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Hukou, socio-spatial class, and the strategic citizenship practices of Chinese labour migrants in Australia

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ABSTRACT

China does not permit dual nationality, meaning migrants in Australia must evaluate the benefits of Chinese versus Australian citizenship. Decisions about competing citizenship statuses are informed not only by this prohibition of dual nationality but also by individuals' classed positions. By comparing the choices of trade skilled migrants from different backgrounds in China, this paper shows that homeland social class is a key factor in decision-making processes, particularly the uniquely Chinese spatial expression of class manifested through the *hukou* system and the differential local citizenship this entails. An analysis of representative cases illustrates the complexities of evaluating memberships acquired through migration and nested memberships resulting from local citizenship with China. People from different backgrounds and, importantly, different places in China's socio-spatial hierarchy value their Chinese legal status differently. The differential effects, both material and symbolic, of membership in or exclusion from urban centres in China form a critical part of individuals' calculations, over and above the national-level membership within which local *hukou* citizenship is nested.

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Introduction

Migrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) living in Australia face a 'citizenship dilemma' (Ho 2011). While Australian law has permitted dual citizenship since 2002, when a PRC national acquires citizenship of another country, they are deemed to have relinquished their original citizenship and are thereafter treated as aliens under Chinese law and by systems of Chinese public administration. This includes their *hukou* and linked ID card, which form the main point of interface between a Chinese citizen and public bureaucracy. The *hukou* household registration system is a mechanism of population control and identity status administration that affects access to welfare, education and healthcare, residency and family planning permits, work rights and employment insurance schemes. Importantly, it is managed at local rather than national levels, and vests significant discretionary administrative power with local governments (Wang 2005; Fan 2008; Woodman 2018), which in turn means that migrants in Australia

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value their Chinese citizenship differently in light of their own individual subnational *hukou* membership.

The prohibition of dual nationality means that PRC-born migrants to Australia must evaluate the relative benefits of Chinese versus Australian citizenship. However, choices and decisions about competing memberships within possible constellations are informed not only by China's prohibition of dual nationality but also by the classed positions of individual migrants, in particular the uniquely Chinese spatial expressions of class manifested through the *hukou* system and the differential citizenship it entails. Since naturalisation in Australia entails renouncing Chinese national citizenship, by extension this includes differential subnational (local) citizenship rights.

The citizenship practices of migrants employed in traditional 'working class' occupations in Australia illustrate the importance of *hukou* status and the relative positions it affords in China's socio-spatial hierarchies. The findings presented form part of a wider study that explores the experiences of male Chinese trade skilled migrants and their wives living in Perth, Western Australia (Stevens 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022). These trade skilled migrants are welders, mechanics and metal machinists who migrated from China under employer-sponsored skilled visa pathways during the resources boom of the early twenty-first century. Although initially recruited as temporary labour migrants, many acquired permanent residency under transitional visa streams and so became eligible for Australian citizenship after fulfilling residency requirements.

During sixteen months of fieldwork conducted from November 2014 to February 2016 in Perth, Western Australia, the life narratives of 26 participants from this trade skilled cohort were documented using ethnographic methods including participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Two case studies from this cohort, the stories of two welders whose employment and migration histories are differentiated by their rural and urban backgrounds, illustrate the extent to which *hukou* status and the differential access to both public services and social inclusion in urban China that *hukou* can entail inform the strategic citizenship practices of trade skilled migrants in Australia.

The experiences and aspirations of these trade skilled migrants further illuminate the 'instrumental turn' (Joppke 2019) in citizenship by considering the choices and actions of less privileged migrant subjects. They also provide fresh insights into the citizenship strategies of Chinese migrants by demonstrating how homeland social class affects naturalisation decisions. Through engaging the analytical lens of social class, expressed in socio-spatial hierarchies and differential local citizenships within China, this paper draws on Bauböck's (2010) citizenship-constellations approach to make sense of varied and contingent responses to the structural opportunities facing transnational migrants from different homeland class backgrounds.

Introducing an analysis of *hukou* status and related classed positions to understand these processes of transnational decision-making demonstrates that people from different backgrounds and, importantly, from different *places* in the socio-spatial hierarchy, may value their Chinese legal status differently, affecting their calculations of both the instrumental and the affective worth of competing citizenship statuses. The case studies further show that neither citizenship nor social class are fixed statuses. Both are malleable, resources that may be deployed in pursuit of personal objectives. Trade skilled migrants, like more privileged mobile subjects, are keenly aware of approaches they may

take to maximise the material and symbolic benefits of overseas employment and their subsequent transnational lives, including through strategic citizenship practices.

