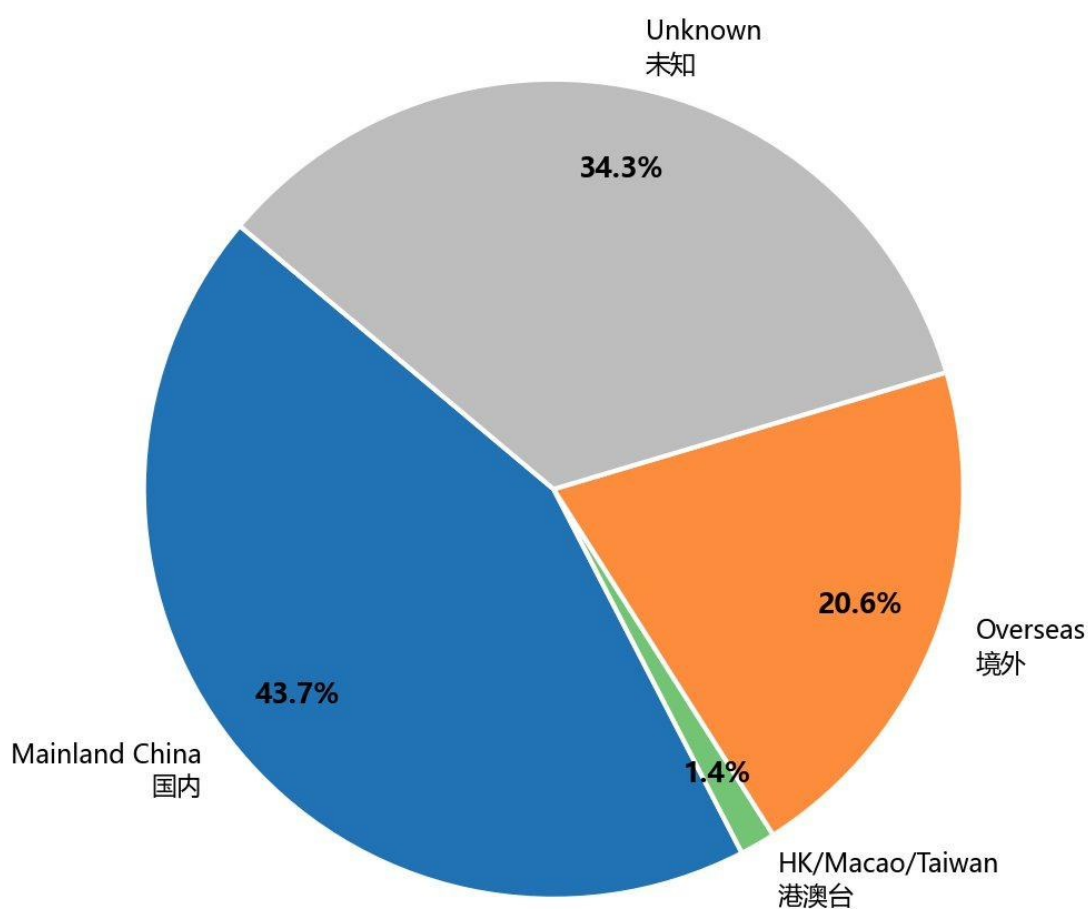


Figure A.9. Geographic type of commenters (mainland, diaspora, unlabelled). Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

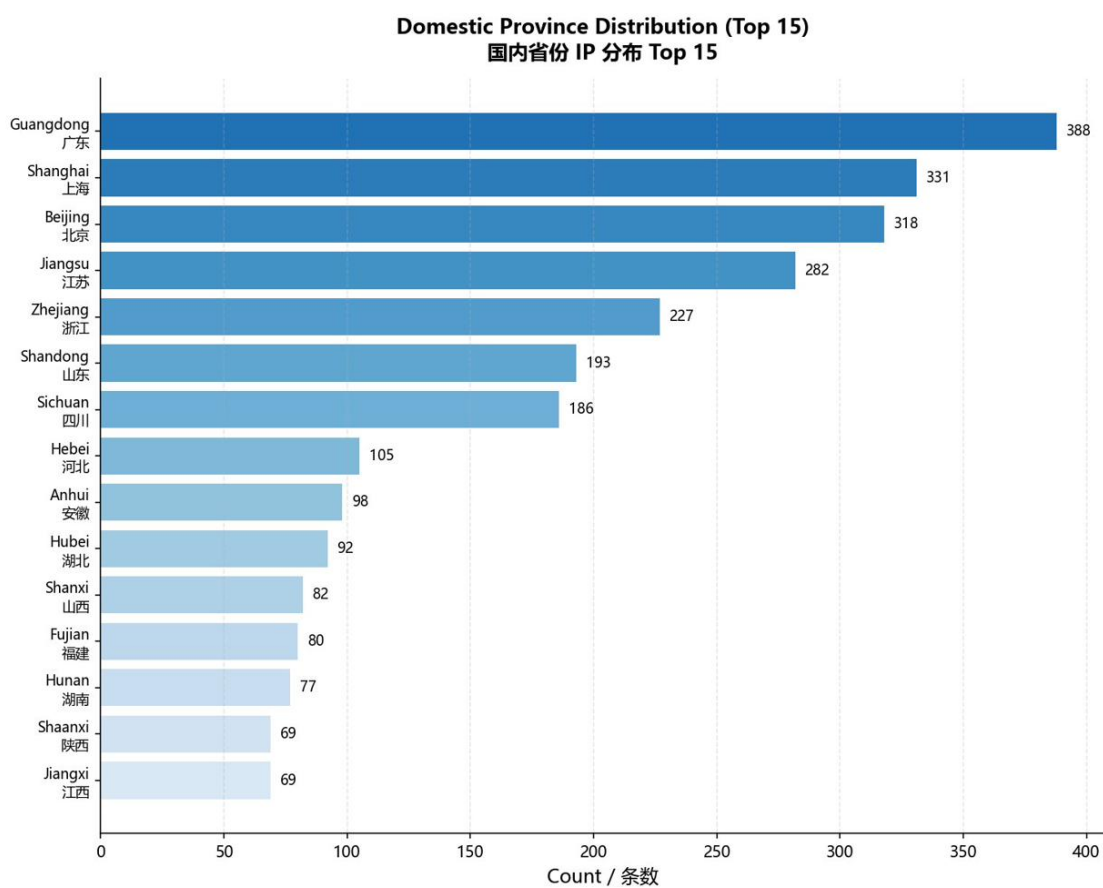


Figure A.10. Leading mainland provinces among located commenters. Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

