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## **Legitimizing exclusion and inclusion: ‘culture’, education and entitlement to local urban citizenship in Tianjin and Lanzhou**

Sophia Woodman

Sociology, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh

Abstract: The paradigmatic ‘migrant’ in China is a worker of rural origin, but more than 30% of the one-fifth of the population living and working away from their place of *hukou* registration are inter-urban migrants, a group mostly neglected by scholars. Based on ethnographic observation and interviews from two Chinese cities – one on the coast, one in the impoverished interior – this article examines how a range of types of migrants deal with citizenship and mobility. It shows that a key criterion for being able to settle in a new place and gain access to local social citizenship is migrants’ level of ‘culture,’ expressed primarily through formal education. Linking access to local citizenship for migrants to their ‘cultural quality’ goes largely unquestioned, as it is connected to the legitimacy of education as a means of differentiating among citizens more generally. This logic shapes family migration strategies as parents seek to ensure that their children will receive an education that enables access to the kinds of good jobs and benefits that enable full citizenship wherever they live.

Keywords: [China](#), [internal migration](#), [mobile citizenship](#), [education](#), [hukou registration](#), [social citizenship](#)

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Eating a late lunch in a small restaurant in the northern coastal city of Tianjin, I chatted to the couple from Jiangxi in southern China who were running the place for ‘their boss.’ Since it was after hours, I was the only customer, and they were preparing for the evening shift and cleaning up. The husband was also eating nearby, and was gregarious; but the woman was hostile. When I told them that I was researching people’s stories of internal migration, she said she felt their experience had no value: ‘We have no story,’ she retorted. Moving to Tianjin had nothing to do with choice, she said, ‘Migrant work (*dagong*) is like this, we have to earn money to eat and live.’ Her grumpy demeanour might be explained by what the husband told me: recently a business venture in which they had invested their life savings had failed spectacularly, which the wife attributed to her husband’s negligence. While her narrative of migrant life might appear to be typical of the rural-to-urban migrants central in the literature on migration and citizenship in China, in fact this couple held urban household registration (*hukou*) in their Jiangxi home city, but they were just as much outsiders in Tianjin as their counterparts with rural *hukou*. Similarly, they felt they had few choices and could claim little in the city. Having no story was not to do with rural origins, but with the fact that they lacked the ‘culture’ (*wenhua*) expressed through formal education which might have entitled them to more than migrant work in an ‘advanced’ coastal city like Tianjin.

This couple are among the hundreds of millions of people in China today who have moved away from their place of *hukou* registration in search of a ‘better life’. According to the most recent census in 2010, 221 million people had migrated away from their *hukou* location (either on a temporary or permanent basis) (Liang 2016). By the end of 2015, China had a migrant population of 247 million, representing 18 percent of the population (State Council 2016). This migration takes place in a context where formal citizenship remains primarily a sedentary relationship that fixes citizens’ entitlements in the place of their *hukou* registration (F.-L. Wang 2005; Chan and Buckingham 2008; Woodman 2016). Vast differences among localities in the provision of public services and benefits are justified through a ranking of places on a spectrum from ‘backward’ to ‘advanced’. Mobility up this locational ladder is possible, depending on access to forms of recognition of people’s ‘advanced’ status that fit them for permanent relocation in ‘advanced’ settings. Previous research on citizenship and internal migration has largely concentrated on the exclusion of rural-to-urban migrants and restrictions on migration, neglecting the ways state frameworks can serve both to facilitate mobility, as well as constraining it (Nyíri 2010).

This article thus seeks to fill a gap in considering a range of types of migrants, through an exploratory place-based analysis of the migration narratives of differently situated mobile people in two urban locations—Tianjin, a major coastal city, and Lanzhou, a city in the northwestern interior. These two locations are chosen for the contrasts they represent between the rapidly developing coastal areas and the interior of the country. It particularly explores perhaps the most crucial form of recognition conferred by state frameworks: that of ‘culture’ (*wenhua*), which relates to formal educational qualifications but also to broader evaluative schemas used both by the state and in society. The article asks: How does the ‘culture’ of migrants shape their citizenship entitlements, both in a formal sense and in terms of what they feel entitled to claim?