Bringing differential local citizenship and socio-spatial class into a constellations of membership approach

Mobility and the freedom to move is now one of the most significant stratifying factors globally (Bauman 1998; Carling 2002; Cresswell 2010). States have responded to faster and cheaper technologies of transport and communication by increasing the regulatory dimensions of migration infrastructures, consolidating and extending their powers to determine who may or may not cross borders (Fassin 2011; Xiang and Lindquist 2014; Mau et al. 2012). In this context of nationally framed mobility regimes, citizenship, here the status of legal belonging to a nation, emerges as a site of global inequality, one that may be acquired by dint of wealth or possession of other forms of mobile capital, but that may also be deployed to secure access to employment, education, symbolic prestige, or other dimensions of class mobility and social advancement (Shachar 2009, 2021; Mau et al. 2015; Kim 2019; Altan-Olcay and Balta 2020). This centrality of citizenship as a form of capital that facilitates (or restricts) international mobility, combined with new complex networks of legal entanglement in multiple states, results in citizenship assuming new meanings and, very often, being vested with instrumental and strategic value for people who seek to move (or resist moving).

Strategic approaches to citizenship arise through the confluence of two factors: the central role of national membership in patterns of global inequality, and new migration and citizenship legislation that forms opportunity structures for those who move or seek to move (Harpaz and Mateos 2019). Changes to citizenship acquisition mechanisms and the widespread normalisation of dual or multiple memberships have resulted in the commodification of citizenship, whereby national membership can be seen as ‘a portable good that carries value independently of its connection to a specific nation’ (Harpaz and Mateos 2019, 8; Joppke 2019; Harpaz 2019a). Commercialised migration programs with demand-driven skilled and investor visa streams are increasingly the first step towards acquiring national citizenships. In the global race for talent, states award membership through what Shachar (2018; also 2006, Shachar 2011) calls the ‘talent-for-citizenship exchange’ or, more baldly still, ‘citizenship for sale’.

The ‘inevitable lightening of citizenship’ that accompanies these processes of liberalisation and commodification has worked to uncouple citizenship from national belonging (Joppke 2010, 9). The affective value of citizenship has consequently declined and the objective, practical value of citizenship as a form of mobility capital has increased. However, Bauböck (2019, 2) hesitates to assign affective citizenship and national belonging to this meagre and diminished status, playing a poor second fiddle to strategic interest-driven approaches. He argues instead that ‘instrumental and identity values of citizenship seem to be closely linked, rather than one depreciating the other’. Bauböck’s (2010) further calls for an understanding of ‘citizenship constellations’ whereby people are simultaneously linked to two or more territorial political entities, subject to the laws and party to the benefits accorded to members in different jurisdictions. These links generate complex and highly individualised interests in relation to competing citizenship statuses, webs of rights, obligations and affective ties that operate at national, sub-

national (e.g. provincial, local or municipal membership), supra-national (e.g. EU citizenship) and/or transnational (e.g. overseas co-ethnic quasi-citizenship or dual/multiple nationality) levels.

Constellations is therefore a useful tool with which to conceptualise how people living transnational lives may understand and evaluate their current and potential memberships, the benefits of which may be operationalised at different geographic scales. A constellations approach can help to illuminate ‘ordinary’ citizenship practices (Staeheli et al. 2012), explaining how everyday concerns intersect with administrative and legal structures of boundary and belonging. It further provides an appropriate lens to understand ‘how the territorial underpinnings and norms of citizenship are being reconfigured through the domestic and global events experienced by emigrants, immigrants and re-migrants’ (Ho 2019, 6) as new citizenship practices emerge to accommodate the contingent and sometimes contradictory objectives of transnational people and families (Harpaz 2019a; Altan-Olcay and Balta 2020).

For migrants living in Australia who have ongoing ties in China, whether remaining relatives and caring responsibilities, financial affairs, or future plans to return (Stevens 2019; Baldassar, Stevens, and Wilding 2022), relinquishing Chinese citizenship is not an easy decision to make. It is also final, as China does not have clear mechanisms for reinstating citizenship (Liu and Ahl 2018). Although there are programs to support the repatriation of naturalised former Chinese citizens, these are targeted at highly educated and prized ‘talents’, entrepreneurs, international students and investors (Xiang 2011; Zhang 2018; Ho and Lim 2017), while other former nationals, including working-class economic migrants and ‘middling’ migrants whose potential social and economic contributions are valued less highly by the state, may face barriers to return (Ho 2011; Ho 2013; Ho 2019; Ho and Ley 2014; Gao 2006; Liu 2008).