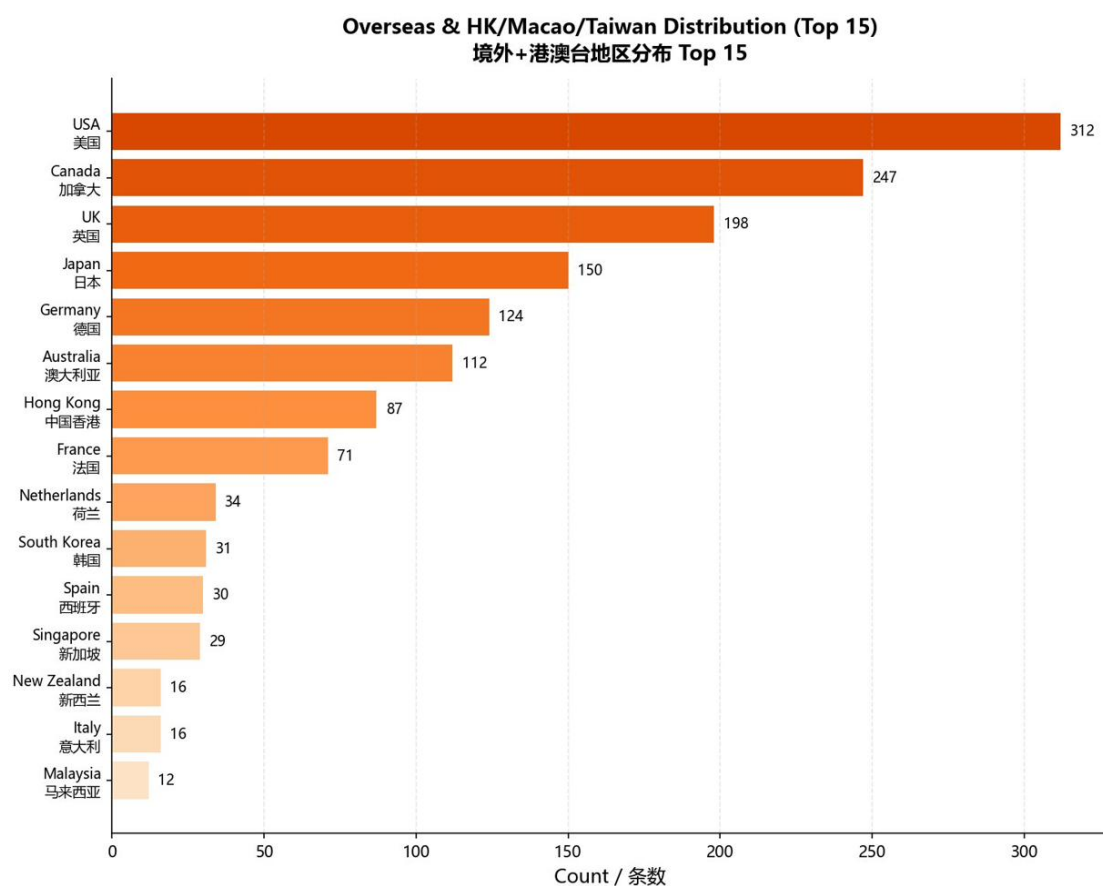


Figure A.11. Leading overseas locations among located commenters. Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

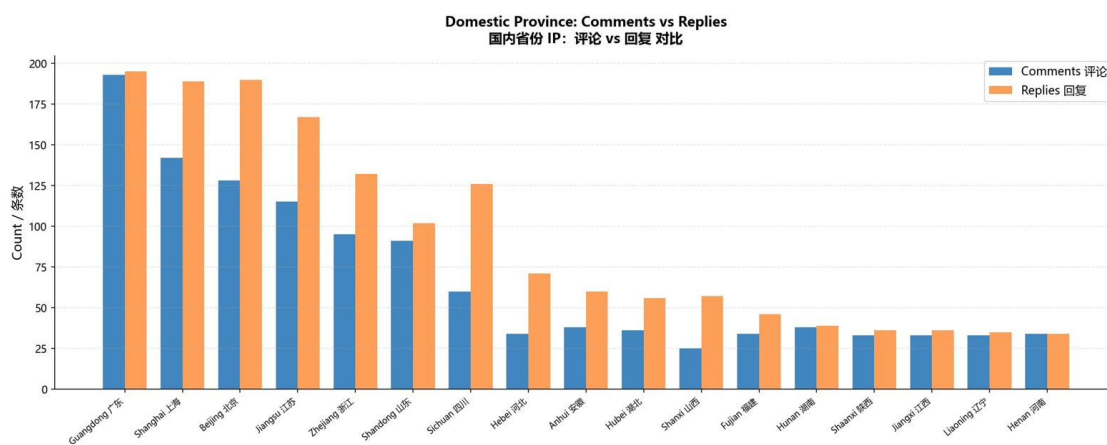


Figure A.12. Geographic distribution: first-level comments versus replies. Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

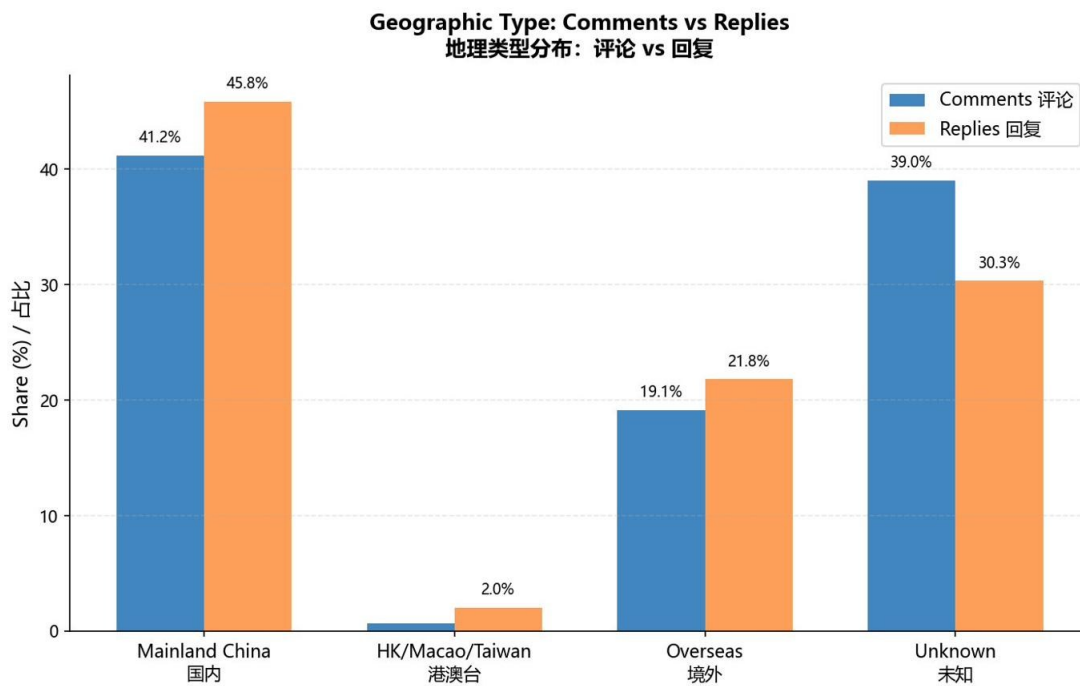


Figure A.13. Comparison of geographic type across comment levels. Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

