

## Alumni Spotlight: Mingqian Li

Meet Mingqian Li, a Health in Urban Development MSc alumna who progressed directly into a PhD in Behavioral and Experimental Economics, building on research she began during her Master's.



### About Mingqian

Mingqian Li joined the Health in Urban Development MSc (HUD) at UCL with a strong interest in interdisciplinary research and human-centred approaches to development. During the programme, she developed a rigorous foundation in research and began exploring how environmental factors influence human behaviour, which shaped her academic direction toward Behavioral and Experimental Economics. She progressed directly into a PhD under the supervision of Professor Jaimie Lien, where she now investigates how exposure to nature can influence risk-taking, social preferences, and overall well-being through behavioural economic approaches.

### Q&A with Mingqian

#### Why did you choose this programme?

Before joining the programme, I completed a double major in Economics and Psychology at McGill University, where I developed a strong interest in Behavioral Economics—particularly how cognitive biases, preferences, and environmental “nudges” shape decision-making under uncertainty. Alongside this, I became deeply interested in addressing anxiety and exploring how lifestyle, consumption patterns, and belief systems might help reduce psychological distress. My pre-Master’s research examined

demographic change and household consumption in China, and I later presented this work at the ICEFA Conference in London.

I joined the programme as a self-funded student seeking a broader interdisciplinary environment that could connect behavioural insights with real-world challenges. A key motivation was the Overseas Practice Engagement (OPE), which allowed me to move beyond theory into field-based research. My collaboration with the High Atlas Foundation (HAF) strengthened my ethnographic, cross-cultural, and teamwork skills while working in complex real-world contexts.

### **What aspects of the programme did you enjoy most?**

What I valued most was the programme's immersive and practice-oriented approach, which extended learning beyond the classroom into real communities. Field-based teaching, such as observing neighbourhood life and studying housing policy in Lewisham, gave me a deeper understanding of the social realities behind urban development.

My Fellowship Dissertation, "*Assessing the Effectiveness of Nature-Based Therapy: A Multidimensional Framework and Accessibility Considerations*," was a defining part of my academic journey. Through collaboration with the NHS Foundation Trust, I explored how nature-based interventions can function as "green prescriptions" to support mental health, bridging behavioural theory with clinical and public health practice.

The field study in Marrakech was another transformative experience. Through research on urban greenspaces, climate change, and public health—including interviews, community engagement, and collaboration with the High Atlas Foundation, I developed strong qualitative research skills and a deeper understanding of resilience, community empowerment, and the human-centred value of urban environments. This experience reshaped my perspective on how urban policy and natural spaces can meaningfully support well-being.

### **How did you experience student life in London, both on your course and across the wider UCL community?**

Living in London was an exciting and enriching part of my journey. I balanced my studies with exploring the city, building strong friendships, and immersing myself in its creative energy. With classmates and roommates, I visited art exhibitions, attended the opera and dance performances, and enjoyed simple but meaningful moments like bowling, cooking together, and nature walks.

Beyond my course, I actively joined events across the wider UCL community, often discovering activities through Eventbrite. One particularly memorable experience was a festive screening of *The Grinch* before Christmas, complete with snacks, surprise pizzas, and "mystery gift bags." These thoughtful events helped me feel a genuine sense of belonging at The Bartlett and UCL.

### **What did you do after completing the course, and what is your current role?**

I had already decided during my undergraduate studies to pursue a PhD, so I began connecting with leading professors early on. One of them later became my Ph.D. supervisor, which meant I moved directly into doctoral research after my Master's without a job-hunting period. During my Master's, I was already conducting experiments and collaborating on research, and one of our joint papers is currently under review.

I am now a Ph.D. researcher working with Professor Jaimie Lien in Behavioral and Experimental Economics. My work involves the full research process, from designing experiments to analysing data and publishing papers. I am currently developing a project on how exposure to nature influences risk tolerance and social preferences, applying "nudge" approaches to understand how environmental factors shape economic behaviour and decision-making.

### **Which parts of your student experience best prepared you for your career, and what are your key milestones so far?**

The most valuable preparation was the rigorous research training I received, along with the interdisciplinary environment at the DPU, which encouraged me to integrate

environmental perspectives into economic research—an approach that now defines my work.

A major milestone has been progressing into my PhD. and advancing my research, with several papers under review or in submission. I have also presented at international conferences, including *The 12th International Conference on The Chinese Economy: Past, Present and Future*, and have been invited to serve as a reviewer for *Scientific Reports*.

### **What are your future ambitions?**

I aim to present my research on leading international academic platforms and publish in top-tier journals. More broadly, I hope to develop a distinctive research voice that combines rigorous economic analysis with human-centred insights, ultimately contributing practical interventions to reduce anxiety and improve societal well-being.

### **What advice would you give to prospective students or those interested in this field?**

Stay curious and embrace every opportunity for new experiences. Make the most of activities such as Overseas Practice (OPE), field visits, Loo Tours, seminars, and the Fellowship Dissertation. These are not just academic requirements but transformative experiences that broaden your perspective and help you grow both intellectually and personally.

### **Where can people find examples of your work?**

I am happy to share my upcoming co-authored paper, *“Challenging the Thrift Paradigm: When Decreasing Income Trajectory Drives Expensive Non-Conformity,”* which is expected to be published soon.

## **Are you interested in studying the Health in Urban Development MSc at The Bartlett Development Planning Unit?**



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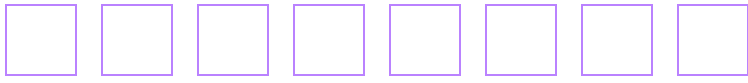
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