Individual evaluations of the citizenship constellations available to Chinese migrants in Australia are informed not only by China’s prohibition of dual nationality, but also, importantly, the highly differential forms of local citizenship that are nested within PRC national membership. Many of the social rights of Chinese citizens are afforded through local level memberships and are not universal or consistent for all Chinese nationals. The differential citizenship produced through the *hukou* system manifests as deep structural and hereditary inequalities, since *hukou* is inherited at birth. While *hukou* inheritance was once patrilineal, a mechanism designed to limit rural-urban population transfer, this status may now be inherited from either parent (Wang 2005; Wu 2010). China’s immense size and the significant discretionary administrative and regulatory powers of local governments have resulted in a diverse range of citizenship practices under a ‘locally differentiated citizenship regime’ (Woodman 2018, 254; Woodman and Guo 2017). Vortmerms (2015) describes *hukou* as a ‘local citizenship institution’, illustrating the extent to which the tangible benefits of PRC citizenship are afforded at the local, and not the national or even provincial level, highly subject to local politics and local normative expectations about the role of the state (Woodman 2018).

Hukou status is not a proxy for nor precise predictor of social class, since wealthy rural residents exist, as do unemployed and severely impoverished urban residents, particularly in less affluent municipalities where minimum subsistence payments are lower or in circumstances when families in need are denied access to payments by local administrators (Solinger and Hu 2012; J. Pan 2020). However, *hukou* is a significant dimension of

Chinese stratification that directly affects individuals' classed positions in both materialist and culturalist ways.

From the economic perspective, *hukou* status may entail enhanced access to preferential employment rights, quality education, pensions and insurance, healthcare, housing, and other forms of state welfare. In practical terms, differences of *hukou* status and related access to services correlate with lasting disparities across key measures of social inequality such as health, education and income. The *hukou* system has been demonstrated to cause health stratification across the life course, from childhood nutrition through to rates of decline in cognitive ageing (Liu, Rizzo, and Fang 2015; Song and Smith 2019; Zhang, Song, and Chen 2022). Educational inequality is manifested in severe school segregation between rural migrant and local *hukou* holding children and resultant disparities in educational attainment (Wu 2011; Xu and Wu 2022), while the impacts of rural vs urban *hukou* status can also be observed in patterns of occupational mobility, homeownership, and wealth accumulation (Fang and Zhang 2016; Zhang 2020; Liao and Zhang 2021).

The material advantages of *hukou* status are particularly pronounced for those 'inside the system' of the post-reform socialist state, working for resource-rich work units, such as powerful government agencies or profitable state-owned enterprises and state institutions (Tang and Tomba 2013). The relative disadvantage experienced by rural residents is reflected in Chinese neo-Weberian schema of social stratification, such as the influential models proposed by Lu (2002, 2004). Although these models position both industrial workers and agricultural labourers among the lowest strata, highlighting the decline in social position that urban workers have experienced since the onset of reform in the early 1980s (Solinger 2004; Guo 2016), they also recognise that farmers and rural-urban migrants continue to experience disadvantage exceeding that of most urban residents.

However, the bounded and exclusionary forms of citizenship experienced by many Chinese nationals (dis)advantaged by their *hukou* extend beyond the systemic practices of in/exclusion in administering public goods and services. From a culturalist perspective, *hukou* status and place of origin are sources of cultural capital deployed in classed struggles for distinction at both individual and collective levels. Contemporary class discourses in China position those with rural *hukou* as intrinsically and irrevocably inferior, lacking the embodied cultural capital or 'quality' of urban counterparts (Kipnis 2007; Sun 2014, 2019). Those who come to urban areas for work, the peasant workers (*nongmingong*),¹ inspire moral panic as threats to urban civility whose transgressive mobility should be controlled, thereby justifying their administrative exclusion from the benefits of city membership. Despite performing essential low wage work in sectors like hospitality and construction, peasant workers experience daily discrimination, forever consigned to a liminal social space between the city and the country (Yan 2008; Sun 2014).

The role of the *hukou* system is now changing, albeit in ways that are geographically uneven and locally particular. For example, some municipalities have eliminated rural-urban distinctions among local populations, providing expanded, if still differential, urban services to migrant populations through the gradual decoupling of social rights from *hukou*, or now actively encourage rural-urban transfers under municipal land acquisition measures (Guo and Liang 2017; Tang, Hao, and Huang 2016). However, for migrants in Australia who left China almost two decades ago, their lived experiences of in/exclusion and discrimination precede more recent reforms. The accounts of individual naturalisation

decisions presented in this paper are clearly informed by a sensitivity to the sociospatial dimensions of homeland class that they have encountered in China.

The citizenship choices of trade skilled migrants in Perth, Western Australia

The (post)colonial settler state of Australia has been characterised as a ‘classical immigration country in transition’ (Castles, Ozkul and Vasta 2014), the first nation in the world to establish an Immigration Department, in 1945, with the explicit policy goal of growing the population to ensure economic and strategic security. Policy mechanisms for attracting and selecting immigrants have shifted over the years, transitioning from racialized exclusion of non-Europeans to official multiculturalism, and from an emphasis on family migration and unskilled labour migration for permanent settlement to market-driven approaches that privilege temporary migration and the selective recruitment of ‘skilled’ migrants deemed to possess certain forms of valorised and credentialised cultural capital (Hawthorne 2011; Walsh 2014; Boese and Robertson 2017).