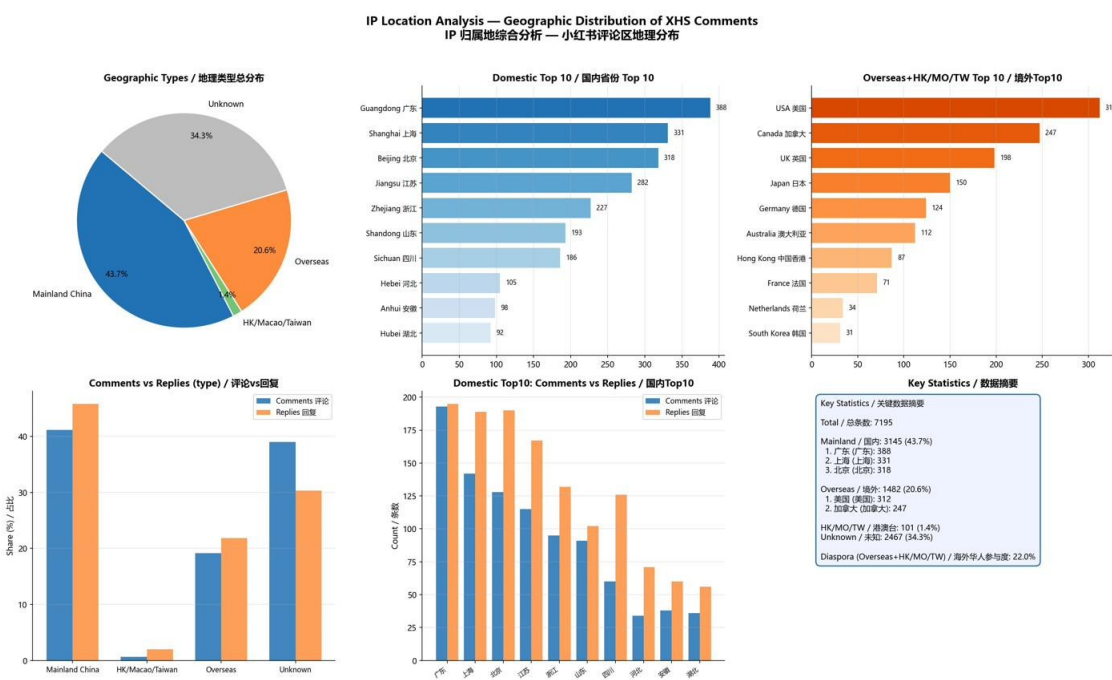


Figure A.14. Overview dashboard of the comment-geography analysis. Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

Alongside affirmation, qualification, and contestation, a fourth register runs through the threads: mutual protection. Where a post describes an improvised, informal route abroad, experienced commenters intervene with warnings, cautioning that one should never take up a private invitation to work overseas without a proper, company sponsored visa, however well one knows the person

offering it.²⁰³ Such comments treat the escape not as a fantasy to be cheered but as a risky undertaking whose dangers the community has a duty to flag, and they position the counterpublic as a space of practical safeguarding as much as of encouragement. The same thread that recruits women to the genre also tries to keep them safe within it, which is itself a form of the collective care that distinguishes a counterpublic from a mere audience.

The threads are also occasionally cross generational, and these moments are revealing. Beneath a post about a friend who funded her own way abroad, a self-identified parent writes that she had supported her own daughter's education wholeheartedly and that her daughter's success has since repaid that support, urging other parents to attend to their children's happiness rather than their compliance.²⁰⁴ The presence of such voices shows that the counterpublic is not sealed off from the world of parents it defines itself against; it is porous, and part of its work is to model, for whoever is listening, a different way of being a family. The escape narrative, circulated and contested in these threads, is in this sense also addressed back toward the very institution it flees.

What makes the comment section a counterpublic in Warner's sense, rather than simply a busy comment section, is the way these stances together constitute a self-organising public around a discourse that the dominant culture marginalises.²⁰⁵ The members of this public do not know one another; they are brought into relation purely by the circulation of escape narratives and by their address to the stranger who might be reading. Through that circulation they come to recognise themselves as a group with a shared predicament, daughters of a gendered family order, and they elaborate, in public and among strangers, a counter discourse to the filial daughter master narrative that the wider culture sustains. The twenty-two point sentiment gap is the quantitative signature of this counterpublic at work: it is the measurable distance between the official, celebratory story a woman tells about her own escape and the more guarded, more various, more honest reckoning that the collective produces when it answers her. (That this counterpublic operates on a commercial, algorithmically curated lifestyle platform, so that its solidarity is interwoven with self-branding and the threat of erasure, is a tension taken up directly in Chapter 6.)

The ambivalence of the comments is, moreover, durable rather than momentary. Tracked across the thirty-three months for which the comment data set has data, from May 2022 to March 2026, the

²⁰³ Original (Chinese): “除非正规工签办理，有公司，否则任何私人邀请都不要去。” Translation: “Unless it is a proper, company-sponsored work visa, do not take up any private invitation.”

²⁰⁴ Original (Chinese): “真心希望每个父母多关心自己的孩子，让他们幸福快乐地成长。” Translation: “I sincerely hope every parent cares more for their own children and lets them grow up happy.”

²⁰⁵ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

monthly positive share fluctuates between roughly thirty and seventy-three per cent but averages around fifty-five, almost exactly the figure for the data as a whole (Figure A.15). The gap between celebratory posts and mixed comments is therefore not an artefact of a particular moment or news cycle; it is a stable, structural feature of how this discourse is received. Whatever the month, the audience answers the genre's confidence with the same roughly even split between affirmation and doubt, which is what one would expect of a counterpublic doing ongoing, collective evaluation rather than reacting to a passing event.

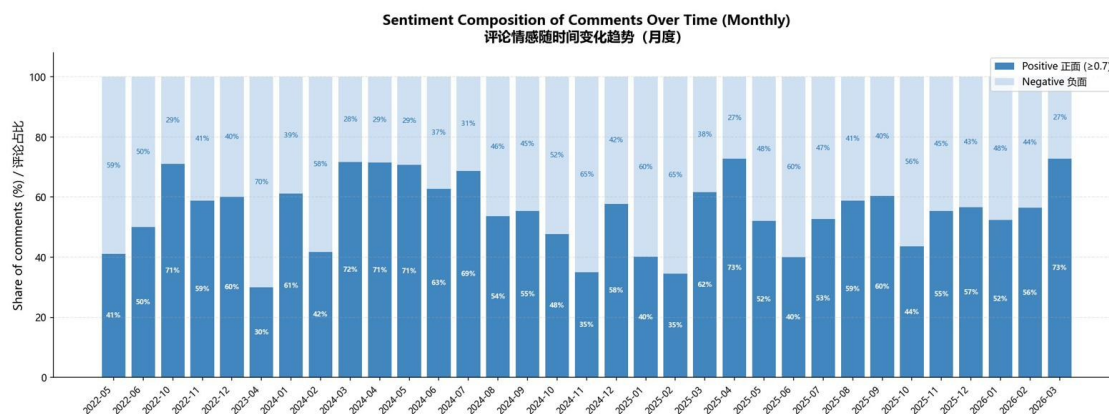


Figure A.15. Monthly positive share of comments over time (May 2022 – March 2026). Source: author's analysis of the Xiaohongshu corpus.

The vocabulary of the comment data set confirms what circulates in these threads. The most frequent content words are, in order, work, parents, child, study abroad, life, going abroad, and home country, with “cheer on” among the most common expressions of all (Figures A.7 and A.8). The prominence of “work,” ahead even of “parents” and “study abroad,” is itself a finding: the audience situates escape squarely within the material questions of employment and livelihood, not in a register of pure self-discovery. “Parents” and “child” keep the family timetable constantly in view, “home country” and “going abroad” mark the here and there axis along which the whole discourse runs, and the recurrence of “cheer on” registers the affirming, solidaristic register that, for all the contestation, remains the threads’ default key. The word frequencies, in short, sketch the counterpublic’s preoccupations with unusual clarity: work, family, mobility, and mutual encouragement.

5.4 A case in close: the most shared post and its counterpublic

The dynamics traced across this chapter, the celebratory post and the more sceptical audience, are nowhere clearer than in the single most engaged post in the data, which drew tens of thousands of likes and several thousand comments. Its title poses a deceptively simple line: my mother asked me why I do not want to go home to work. The post itself is image led, views of a comfortable apartment, the apparatus of a polished life abroad, and its written content is little more than a string of hashtags

about the state of mind of the overseas student. The escape it depicts is the aftermath in its most aspirational key: not the struggle of leaving but the arrived good life, offered as the unspoken answer to the mother's question. On the post's own surface, the answer is plain; the comforts on display are meant to make the case that going home to work would be a step down.