### **Conceptualizing citizenship and migration**

Citizenship has been deployed by some scholars as a conceptual approach to analysing internal migration in China (see for example, Solinger 1999; Smart and Lin 2007; Smart and

Smart 2001; J. Wu 2010; L. Zhang 2002; L. Zhang and Wang 2010). Generally, this has demonstrated the exclusion of rural-to-urban migrants from urban 'social citizenship', such as health insurance, education, housing and pensions. Scholars have concentrated their attention on the poorest and most excluded among the migrant population, and the exploitation that this lack of urban citizenship entails (see for example, Solinger 1999; Murphy 2008; Z. Zhang and Wu 2016; J. Wu 2010; L. Zhang and Wang 2010; Tse 2016). This body of work highlights how the *hukou* system has resulted in an overall regime of highly differentiated citizenship entitlements.<sup>1</sup>

These works generally deploy a concept of citizenship as a set of substantive entitlements related to urban membership. In addition, a number of works analyse how the cultural frameworks embedded in the concept of 'quality' (*suzhi*) normalize distinctions among citizens based on factors including their migrant status and rural origins (Sun 2012; Jacka 2009; Sun 2009; Anagnost 2004). Here an (often implicit) conception of citizenship as recognition by the state (and to a certain extent by other citizens) is deployed. Sun shows how the current 'common sense' about the value of citizens privileges the urban, educated middle class, and frames failure to achieve such status as matters of 'individual choice and responsibility' and 'fate, luck or personal quality' (2012, 33, 41). However, this literature has often paid insufficient attention to how such discourses around 'quality' intersect with formal means of recognizing it through educational qualifications.

In this article I combine this 'cultural politics' of citizenship as formal and informal means of defining and distinguishing value, with a sociological conception of citizenship as a relation that links the individual to the state through a set of institutional frameworks (Marshall 1992). In the China context, citizenship in this latter sense, I have argued, is primarily a local relation—people are full and recognized members in the place of their *hukou* registration, which entitles them to a set of benefits that is distinctive to this locality (Woodman 2016). Since in China welfare regimes vary by locality, what should be provided is determined by local history and local norms, resulting in wide disparities among locations in provision of basic public goods and services (Carrillo and Duckett 2011; Shi 2012, 2009).

Many types of internal migrants fall somewhere in between the inclusion of this sedentary form of citizenship and the exclusion experienced by rural-to-urban migrant workers. Until quite recently, the literature on internal migration has neglected other types of migrants, such as those who move for education, those who migrate from one city to another, as well as those who relocate among rural places,<sup>2</sup> or move from an urban to a rural location. Ou and Kondo point out a need for studies that explore 'the heterogeneity of assimilation patterns across migrants who have different socio-demographic backgrounds' (2013, 49). Based on 2005 data,<sup>3</sup> Gagnon et al estimate the total numbers of four categories of migrants as follows: inter-rural: 19.4 million; rural to urban: 79.7 million; urban to rural 6.3 million; and inter-urban: 58.4 million (Gagnon, Xenogiani, and Xing 2009). In 2005, inter-urban migrants made up 4.5 percent of the total population (Ou and Kondo 2013), but subsequently, the proportion of inter-urban movers among the total of migrants may have grown, as people moving for manual labour or factory jobs declined from 48 percent in the 2000 census to 37 percent in the 2010 count (Liang, Li, and Ma 2014). These initial studies

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent summary of the literature on internal migration see Liang 2016.

<sup>2</sup> A few exceptions in this category are Smart and Smart 2001; Smart and Lin 2007.

<sup>3</sup> This was a one-fifth random draw from a one percent sample of the census constituting a nationally-representative sample (Gagnon, Xenogiani, and Xing 2009).

that assess the experience of a range of types of migrants find that inter-urban migrants can face discrimination in the cities they move to similar to that experienced by rural-to-urban migrants (Gagnon, Xenogiani, and Xing 2009; H. Wang, Guo, and Cheng 2015).

The distinctions among migrants highlight the continuing importance of institutional factors in conditioning access to state-provided resources (Tang and Tomba 2012), particularly the *hukou* system, but also education as discussed further below. *Hukou* remains a key technology through which different state institutions, including cities, seek to manage and control migration.<sup>4</sup> While the distinction between agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou* is often emphasized in accounts of internal migration, the attachment to a specific place that is a feature of the system may now be more crucial. In recent years, controls on *hukou* transfer have been largely devolved to cities, which have developed a variety of schemes for attracting ‘talents’ and investment, as well as stimulating the local housing market by linking local *hukou* to purchase of property. These regimes vary by city, and cities may reassign their power to grant *hukou* to outsiders to commercial actors; for example, some state companies are allowed to issue ‘collective *hukou*’ (*jiti hukou*) to non-locals who are on contract to work for them. Local states also institute systems of temporary residence linked to employment, but these do not grant access to all the benefits that local *hukou* holders enjoy. Local regulatory regimes are constantly changing, depending on the perceived needs of the city for the ‘human resources’ they may attract and the shifting demographics of each location (Nyíri 2010; Young 2013). The dynamic character and proliferation of regulatory regimes results in a significant degree of regulatory opacity for outsiders from other places.