Within this policy context, Australia has become a destination country for several waves of ethnically Chinese migrants from places across the Asian region, including Malaysia, Singapore, post-war Indochina, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the PRC. These Chinese migrants and their descendants, now comprising 5.5% of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021), are usually more highly educated than the Australian average and form part of a hyper-selected ‘multicultural middle class’ (Colic-Peisker 2011; Zhao 2000; Li 2006; Shao 2014). Against this background of predominantly tertiary educated and professionally skilled Chinese migration to Australia, the working-class trade skilled participants of this study are unusual. During the early 2000s, welders and mechanics were recruited from China under the exceptional economic circumstances of a Western Australian resources boom and resultant labour shortage. Although changing English language criteria have since made it increasingly difficult for tradesmen with limited education to secure the permanent visas that are a precursor to acquiring Australian citizenship, many of this cohort did become permanent residents after an initial period of employment as a temporary visa holder (Stevens 2017, 2020).

This cohort is unusual not only in relation to predominately middle-class Chinese Australians, but also when compared with trade skilled Chinese labour migrants to other regional industrial centres like Korea, Japan or Singapore, where policies of mandatory return exclude lower income workers from permanent settlement and citizenship (Xiang 2013, 2017). The experiences of participants in this study therefore provide rare insights into how homeland working class subjectivities may affect naturalisation decisions in the context of a receiving immigration regime where citizenship acquisition is a possibility for so-called ‘semi-skilled’ labour migrants.

Semi-structured interviews and many informal conversations over sixteen months of fieldwork from November 2014 to February 2016 inform the findings presented in this paper. The citizenship dilemma was a topic widely discussed among trade skilled migrants living in Perth, an ongoing debate with real effects in their lives and the lives of their friends and relatives. These discussions illuminated the factors influencing decisions regarding their legal status, as individuals evaluated the alternative choices

available to them in the light of how they had personally experienced being a Chinese citizen prior to going overseas.

The case studies presented below tell the stories of two men from north China of the same age and occupation. Both welders in their mid-fifties, they were each first granted employer sponsored work visa to come to Australia in 2007. They had both learned their trade by working in Chinese factories for many years before becoming international labour migrants. And they both left China to work overseas by paying high fees to secure the services of migration brokers, key actors in dense migration industries that developed over the first years of this century to channel workers from China into fixed term contracts in regional destinations like Japan, Korea, Singapore and Australia (Xiang 2012, 2013). After working a stint in an another developed industrial regional centre, they each reinvested some of their savings in a second overseas visa and work placement in Western Australia. However, because of their different *hukou* statuses the related classed positions that they experienced within China, they each assess the value of Chinese versus Australian citizenship differently.

Case study 1: the value of Australian citizenship for rural hukou holders

Yang² was born in the 1960s in a village in north China, in a region famous as one of the birthplaces of the socialist revolution. It was a hard place to work the land, he told me: 'The places that were most revolutionary and rose up, places like Jinggangshan, Yan'an³ and [my home county] were the poorest places, places where people were so poor they feared death and so they rose up'. Yang was speaking here about an earlier generation, but his life had not been easy either. After the onset of the economic reforms that commenced in the 1980s, he went to find work as a welder in an eastern seaboard city nearly two days travel from his home. He lived in the city as a peasant worker for several years, sleeping in a workers' dormitory and barely earning enough to support his family. His children remained behind in the county town with his wife and his mother, since their rural *hukou* status prevented them attending school in the city. When migration brokers started recruiting trade skilled workers to leave China for jobs in East Asian regional industrial centres, Yang seized the opportunity to increase his monthly salary fivefold. In 2004, he took his first job as an international labour migrant, a three-year fixed-term position welding in a Korean shipyard.

Yang worked in Korea for the full three years, accruing substantial savings in the process, but his contract then required him to return to China. He realised that although fixed-term labour migration to Asian countries with tightly regulated policies of compulsory return (Xiang 2013) could improve his financial situation, his status and his children's status in China's socio-spatial hierarchies would not be changed so easily.