The comment thread, however, refuses to let the image stand, and in doing so it performs the counterpublic's work of contestation in concentrated form. The most liked replies dismantle the implied contrast between a stifling China and a liberating abroad point by point. One observes that the amenity on display is simply a free feature that comes with the apartment, not a marker of any special freedom.²⁰⁶ Another insists that the standard of living shown would be an unremarkable comfort in China too, deflating the contrast entirely.²⁰⁷ A third, more pointed still, grants the comfort but names its class condition: a pity, the commenter writes, that the vast majority of people in China cannot leave work at half past four in the first place.²⁰⁸ The escape on display, these comments insist, is not available to most of the women reading, a class realism that punctures the post's universalising glow.

Other replies contest the post's very framing of the family. Where the post implicitly casts the mother's question as an imposition, one widely liked comment turns the irony back on the narrator, sarcastically proposing that since fifty is the prime age for striving, the mother might as well keep working her state sector job and put her leftover energy to use.²⁰⁹ The joke cuts in two directions at once, mocking both the parental work ethic and the daughter's leisured self-display, and it exemplifies the comment section's refusal to take the escape narrative at its own valuation. Even the blunt scepticism, is this not simply something money can buy, what is special about it, registers the same impulse to deflate.²¹⁰

This single thread compresses the chapter's argument. The post is the escape narrative at its most confident, the aftermath as pure arrival, the good life abroad held up as plainly superior, and the

²⁰⁶ Original (Chinese): “这是公寓自带的设施，不要钱。” Translation: “This is a free amenity that comes with the apartment.”

²⁰⁷ Original (Chinese): “生活水平放到国内也是正常享受。” Translation: “This standard of living would be an unremarkable comfort in China too.”

²⁰⁸ Original (Chinese): “可惜，绝大多数国人没办法四点半下班。” Translation: “Pity that the vast majority of people in China cannot leave work at half past four.”

²⁰⁹ Original (Chinese): “50 岁正是奋斗的年纪，让妈妈继续去体制内上班发挥余热。” Translation: “Fifty is the prime age for striving—let your mum keep at her state-sector job and put her leftover energy to good use.”

²¹⁰ Original (Chinese): “这不是花钱就能享受的吗，有什么特别的？” Translation: “Isn't this just something money can buy? What is so special about it?”

comments are the counterpublic at its most searching, contesting the comparison, naming the class privilege it conceals, and puncturing the self-presentation the platform rewards. That the data's most circulated post is also one of its most contested is not a coincidence but the mechanism itself: the more a post idealises escape, the more energetically the audience tests the claim. The twenty-two point sentiment gap, in other words, is produced precisely here, in the friction between a woman's polished account of her own liberation and the collective's insistence on asking what it cost and who could afford it.²¹¹

5.5 Discussion within the findings

Reading the four dimensions and the comments together returns the analysis to the spine set out in Chapter 2. Escape is desired by many: motivation and tool, the subjects of Chapter 4, saturate the data, and the genre's dominant emotional form is the rising arc from family pain to after departure hope. But escape is afforded by few: capital is the least articulated dimension precisely because it is the most decisive, and those who name it are largely the women obliged to assemble it themselves through scholarships, savings, and labour. It is completed by fewer still: the aftermath posts split between reconstruction and a disillusion in which the abroad fails to remake the self and the family proves impossible to fully leave. And it is debated by all: the twenty-two point gap between celebratory posts and ambivalent comments marks a counterpublic that circulates the escape script and simultaneously contests its terms.

Taken together, these findings describe escape as at once gendered, class stratified, affectively charged, and collectively negotiated. The promise of happiness oriented toward the abroad meets the disembedded reality of an individualization without arrival, and it does so in public, on a platform where other women affirm, qualify, and puncture the promise in real time.^{212 213 214} The escape narrative, on this evidence, is neither the simple emancipation its most celebratory instances proclaim nor the mere illusion its harshest critics in the comments allege; it is a structure of hope, unevenly available and incompletely realised, that a community of women builds and tests together. The next chapter develops the implications of this account, escape as cruel optimism, individualization without arrival, and the platform as feminist counterpublic, and returns explicitly to the study's research questions.

²¹¹ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

²¹² Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010).

²¹³ Yan, "Chinese Path to Individualization".

²¹⁴ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

These findings allow the study's third research question, how the comments affirm, complicate, or contest the escape narratives, to be answered directly. They do all three at once, and in roughly that order of frequency: the prevailing response is affirmation and the supply of parallel stories, which reproduces the genre; a substantial secondary current qualifies the promise, naming the rootlessness and the unfinished business the posts elide; and a vocal minority contests the framing outright, policing aspirational self-presentation and disputing the class terms of escape. The aggregate effect is neither endorsement nor refutation but negotiation, a public working out, in real time, what escape is worth and for whom. This is why the comment threads are not an appendage to the analysis but central to it: they are where the escape narrative stops being one woman's story and becomes a collective project, held up to the scrutiny of the very people most likely to attempt it themselves.

The remaining research questions can be answered in the same spirit, though their fuller development belongs to Chapter 6. To the first, from what, and toward what, do these women narrate escape, the findings answer: from a gendered family settlement of control, neglect, son preference, and the marriage timetable, and toward an autonomous, self-authored life imagined as available abroad. To the second, what role capital plays, they answer that economic and academic capital are the decisive, least spoken gatekeepers, sorting women into different routes and, for those without family wealth, demanding that the means of escape be assembled through their own labour. And to the fourth, what the case reveals about gender, family, and individualization in contemporary China, they answer that it shows individualization proceeding along a recognisably Chinese and unmistakably gendered path: daughters exiting a patriarchal family without arriving at a settled new belonging, pursuing through transnational mobility a recognition the social order still withholds, and doing so collectively, in a digital counterpublic that circulates the escape script even as it contests its terms. Chapter 6 develops these answers into the study's central claims.

Chapter 6, Discussion

Chapters 4 and 5 established what the escape narrative flees, the mobility through which it imagines flight, the capital that gates it, the aftermath that complicates it, and the comment threads in which it is collectively negotiated. This chapter now steps back from the coding sheet to ask what the case means. It reads the four dimensions, namely Motivation (A), Tools (B), Capital (C, present in just 18.6 per cent of posts), and Aftermath (D), together with the gap in sentiment between posts and comments, through the apparatus assembled in Chapter 2. The argument is that the escape these women tell is shadowed by the structure Berlant calls cruel optimism, an attachment to departure as the object that promises a liveable life, in which clinging to that object can reproduce some of the very conditions it was meant to undo. This is the genre's fault line rather than its universal condition. It surfaces in the cases that do not fit, the non-rising ones, and the counterpublic of the comments is where the community collectively names it. Four linked claims follow: escape as cruel optimism (6.1), individualization without arrival (6.2), the platform as feminist counterpublic (6.3), and mobility as a privilege stratified by class (6.4). The chapter then answers the four research questions directly (6.5). So as not to repeat the close readings of Chapters 4 and 5, the discussion draws throughout on a different set of posts and comments from the same data.

6.1 Escape as cruel optimism

The most striking quantitative result of this study is also its most deceptively cheerful. Of the 129 posts, 99 (76.7 per cent) register as positive, and the mean narrative arc rises across the body of the post. Read on the surface, this is a literature of triumph. The task here is to resist that reading without dismissing it, because the women's happiness is real and worth taking seriously. It is; however, a happiness oriented toward an object in Sara Ahmed's sense, a happiness imagined as something that arrives once one is near the right thing, here the foreign elsewhere.²¹⁵ The 77 per cent is not evidence that escape works. It is evidence of how powerfully escape is invested as the thing that will make a life work. One post makes the object literal, calling permanent residency abroad the very ticket out of the family of origin and confessing that the moment the document came through brought the relief of finally having one place that belonged to her alone.²¹⁶ Another, written from Germany, distils the feeling to its purest form. Having left, the narrator says, she can at last breath and live freely, and any

²¹⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 21–49.

²¹⁶ Original (Chinese): “拿到 pr 那一刻又觉得长吁一口气……至少有一个地方属于我，我可以自己呆着。” Translation: “The moment the PR came through I could breathe out at last—at least there is one place that belongs to me, where I can be on my own.”

dissatisfaction abroad is a ten thousandth of what the family inflicted.²¹⁷ The object is loaded with the whole weight of a future.

Here Lauren Berlant's concept becomes indispensable. For Berlant, an attachment turns cruel not when its object is simply bad, but when the object a subject reaches toward to secure her flourishing is itself an obstacle to it, and yet cannot be let go, because letting it go would mean giving up the capacity to imagine a better life at all.²¹⁸ Studying abroad, as it circulates on Xiaohongshu, is exactly such a cluster of promises: distance from a controlling family, exemption from the marriage timetable, relief from involution, and the recovery of a "true" self. The promise is what makes the present endurable. What makes the optimism cruel rather than merely hopeful shows up where the object is attained but the flourishing is not. A self-described rural girl who "stormed America" writes that she is now busy surviving rather than living, stranded at the bottom of the economic ladder by tuition she cannot meet and a field of study she did not choose, no longer sure what all the striving is for.²¹⁹ The escape was completed in every measurable sense, and yet it delivered subsistence, not liberation. A second narrator, who landed a job after a UK master's and chose to stay, names the cost in a single phrase. She "found work and ended up an orphan," her father using financial cut offs and emotional blackmail to punish her refusal to come home.²²⁰ In both cases the attachment persists even as it fails to pay out, which is the structure Berlant names. A commenter beneath one such post puts the cruelty more sharply than any theorist. You only look as if you walked out, she writes; you are still a puppet, and somehow, they still hold the remote.²²¹ The rising arc, in this light, is less a record of arrival than a device for keeping the promise alive. The post must end on hope, because hope is the point.

6.2 Individualization without arrival

If 6.1 explains the form of feeling the escape takes, this section explains its social structure. The narratives are, by definition, individualizing. Each is a first-person account of one woman pulling

²¹⁷ Original (Chinese): "逃离了原生家庭, 终于感觉自己在自由的呼吸和自由的活着了.....比不上原生家庭折磨的万分之一。" Translation: "Having escaped my family of origin, I can finally breathe and live freely; nothing here compares to a ten-thousandth of what the family put me through."

²¹⁸ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 1–2, 24.

²¹⁹ Original (Chinese): "最近在忙着生存, 是的, 是生存而不是生活.....被赤裸裸地困在了最底层。" Translation: "Lately I am busy surviving—yes, surviving, not living—nakedly stranded at the very bottom."

²²⁰ Original (Chinese, title): "英硕找到工作 结果变成孤儿。" Translation: "Found work after a UK master's—and ended up an orphan."

²²¹ Original (Chinese): "你看似走出去了, 还是父母手里的木偶。怎么他们有遥控器啊。" Translation: "You only look as if you got out; you are still a puppet in your parents' hands—how is it they still have the remote?"

herself out of family and nation by her own initiative. This is individualization in Ulrich Beck's sense, the compulsion to author one's own biography outside inherited bonds of family, origin, and class.²²² But Beck's European model assumed a welfare state and a set of public institutions into which the disembedded individual could reembed. The Chinese case, as Yan Yunxiang argues, follows a different path. Individuals are pushed out of the socialist collective and the patriarchal family without a strong public infrastructure to receive them. The result is a disembedded individualization: disembedding without reembedding, individualization without the individualism, rights, and security that underwrote it in the West.²²³ Chang Kyung-Sup makes the parallel point for East Asia as a whole. Under "compressed modernity" the family is overloaded as the container of social risk, and individualization proceeds "without individualism" as its cultural ground.²²⁴

The data give this abstraction a concrete shape, and the as yet unused posts make it unusually clear. The grievance that drives departure is often the family understood as an instrument rather than a bond. One narrator who fled to Europe at thirty-three lists a childhood in which even her university major, her job location, and her choice of partner all had to stay in province, and concludes that if raising a child is merely insurance against old age, then parental love is not love but an exchange.²²⁵ This is precisely the institution Yan describes, one the individual must exit because it offers obligation without recognition. Yet the exit does not resolve into a new belonging. The same narrator, like several others, has not even told her parents that she has already left the country, so she sustains the family tie through the very concealment meant to evade it.²²⁶ More tellingly still, departure does not cut the material claim. A woman who fled an openly son preferring household, told outright that flats are bought for sons, not daughters, finds that even after moving from Japan to Australia her salary

²²² Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences* (SAGE, 2002), 22–29.

²²³ Yunxiang Yan, "The Chinese Path to Individualization," *British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 3 (2010): 489–512; and Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society* (Berg, 2009).

²²⁴ Chang Kyung-Sup, "Individualization Without Individualism: Compressed Modernity and Obfuscated Family Crisis," in *Transformation of the Intimate and the Public in Asian Modernity*, ed. Emiko Ochiai and Leo Aoi Hosoya (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 37–62.

²²⁵ Original (Chinese): "高考志愿不能填外省, 工作不能外省, 甚至找女朋友都不能外省……如果养儿就是为了防老……那是交换。" Translation: "I could not choose a university, a job, or even a partner outside the province ... if raising a child is only insurance against old age ... then it is an exchange."

²²⁶ Original (Chinese): "到目前都没有告诉父母我已经出国。" Translation: "To this day I have not told my parents I have already left the country."

still drains homeward in remittances, renovation money, and gifts for a brother's children.²²⁷ She has left the institution yet remains inside its economy. This is disembedded individualization written as autobiography. The condition is doubled by the discovery that belonging fails to arrive on the far side either. A narrator in Germany admits she never expected to assimilate and even enjoys her solitude, yet on holidays she envies the locals their lifelong friends and full tables.²²⁸ Leaving the family does not produce arrival anywhere. It produces a self-suspended between two places, embedded in neither. The comment threads name the residue exactly, with one reader observing that once you have lived independently it becomes almost impossible to accept being controlled again.²²⁹

It is essential to add that this is a gendered individualization, and here the study extends Yan rather than merely applying him. The biography being exited is patriarchal at every point. The major and partner controlled in province are a daughter's; the flat withheld is a daughter's; the marriage timetable that reasserts itself is a woman's. Even the married narrators individualize against a specifically female script. One woman approaching thirty frames the chief obstacle to leaving as the pull of an already formed family, a tie that falls on wives in a way it does not on husbands.²³⁰ What fails to arrive, then, is not generic adult autonomy but the standing of an autonomous female adult whom the family will recognise as such. Two qualifications keep the account honest. First, individualization is the deeper category and mobility only its most visible tool. One narrator achieves the same exit without leaving. She quietly turns an internship into a permanent job, drops the study abroad plan her mother had scripted, and secures the financial independence that lets her refuse, to her mother's fury.²³¹ Second, the disembedding is not always a clean break. Some narrators reach a reconciliation at a distance, and a commenter captures its ethic with great economy: my mother loves me and I love her, she writes, but our love is not a fetter.²³² The aftermath, in short, splits in two. The

²²⁷ Original (Chinese): “一发工资不是在还债就是在补贴家里……谁家会给女儿买房子啊，都是给儿子买的。” Translation: “Every payday goes to debt or to subsidising the family ... no family buys a flat for a daughter, only for sons.”