Yang then researched other regional destinations that were recruiting trade skilled labour migrants from China. For Yang, migration to Australia and eventual acquisition of first permanent resident status and later citizenship represented a chance to break free from the institutionalised and hereditary inequalities that result from his and his family's *hukou* status. He had experienced at first hand the discrimination to which rural *hukou* holders are subjected and wanted to try to prevent his children from facing the same problems. He decided to invest a portion of the money he had earned in Korea in securing a job in Australia because he had learned that, unlike in most Asian countries,

the Australian immigration system offers possible pathways to permanent status for temporary visa holders:

In China I'm a farmer, from the countryside. You know that life in China is very different for farmers and for workers. If you're a farmer you get no health care, no pension, no social welfare. I was a peasant worker and everyone [in the cities] looks down on peasant workers. So I could go to Korea and get ahead and make some money, but then when the contract is over I'm back in China and I'm just another peasant worker. It's the same for your children, so they have to face the same struggles. In Australia, maybe you can get to stay here and then maybe your children will have more opportunities.

For Yang, the hereditary status of a rural *hukou* and the structural and cultural barriers to social mobility this entails was a compelling reason to seek alternative citizenship and residency. He feared his children might fare little better in life than him, constrained as they were by China's socio-spatial hierarchies, and so actively sought compensatory citizenship (Harpaz 2019b) to make up for the limitations of their primary citizenship, limitations that operate not at the national level of membership but at the local. When I first asked him if he had taken citizenship, he clearly explained that dissatisfaction with his personal circumstances in China had been the most important factor in his decision:

Yes, I have taken citizenship. Why is not an easy question . . . [very long pause] . . . I've been in Australia for seven years and I've been back a few times. At first I really missed it and wanted to go back. But then I started to feel that there were things I didn't like. I had to do some things, administrative jobs that involved going to government departments, and I didn't like having to rely on people you know (*zhao guanxi*) to get things done. And I don't like that farmers have the lowest position in society. No one cares and they have nowhere to express their voices. I am not satisfied with the government.

This is the problem with China. The local level officials have all the power over the normal people and over all the property. The people are on the lowest level and controlled by these abusive, shameless scoundrels (*popi wulai*). This is hard to change. The people at the top set the tone which their underlings follow (*shang xing xia xiao*) and the top, the leaders and the party members, are corrupt so how is it going to change? They take and the poor get poorer. They can't represent the common people (*laobaixing*) and can't represent poor people.

Despite some personal financial challenges following a downturn in the mining sector, Yang remained satisfied with his decision to take up Australian citizenship. He also is politically engaged; 'Yes, of course I vote!' he told me enthusiastically, as he expounded on a range of topical issues. He feels personally invested in the destiny of 'our country – for I'm an Australian now'.

Case study 2: the value of Chinese citizenship for urban *hukou* holders

In contrast, trade skilled migrants from large cities typically value Chinese citizenship more highly than Australian citizenship. Chen is a welder of the same generation as Yang, also born in the mid-1960s. He also shares a similar history of serial labour migration overseas, as Chen first spent some years working in Singapore before returning to China and then securing a second international labour contract, this time in Perth, Western Australia. However, a key difference between these two men is their place of origin; Chen was born and raised in Shenyang, a provincial capital in the industrial heartland of northeast China. As such, Chen's *hukou* status has significant material and symbolic

value to him, a resource he chooses to deploy to secure both the spatial and social mobility that he desires.

After finishing high school, Chen was assigned a job in a large manufacturing work unit near his childhood home, but the restructuring of state-owned heavy industry that occurred in the 1990s unsettled his position as an urban worker. However, although his income declined relative to his expenses, creating challenging personal financial circumstances that precipitated his labour emigration, he and his family continued to benefit from membership of the city, inside the urban state-owned system. These benefits included pensions and accommodation for his and his wife's parents, education for his child, and ongoing access to insurance and superannuation schemes. Just as important, Chen enjoys affective dimensions of belonging and citizenship as a Shenyang *hukou* holder. He expressed pride in his identity as a citizen of Shenyang, the provincial capital and an industrial centre renowned throughout China for many decades. Chen's sense of belonging in urban China contrasts markedly with Yang's experiences as a migrant peasant worker, forever excluded from both affective and administrative membership of the city where he lived for many years.

For Chen and others like him, the loss of *hukou* status which necessarily follows a renunciation of Chinese citizenship is a strong reason for not becoming an Australian citizen. This is the case not only for people considering future return or circular migration, but also those who plan to remain overseas but have ongoing financial or familial attachments to China. Most trade-skilled migrants were in their thirties, or even early forties, when they came to Australia. Departing China in the middle years of their working lives, those from urban backgrounds who were eligible for employee insurance schemes had already paid in significant contributions. They may look forward to drawing pensions upon reaching retirement age, usually sixty or, for women and some men employed in specialist roles, fifty-five. Payments can be claimed from overseas, but only with a local *hukou* registration; surrendering citizenship thus also means giving up a hard-earned pension. Chen explained how these practical considerations affect naturalisation choices for his family:

We will maybe go back later once our child is married. I have a pension in Shenyang and I'm still making payments every month. I worked in the factory for over 10 years . . . There are only 3 years until I can get my pension. Because I had special employment, I can retire at 55, while the normal retirement age is 60. You can claim the pension here, you don't need to be in China. That is unless you naturalise, because then you would be an Australian citizen so the Chinese government wouldn't pay it to you. But now I am still Chinese. I haven't taken citizenship and neither has my wife.