²²⁸ Original (Chinese): “我从来没有想过融入，也很享受一定程度的孤独，但逢年过节我还是很羡慕德国人。” Translation: “I never expected to assimilate and I do enjoy a degree of solitude, yet at the holidays I still envy the Germans.”

²²⁹ Original (Chinese): “独立过就很难再接受被别人掌控了。” Translation: “Once you have been independent it is hard to accept being controlled again.”

²³⁰ Original (Chinese): “已婚后离开家庭出国留学的最大阻碍……可能是对幸福家庭的牵绊。” Translation: “After marrying, the greatest obstacle to leaving for study abroad is perhaps the pull of one's own happy family.”

²³¹ Original (Chinese): “放弃留学我经济独立了……如我所料，她暴跳如雷。” Translation: “I gave up study abroad and became financially independent ... as I expected, she flew into a rage.”

²³² Original (Chinese): “我妈妈爱我，我也很爱我妈妈，但我们的爱不是羁绊。” Translation: “My mother loves me and I love her, but our love is not a fetter.”

same tool yields both the woman who builds a self abroad and the woman who finds the family order has travelled with her, and what separates them is rarely the strength of the escape but the weight of what came along.

6.3 The platform as feminist counterpublic

The clearest empirical signature of this study is the gap between the posts and their comments. Posts are 76.7 per cent positive, while the 7,195 comments and replies are only 54.7 per cent, a swing of some twenty-two points toward ambivalence and dispute. Where the original posters narrate, the audience negotiates, and the gap is best read through Michael Warner's theory of counterpublics. A counterpublic, for Warner, is a relation among strangers formed through the circulation of discourse that runs against a dominant public's norms, here the master narrative of the filial daughter, and that brings its members into being precisely through their taking part in that circulation.²³³ The Xiaohongshu comment sections work in exactly this way, and three of the as yet unused threads show the mechanism clearly.

First, the counterpublic recruits. A high school senior in Shanghai, not yet able to leave and without parental support, posts not a story but a request: help me plan a departure of at least a year, in any form, addressing strangers as the people who will know.²³⁴ The reply is method. Under a post insisting that what most women lack is not information but resolve, the narrator pins a do it yourself guide to the European budget route, turning one woman's exit into a template others can use.²³⁵ This is how the genre reproduces itself, with each thread building up a shared store of routes rather than a series of isolated confessions. Second, the counterpublic recognises itself as a group. A narrator on a Dutch gap year notes that nearly every Chinese friend asks the same question, "what did your parents think?", and reads the repetition as proof that her choice falls outside the normative track, that a daughter with savings and a plan still cannot expect family support.²³⁶ In naming the shared predicament, the thread does the identity work Warner describes: scattered women come to see themselves as daughters of

²³³ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Zone Books, 2002), 56–63, 117–124.

²³⁴ Original (Chinese): “父母不支持留学……希望能通过留学或者其他方式进行至少以年单位的逃离……可以提供一些消息或者建议吗。” Translation: “My parents do not support study abroad ... I hope to escape for at least a year, by study abroad or some other means ... can you offer any information or advice?”

²³⁵ Original (Chinese): “大部分人，缺少的不是信息，而是一种决心……DIY 欧陆留学攻略放在图片里了。” Translation: “What most people lack is not information but resolve ... my DIY guide to studying in continental Europe is in the images.”

²³⁶ Original (Chinese): “几乎每个中国朋友都问过我……说明我的选择不合乎常人的轨迹。” Translation: “Almost every Chinese friend has asked me [what my parents thought] ... which shows my choice falls outside the normal track.”

one gendered order. Third, and most pointedly, the counterpublic is openly feminist. One narrator reports that “escaping successfully” let her do things she never dared, dress as she likes and run a women’s account, and that her feminist posting was repeatedly taken down by misogynist users, yet the half year of trying has outweighed her previous twenty-three years.²³⁷ Here the counterpublic defines itself against not only the family but a hostile dominant public, and the censorship she records marks the boundary Warner’s concept predicts.

The negativity in the comments is therefore not the opposite of the posts’ optimism but its necessary complement. The poster supplies the dream in its most emotionally complete form, while the commenters supply the friction the dream leaves out. The contestation can be merciless. Beneath an account of leaving without telling one’s parents, a reader recasts the family as an extraction machine, warning that the parents will not worry whether their “blood bag” is well, only that it has run away.²³⁸ It can be a deflating quip: the ones who get homesick, another writes, are simply the ones whose families were happy.²³⁹ And it can enforce a class realism the celebratory posts suppress, with one commenter judging flatly that with means this slender one ought not study abroad at all,²⁴⁰ and another advising that the migration window will reopen in a few years and the smart move is to prepare now.²⁴¹ This is the feminist killjoy in collective form. The audience interrupts the happy narrative to ask who paid, what follows, and for whom the freedom is available.²⁴² The make-up of the audience supports the reading. After correction, mainland China accounts for 43.7 per cent of comments, overseas locations for 20.6 per cent, and Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan for 1.4 per cent, a diaspora participation of 22 per cent. The leading domestic provinces are Guangdong, Shanghai, and Beijing, and the leading overseas origins are the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. The counterpublic is cross border in its make up. Those who have arrived advise and disabuse those still hoping to leave, and the script is revised in transit. This is also where a tension internal to Chinese

²³⁷ Original (Chinese): “出逃成功后我尝试了很多以前不敢做的事情，比如……做女性博主……这半年的尝试已经比我过去 23 年活的都精彩。” Translation: “After escaping I tried things I never dared—running a women’s account, for one ... these six months have been richer than my previous twenty-three years.”

²³⁸ Original (Chinese): “他们知道后只会担心自己的血包跑了，不会担心血包在美国好不好。” Translation: “They will only worry that their blood-bag has run off, not whether the blood-bag is doing well in America.”

²³⁹ Original (Chinese): “想家的都是原生家庭很幸福的孩子。” Translation: “The ones who get homesick are the ones whose families were happy.”

²⁴⁰ Original (Chinese): “这种条件就不该留学吧……” Translation: “With means like these one really should not study abroad.”

²⁴¹ Original (Chinese): “现在做准备……3-4 年后恰恰会是加拿大最容易移民的窗口期。” Translation: “Prepare now ... in three or four years it will be exactly the easiest window to migrate to Canada.”

²⁴² Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 50–87.

digital feminism has to be registered rather than resolved. The escape told here is, in its dominant form, an individual solution to a structural problem, the signature move of what scholars call neoliberal feminism, in which emancipation is recast as personal exit rather than collective transformation.²⁴³ And yet, in the very act of collectively pricing, qualifying, and contesting the escape script, the women produce something that goes beyond individual self-optimisation: a shared, critical, mutual aid discourse about the limits of escape. The platform circulates the individualized dream and, in the same motion, opens it to collective critique. The sentiment gap is the measurable trace of the two existing side by side.