Chen has continued to make such contributions since leaving China. He was nearly forty when he first went overseas, having worked in a factory in Shenyang for almost two decades. His pension scheme allowed him to make payments even after leaving his work unit, and so he continued to do so while a temporary labour migrant, first in Singapore and later in Australia, where he unexpectedly became an 'accidental' permanent resident (Stevens 2017). Because he worked in a specialised occupation, his pensionable age is fifty-five, only two years away at the time of interview. He will not yet retire in Australia but nonetheless looks forward to being able to claim his Chinese pension. He and his wife have therefore retained Chinese citizenship. Not only do they imagine a future when they

might retire to China, but their financial circumstances are also a powerful disincentive to naturalising in Australia.

Chen also prefers the idea of spending his later years in China surrounded by the places and faces of his youth. Although he worries about what this might mean for his daughter, a naturalised Australian citizen now enrolled at university, he feels it will be better for him and his wife to enjoy their life among friends and relatives once they have retired. He speculates that they may spend time in both countries, perhaps returning to Perth during Shenyang's bitterly cold winter months. The mobile futures he imagines require him to maintain a constellation of memberships that maximises his freedom of movement and access to services in both places. For Chen, this is best represented by combining Australian permanent resident status with Chinese nationality, including the nested membership of the city of Shenyang that this entails.

Ho (2019, 34) argues that patterns of re-migration across the lifecourse are 'transforming the social relations of citizenship, and re-spatializing rights, obligations and belonging'. Like the middling returnees featured in her research, these trade skilled migrants similarly negotiate competing practical concerns and membership claims as they negotiate personal objectives and long-term mobile imaginaries across borders that demand a flexible engagement with both China and Australia. *Hukou*, and the rights, practical benefits, and affective membership it entails, are at the heart of their concerns.

Classed inequalities and the flexibilised citizenship practices of 'working class' migrants

This paper contributes to a growing literature that explores the intersections between citizenship practices and classed inequalities that operate at local, national and global scales. As the case studies presented here illustrate, engaging citizenship status(es) as a resource in strategies of distinction and transnational material accumulation is not the preserve of wealthy and professional classes. Capital-constrained migrants similarly navigate migration and citizenship regimes to achieve their goals and to secure, maintain or defend positions of relative social advantage.

It is now thirty years since Ong (1999) proposed flexible citizenship as a means of understanding transnational elites' responses to the disciplining power of nation states, arguing that the flexible accumulation of capitals by wealthy East Asians, skipping easily between global markets, could be mirrored in or supported by a flexible and instrumental approach to acquiring citizenship rights in different jurisdictions. There have been critiques of Ong's thesis, including Waters' (2009) observations that while such migrants may have flexible intentions, their actual experiences may prove far more grounded. However, the 'instrumental turn' (Joppke 2019) in citizenship indicates that such flexible national affiliation is now commonly intended, not just among the most privileged mobile subjects, but most internationally mobile people, including those with aspirations to mobility. Citizenship has become another commodified resource, or form of capital (Harpaz 2019a). These case studies, like those of Kim (2019), extend our understanding of flexible citizenship practices among those with fewer resources at their disposal than members of the jet-setting managerial class.

The cases of Yang and Chen, while broadly representative of members of this cohort of trade skilled migrants, depict individual experiences, specific to the contexts of their own

lives and personal histories. The conclusions drawn here are therefore necessarily heuristic and tentative, indicative of how *hukou* status and the classed positions this can entail may affect naturalisation decision making, rather than a predictive rule that should be assumed to hold true in all circumstances. Nonetheless, these cases provide a useful entry point to explore how Chinese migrants in traditional 'working class' occupations describe their contingent and shifting class positions as both the cause and consequence of their citizenship practices.

China does not permit dual nationality, meaning migrants to Australia face a citizenship dilemma and must compare the value of Chinese versus Australian citizenship. However, the exclusion that this adherence to single nationality entails is experienced unevenly among emigrants and former nationals. Joining the global race to secure 'talent' or 'human capital' (Kuptsch and Pang 2006; Shachar 2011), China now engages its diaspora not through the introduction of dual citizenship seen in many other developing countries (Joppke 2007; Faist, Gerdes, and Rieple 2004) but instead through policies of exception. New immigration regimes facilitate the return of elites (Ho and Lim 2017; Ho 2011; Xiang 2011; Luo, Guo, and Ping 2003; Liu and Ahl 2018), those deemed by the state to possess sufficient useful 'transnational capital' (Rosen and Zweig 2005), while emigrants who may be considered of limited cultural or economic value to China, such as less educated labour migrants, have been discouraged or even blocked from returning (Liu 2008).

Labour migrants in Perth whose trade skills are in high demand in Australian primary industries may therefore find that they can access Australian permanent residency and then citizenship, but in doing so risk exclusion from their country of birth where their skills are not as highly valued. Under these circumstances, choosing to *not* acquire Australian citizenship may constitute an agential and strategic response to the membership options available since permanent residency in Australia affords many of the same benefits as full citizenship (Q. Pan 2020). Trade skilled migrants' evaluations of the citizenship constellations available to them are highly contingent on personal circumstances and demonstrate careful consideration of the instrumental and affective factors that inform naturalisation decisions.

The migration narratives of trade skilled migrants and their wives living in Perth typically share some common elements: most originally hail from places in north and northeast China; most paid high fees to migration brokers to arrange their employment and their visas; and many had previous experience working away from home, either within China or in other industrial centres in East Asia (Stevens 2017). Yet within this cohort there is also substantial variance, particularly in relation to dis/advantage and relative social position within Chinese socio-spatial hierarchies of place. Despite sharing similar occupations, all ostensibly of working-class backgrounds, those born and raised in large cities with historically secure employment in large work units had very different working lives prior to migration than former villagers who had previously only experienced precarious employment as rural migrant workers to those same cities. The differential experiences of living and working in China remembered by participants illustrate that 'working class' is not a single subjectivity and that the social identities of a 'worker' may be sharply differentiated (Goodman 2014, 124–6).

For migrants disadvantaged by their classed positions in China's social-spatial hierarchies the decision to naturalise in Australia may not be so difficult. Yang, and others

like him, see little value in retaining a Chinese citizenship that offers little intrinsic value, whether affective or instrumental. Administratively and socially excluded from urban belonging back 'home', Yang did not hesitate to take Australian citizenship when it became available to him and his children. Calculating the relative value of the memberships he could access, he found he had little to lose in surrendering his Chinese passport. However, for those in more interstitial class positions, workers with privileged membership of major cities who are nonetheless excluded by their occupations and education from the selective Chinese migration policies under which professionals naturalised overseas may possibly plan to return, the citizenship dilemma is real.

Despite their different decisions, both Yang and Chen treat their citizenship status(es) as a resource that can be deployed to achieve life goals and, most importantly, to sustain or improve their social position and that of their children. No longer a 'peasant worker', administratively and discursively relegated to the margins of society, Yang finds that his new position as an Australian 'tradie' brings with it social respect in the West Australian context where a 'Karratha mentality' privileges high-earning technical work over the professional forms of labour traditionally valorised by the middle classes in both Australia and China (Forsey 2015). For Chen, retaining his Chinese citizenship and the *hukou* status nested therein not only brings material benefits as he will be able to draw pensions in both China and Australia in older age, but it also allows him to return to the social world that he left behind and share the comfortable life enjoyed by many urban Chinese retirees (Stevens 2019; Baldassar, Stevens, and Wilding 2022).

This also points to the different national class frames within which naturalisation decisions are made, and to how individuals' classed positions may be disrupted through migration. Much has been written about the downward or contradictory class mobilities that people migrating from developing to developed countries often encounter (Ho 2011; Parreñas 2015; Cederberg 2017). However, unlike middle-class and tertiary-educated migrants from China, who may experience deskilling and downward social mobility in the Australian context (Stevens 2022; Gao 2006), trade skilled migrants in Perth enjoy not only financial recompense for their labour far exceeding the incomes available to them in China but also enhanced social status as tradesmen in a national context where the figure of the working man is still highly valorised in popular culture. Occupational status and classed positions are therefore not static but instead situational and malleable; trade skilled migrants are keenly aware of strategies they may employ to maximise the material and symbolic benefits of overseas employment and their subsequent transnational lives, including through strategic citizenship practices.

These case studies may also be productively compared with the citizenship practices of wealthy and/or middling transnational classes, who deploy economic and social resources to secure alternative citizenship statuses in order to guard against perceived threats to their position and to the intergenerational transfer of advantage. Examples from diverse global contexts illustrate that while the acquisition of additional, alternative or 'compensatory' (Harpaz 2019b) national memberships may have practical, instrumental value, for example, hedging against political instability at home or simplifying international travel through access to visa-free entry to multiple other nations (Ong 1999; Balta and Altan-Olcay 2016; Altan-Olcay and Balta 2020; Harpaz 2019a, 2022), the symbolic meanings that are invested in citizenship statuses are equally compelling drivers of contemporary citizenship practices. Acquisition of new citizenships becomes

a strategy of differentiation, securing homeland social status through the experiences and forms of knowledge that are assumed to accompany the new legal status (Altan-Olcay and Balta 2020, 146–7), a ‘cultural currency’ through which groups reproduce status by monopolising culturally validated forms of mobility (Trdina and Jontes 2019), or a form of ‘class-based consumption’ (Liu-Farrer 2016, 503) that serves to erect and maintain class boundaries through the conversion of economic resources into the symbolic capital of foreign citizenship(s).