6.4 Mobility, capital, and inequality

The fourth argument concerns who is allowed to perform this escape at all. The mobilities paradigm reminds us that movement is never socially neutral. The freedom to move is a stratified resource, and every celebrated mobility implies a matching immobility for those who cannot move.²⁴⁴ Studying abroad is among the most capital-intensive forms of mobility available to a young person, and Capital is the lowest coverage dimension in the entire study at 18.6 per cent. Escape is desired by many but priced by few. Read through Bourdieu, the silence is itself telling. A precondition that works most powerfully when left unspoken is exactly the kind of structuring constraint his account of the forms of capital was built to expose.²⁴⁵ The most articulate statement of this in the as yet unused data comes, tellingly, not from a confession of means but from a woman analysing the field through popular culture. Reading the television drama *Ode to Joy*, she maps its characters onto a class ladder of escape. The wealthy can buy their way out of an unwanted family atmosphere with money and resources, while the working-class figure is bound by family and circumstance and cannot escape the drag of her origins at all.²⁴⁶ The post theorises, in the genre's own idiom, exactly what the coding dimension measures: escape is an opportunity stratified by class, and the genre mostly keeps that stratification quiet.

²⁴³ Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–20.

²⁴⁴ Sheller, Mimi, and John Urry. "The new mobilities paradigm." *Environment and planning A* 38, no. 2 (2006): 207–226.

²⁴⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (Greenwood, 1986), 241–258.

²⁴⁶ Original (Chinese): "安迪 / 曲筱绡 (上层)可以用金钱与资源逃离不喜欢的家庭氛围.....樊胜美 (底层)逃不开原生家庭的拖累。" Translation: "Andy and Qu Xiaoxiao (the upper class) ... can use money and resources to escape a family atmosphere they dislike ... Fan Shengmei (the bottom) ... cannot escape the drag of her family of origin."

When capital does surface, it tends to be named by the women who have least of it, while those who clearly have it pass over it, which is exactly the asymmetry a Bourdieusian reading predicts. The rural narrator stranded at the economic bottom abroad names the threshold by failing to clear it. The daughter in a son preferring family names it through the flat bought for her brother and refused to her. Cultural capital works alongside the economic: the command of English, the bureaucratic skill to manage applications and visas, and the dispositions that make the foreign university imaginable as a destination for oneself. The genre even has a folk term for inherited advantage, *tuoju* (托举), a “lifting up from below.” The rare posts that bring it to the front tend to come from the two poles: the woman who must build a working substitute through her own labour, and the comfortably supported peer for whom the question is a footnote. One as yet unused post sits squarely at the supported pole and is worth weighing as a counter case. A narrator credits ordinary but forward-looking parents who insisted from childhood that a girl must study and see the world, and who funded the application that ended in tears of joy at a Berkeley offer.²⁴⁷ Capital here is present and kindly used, a reminder that the family is not always the enemy and that *tuoju*, where it exists, changes everything about how the escape lands. The geographic data close the argument. The conversation about leaving is disproportionately a conversation among those with the resources to consider it, clustered in the country’s wealthiest provinces. The cruel optimism of escape (6.1) and the disembedded individualization it expresses (6.2) are not evenly distributed. They are the structure of feeling of a particular, capital rich, mostly urban group of young Chinese women. For those without the capital, the same dream is available to consume on Xiaohongshu but not to enact, and the counterpublic, cross border and articulate as it is, cannot redistribute the resource it so fluently debates.

6.5 Answering the research questions

This study posed four questions; the findings answer each.

How do young Chinese women on Xiaohongshu tell studying abroad as escape, from what and toward what? They tell it as a flight from a patriarchal family and a stalled, involuted society (Motivation, 55 per cent) and toward a recovered, autonomous self-located in the foreign elsewhere, routed almost always through the tool of mobility (82.2 per cent). The dominant form is the rising arc from trauma to hope, a device of feeling that resolves family pain into the promise of departure, and the destination is specified far more thinly than the origin. These are stories rich in escape from and comparatively poor in arrival at.

²⁴⁷ Original (Chinese): “女孩子一定要读书……多去见识见识外面的世界，想出国留学……都没问题。” Translation: “A girl must study ... go and see the wider world; if you want to study abroad ... that is no problem at all.”

What role do economic and cultural capital play in who can perform this escape? A decisive but largely unspoken one. Capital is the least told dimension at 18.6 per cent. Yet the concentration of participants in wealthy provinces, the women obliged to build the means through scholarships and labour, and the users who theorise class through pop culture together show the escape to be gated by economic and cultural capital. The optimism of the genre is sustained in part by keeping this gate out of focus.

How do the comments affirm, complicate, or contest these narratives? They do all three, in roughly that order of frequency. Affirmation supplies parallel stories and reproduces the genre. Qualification names the rootlessness the posts leave out. Contestation punctures the framing outright and enforces a class realism the posts suppress. The twenty-two point sentiment gap, the deliberative vocabulary of the threads, and the 22 per cent diaspora participation together show the comment sections working as a feminist counterpublic, a cross-border space of strangers in which the individualized escape script is collectively priced, qualified, and contested rather than simply applauded.

What does the case reveal about gender, family, and individualization in contemporary China? It reveals a gendered, disembedded individualization. These women detach themselves from the patriarchal family by their own initiative, as Beck describes, but without the public institutions that would let them reembed elsewhere. They leave the family without arriving at a new social settlement, and the family's economic and emotional claims often travel with them. The escape is thus a case of cruel optimism, an attachment to departure that keeps a liveable future imaginable precisely by putting off the reckoning with what departure cannot deliver. The Xiaohongshu counterpublic is where that postponement is collectively managed, circulating the dream and, in the same gesture, telling the truth about its limits.

Taken together, these answers support the central claim of the thesis. On Xiaohongshu, studying abroad is told as a project of self-liberation, charged with feeling, that is desired by many, afforded by few, completed by fewer, and debated by all. It is an individualized escape from a structural condition that the escape itself often leaves intact.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to understand a genre that has taken shape on Xiaohongshu: the public telling, by young Chinese women, of studying abroad as escape. It approached that genre through a theory led, mixed methods design, reading a set of 129 posts and roughly 7,195 comments and replies first at the distance of computation and then at the closeness of close reading. This conclusion draws together what each stage of the argument established, and it then points to the questions the study leaves open.

The theoretical framework (Chapter 2) assembled the vocabulary through which the material became readable. It built an analytic model in four stages, namely Motivation, Tool, Capital, and Aftermath, read across the board through the promise of happiness and the counterpublic. Individualization, in Beck's structural sense and Yan's Chinese version, named what the escape is: a disembedding without a guaranteed reembedding. The mobilities paradigm and Martin named how it is performed. Ahmed and Berlant named why it feels as it does and how its hope can sour. Bourdieu named who can afford it. The methodology (Chapter 3), in turn, put this model to work as four binary dimensions and a sentiment arc analysis, classified sentiment with a strict threshold, and checked every computed pattern against a purposive close reading, a design whose validity is interpretive and procedural rather than statistical.

The findings chapters then tested the model against the data. Chapter 4 showed that the escape narrative is driven, overwhelmingly, by a gendered family settlement, namely control, neglect, son preference, and above all the life course timetable, and routed, almost universally, through the tool of mobility, with study abroad as its emblem and "running" as its idiom. Its signature move is to name an oppression and an exit in a single breath, and its signature form is the rising arc from family pain toward hope after departure. Chapter 5 then turned to the dimensions the celebratory surface leaves unspoken. Capital is the least told dimension precisely because it is the most decisive, surfacing chiefly when a woman without family backing has to account for how she put the means together. The aftermath, meanwhile, splits between genuine rebuilding and a disillusion in which the abroad fails to remake the self and the family proves impossible to leave entirely. And the comment threads, more ambivalent than the posts by some twenty-two points, work as a feminist counterpublic that affirms, qualifies, and contests the escape script rather than simply applauding it. Chapter 6, finally, drew these strands into the study's central claim: that the escape is best understood as a gendered, disembedded individualization shadowed by cruel optimism, an attachment to departure that keeps a liveable future imaginable, and one that the counterpublic collectively prices, qualifies, and contests in real time. In a sentence, escape is desired by many, afforded by few, completed by fewer, and debated by all.