These strategies of differentiation are intertwined with affective dimensions of citizenship acquisition, such as desire, longing or anxiety. For example, Fong’s (2011) account of Chinese international students’ attraction to ‘developed world’ citizenship shows how culturally valorised narratives of upward social mobility through transnational migration lead young people to endure difficult, disappointing or ambivalent outcomes overseas. Altan-Olcay and Balta (2016, 2020) similarly illustrate how Turkish national class frames, inflected with secular and gendered anxieties, and related imaginaries of ‘Western’ belonging, compel highly educated and transnationally mobile families to deploy significant economic resources in pursuit of the US citizenship that may guard against challenges to their social positions at ‘home’.

Trade skilled migrants from China to Australia exhibit similarly complex, nuanced, and sometimes contradictory dimensions to their evaluations of competing citizenship statuses. Although instrumental considerations, such as pensions, visa-free travel, or access to public services do feature in discussions of the citizenship dilemma, their calculations extend beyond these more practical concerns to incorporate the symbolic meanings and affective value that may be attached to different national citizenships and to the homeland local membership conferred by *hukou* status.

Conclusion

This paper compares the naturalisation choices of trade skilled migrants from different backgrounds in China employed in traditional ‘working class’ occupations in Australia. Findings demonstrate how dimensions of social class and inequality may be incorporated into decision-making processes, particularly the uniquely Chinese spatial expression of class manifested through the *hukou* system and the differential local citizenship this entails. Since naturalisation in Australia entails the loss of Chinese national citizenship, by extension this includes subnational (local) citizenship rights afforded through the *hukou* system of household registration. When calculating the configurations of membership available, any comparison of the possible competing citizenship constellations necessarily entails assessments of value conferred at both national and local levels.

In exploring the material and symbolic value afforded to the differential local citizenships nested within Chinese national membership, this paper draws on Bauböck’s (2010, 849) constellations approach in order to ‘better understand individual interests in relation to alternative citizenship statuses’. When citizenship choices and claims in today’s complexly mobile world are conceptualised as ‘constellations’ of multiple nested and/or overlapping memberships, this perspective helps to make sense of varied and contingent responses to the structural opportunities facing migrants from different backgrounds and different national or subnational origins. The case studies presented illustrate these contingent claims and choices and the central role that socio-spatial dimensions of PRC

homeland class have on the decisions made by individuals and households as they calculate the relative merits of the membership options available to them and engage alternative citizenships as resources in family strategies of accumulation and differentiation.

In contrast with previous studies that primarily focus on the citizenship strategies of wealthy transnationals (Liu-Farrer 2016; Shao 2014; Harpaz 2022) or middle-class or ‘middling’ migrants from China (Ho 2011; Ho 2013; Ho 2019; Teo 2007; Pan 2020), this paper considers how migrants from diverse working-class backgrounds navigate the citizenship choices they face. These cases, like those of Kim (2019) extend our understanding of strategic citizenship practices among subjects with more constrained resources who are responding to inequality both within and between national-level memberships. Trade skilled migrants’ varying responses to the membership options available to them are explicitly linked to homeland *hukou* status, demonstrating that differential citizenship within China plays a significant role in instrumental calculations of value. Since *hukou* functions as a ‘local citizenship institution’ (Vortherms 2015), the differential benefits, both material and symbolic, of membership in or exclusion from large urban centres forms a critical part of these calculations, over and above the national level membership within which local *hukou* citizenship is nested.

Notes

1. The translation of *nongmingong* as ‘peasant worker’ is used here, following Guo and Liang (2017) in preferring this term because, firstly, this term emphasises the (Marxist) class category of ‘peasant’ over the term ‘worker’, secondly, it has greater specificity than ‘migrant worker’, which might include workers from other cities or international migrants, and finally, it is considerably more concise than ‘domestic rural-to-urban migrant worker’.
2. Names of participants are pseudonyms.
3. In 1927, following the Guomindang purge of Chinese Communists, a small army of Communist troops took shelter in the isolated Jinggang Mountains (Jinggangshan) in borderlands between Hunan Province and Jiangxi Province in the south of China. Yan’an is in a particularly dry and desperate part of the north Chinese plain in Shaanxi Province, and was the Communist headquarters from 1936 to 1948. Both Jinggangshan and Yan’an are remembered in revolutionary history as places where the impoverished peasantry supported the Party prior to the establishment of the People’s Republic (Spence 1999).

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