The study's limits, set out in full in Chapter 3, mark the openings for further work. Because the data are drawn from a single platform that rewards aspirational self-presentation, and because both the search query and the dimension lexicons are built by the researcher, the figures describe this discourse as retrieved rather than the views of Chinese women in general. The sentiment classification, too, is binary and, as yet, checked only by spot checking rather than against a hand labelled gold standard. Three lines of development follow directly. The first is methodological. A stratified, double annotated validation of the sentiment and dimension coding, reporting agreement coefficients and a confusion matrix, would turn the present figures from indicative into robust, and an inductive complement to the deductive lexicons would test how much the four dimension model leaves unseen. The second is about time. The design is cross sectional, capturing how escape is told at one moment rather than whether the promised liberation later came about. Interviews with posters, or long term tracking of returnees and the long settled, would recover the aftermath that the genre, by its nature, cannot yet tell. The third is comparative. Reading this set of posts against escape narratives on other platforms, against male "running" discourse, or against the experience of women who stay and negotiate in place would clarify what is specific to gender, to Xiaohongshu, and to this moment in contemporary China.

Beyond these, the case opens a broader question for the sociology of individualization. What this study has watched is not only a set of women leaving, but a counter script being made, a culturally readable way of telling a female life that did not exist in this form a generation ago, hardening in public and among strangers into something other women adopt, adapt, and pass on. That the remedy it offers is individual mobility for a problem that is structural is the source of both its energy and its limits. And that the comment section keeps turning "my escape" back into "our condition" suggests that the terms of Chinese individualization are not merely undergone but actively, collectively, and arguably worked out, on the platform, in the open, one post and one reply at a time.

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Annex — Tables

Table A.1. The four dimension-coding lexicons as applied, with per-term match frequencies. For each dimension the table reports the number of lexicon terms and the posts coded present (a post is coded present when at least two distinct terms match; matching is by substring containment on the cleaned post text, see §3.6). Below the table, every lexicon term is listed with the number of posts (of 129) in which it occurs; terms with zero matches are retained to display the lexicons exactly as applied. Source: author's analysis.

Dimension	Lexicon terms	Posts coded present
A — Motivation (逃离动机)	31	71 (55.0%)
B — Tools (逃离工具)	43	106 (82.2%)
C — Capital (逃离资本)	32	24 (18.6%)
D — Aftermath (逃离之后)	29	42 (32.6%)

Dimension A — Motivation (逃离动机), 31 terms: 原生家庭 'family-of-origin' (74), 逃离 'to flee' (73), 摆脱 'to break free of' (12), 压抑 'repression' (10), 窒息 'suffocation' (9), 控制欲 'controlling behaviour' (7), 出走 'walking out' (7), 内耗 'self-attrition' (5), 脱离 'to break away' (5), 重男轻女 'son-preference' (4), 道德绑架 'moral coercion' (4), 挣脱 'to wrench free' (4), 催婚 'marriage-nagging' (3), 父权 'patriarchy' (2), 冷暴力 'cold violence/stonewalling' (2), PUA 'manipulation' (2), 操控 'to manipulate' (1), 扶弟魔 'brother-supporting daughter' (1), 吸血 'parasitism' (1), 男权 'male dominance' (0), 性别歧视 'gender discrimination' (0), 厌女 'misogyny' (0), 逼婚 'forced marriage' (0), 催生 'childbearing pressure' (0), 家暴 'domestic violence' (0), 精神控制 'psychological control' (0), 情感勒索 'emotional blackmail' (0), 孝道 'filial piety' (0), 母职 'motherhood duty' (0), 喘不过气 'unable to breathe' (0), 重压 'heavy pressure' (0).

Dimension B — Tools (逃离工具), 43 terms: 出国 'going abroad' (86), 留学 'studying abroad' (85), 美国 'USA' (21), 申请 'application' (18), 海外 'overseas' (15), 签证 'visa' (14), 硕士 'master (MA)' (12), 澳洲 'Australia' (12), offer 'admission offer' (11), 雅思 'IELTS' (11), 英国 'UK' (11), 德国 'Germany' (9), 移民 'emigration' (8), 法国 'France' (7), 日本 'Japan' (7), 读研 'postgraduate study' (6), 读博 'doing a PhD' (6), 中介 'agency' (5), 加拿大 'Canada' (5), 博士

'doctorate' (4), 工签 'work visa' (4), 新西兰 'New Zealand' (3), 荷兰 'Netherlands' (3), 绿卡 'green card' (2), 陪读 'accompanying to study' (2), 澳大利亚 'Australia' (2), 新加坡 'Singapore' (2), 润了 "'ran"/emigrated (slang)' (1), 语言班 'language course' (1), 打工度假 'working holiday' (1), 永居 'permanent residence' (1), 瑞典 'Sweden' (1), 移居 'relocation' (0), 润出去 'to "run" abroad (slang)' (0), 录取 'admission' (0), 托福 'TOEFL' (0), GRE 'GRE exam' (0), GMAT 'GMAT exam' (0), WHV 'working-holiday visa' (0), 交换生 'exchange student' (0), 挪威 'Norway' (0), 丹麦 'Denmark' (0), 爱尔兰 'Ireland' (0).

Dimension C — Capital (逃离资本), 32 terms: 工资 'salary' (11), 靠自己 'relying on oneself' (10), 经济独立 'financial independence' (9), 学费 'tuition' (8), 生活费 'living costs' (8), 普通家庭 'ordinary family' (7), 收入 'income' (6), 奖学金 'scholarship' (4), 费用 'fees' (4), 花费 'expense' (4), 小镇做题家 'small-town striver' (4), 攒钱 'saving up' (3), 全奖 'full scholarship' (3), 预算 'budget' (3), 农村 'rural' (3), 攒够 'saving enough' (2), 存款 'savings' (2), 贷款 'loan' (2), 工薪 'wage-earning' (2), 阶层 'social stratum' (2), 阶级 'class' (2), 贫穷 'poverty' (2), 存钱 'to save money' (1), 省钱 'economising' (1), 中产 'middle class' (1), 没钱 'no money' (1), 半奖 'half scholarship' (0), 助学金 'grant/bursary' (0), 自费 'self-funded' (0), 不靠家里 'not relying on family' (0), 啃老 'living off parents' (0), 家境 'family circumstances' (0).

Dimension D — Aftermath (逃离之后), 29 terms: 终于 'at last' (33), 自由 'freedom' (23), 回国 'returning to China' (23), 孤独 'loneliness' (13), 和解 'reconciliation' (9), 想家 'homesickness' (8), 不想回 'not wanting to return' (6), 放下 'letting go' (6), 治愈 'healing' (6), 做自己 'being oneself' (4), 漂泊 'drifting' (4), 文化差异 'cultural difference' (4), 重生 'rebirth' (3), 解放 'liberation' (2), 归属感 'belonging' (2), 重建 'rebuilding' (2), 解脱 'release' (1), 真实的自己 'true self' (1), 重新认识自己 'knowing oneself anew' (1), 乡愁 'nostalgia' (1), 格格不入 'not fitting in' (1), 释怀 'coming to terms' (1), 断亲 'cutting off relatives' (1), 断联 'cutting off contact' (1), 找回自己 'finding oneself again' (0), 文化冲击 'culture shock' (0), 回不去 'unable to return' (0), 边界感 'sense of boundaries' (0), 课题分离 'separation of tasks' (0).