As well as restricting mobility, particularly permanent settlement, these developments highlight how the central and local arms of the state also encourage, support and facilitate migration (Nyíri 2010). One key dimension of this facilitation is the role of education in changing young people’s *hukou* status (Kipnis 2011). Post-secondary education is a common path to migration, and the overwhelming majority of young people move for their higher education, so migration for education is normalized. In 2010, close to 26 million people left their place of *hukou* registration for purposes of education and training (Liang, Li, and Ma 2014). Formal education is thus frequently an actual start of migration journeys, but only recently has this migratory pathway become a subject of research (see for example, Liu et al. 2016). To date, none of the research on educational migration or inter-urban mobility has adopted a citizenship framework as an analytical perspective.

Examining how the state facilitates certain types of mobility while constraining others highlights another angle on citizenship relevant here: its role in legitimating certain types of distinctions among citizens, which come to seem normal, even natural (Marshall 1992; Ong 2006). This is particularly the case for education systems, as Marshall himself noted (1992), and is certainly the case in contemporary China (Kipnis 2011). To analyse facilitation and constraint further, I draw on the concept of ‘regimes of mobility’ to highlight the relational context for both mobility and settlement, and the ways access to power and resources shape this context (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Glick Schiller and Salazar argue that we should look at both mobility and settlement as aspects of sets of social relations that reflect power dynamics and access to resources, and consider both state institutions and priorities,

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<sup>4</sup> There is a huge amount written on the system and how it works, Nyíri provides an excellent summary (2010).

and imaginaries and aspirations of those who move and those who stay (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013).

However, this approach and the literature on internal migration in China takes insufficient account of the extent to which borders are proliferating *within* the country, in part a feature of the highly decentralized system of governance and accumulation (Goodman 2009; Zheng 2007; Friedman and Lee 2010). Thus the regimes of mobility in question are multiple, with city governments being particularly important in their formation, but bordering practices are created and enforced by many different actors, not only the state (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). In this article, I seek to observe this proliferation of bordering practices through a focus on how they operate in two specific fields in different parts of China.

### **Place-based approach**

Given my aim of incorporating a wider range of migrants than has been the case in most research on internal migration, I chose to conduct my study in two differently-situated urban places, with two objectives: to identify commonalities and variation in local policy regimes; and to show how differently-situated migrants experience these regimes. The two cities, chosen due to their contrasting geographical locations which reflect the uneven character of China's development (see for example, Fan and Sun 2008; Zheng 2013), are Tianjin Municipality (a major city, ranking in the 'first tier' of Chinese cities) and Lanzhou (often ranked as 'second tier' but arguably in the 'third tier' given its location in the northwestern interior of the country). In this section, I present an overview of the characteristics of the research locations, describe the characteristics of my interview sample and outline the methods of this research.

Tianjin is a major coastal city, one of only four directly administered (province-level) cities in China, along with Beijing, Shanghai and Chongqing. Tianjin Municipality comprises six districts in its central urban area, four suburban districts with a mixture of urbanized areas and rural townships, five rural counties and the Binhai New Area, an economic development zone with some special powers.<sup>5</sup> Although its status means that administratively Tianjin is a first tier city, locals joke that it is only '1.5 tier' as it has less clout than the other directly administered cities. However, it is a magnet for in-migration from surrounding regions, some of which are historical sources of incomers, such as Shandong Province. At the 2010 census, Tianjin Municipality had a population of 9.29 million, and approximately three million migrants, but recent figures were 12.78 million for the urban core, and 15.47 million for the municipality as a whole. Estimating the contribution to the total number of migrants from the region is difficult for Tianjin, as moving from nearby Hebei Province (of which Tianjin Municipality was once an administrative part) is counted as inter-provincial migration.

Lanzhou is a regional transportation hub for the northwest—both now and in the past. It is the capital of one of the poorest of China's provinces, Gansu. Built on the banks of the fast-flowing Yellow River, Lanzhou comprises four urban districts, one suburban district and three rural counties. It also has the Lanzhou New Area, a parallel administrative division

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<sup>5</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_administrative\\_divisions\\_of\\_Tianjin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_administrative_divisions_of_Tianjin), accessed 2 Sept. 2016.

to Binhai in Tianjin, which was set up in 2012.<sup>6</sup> Situated on the arid loess plateau, Lanzhou has been a major centre for heavy industrial plants, especially petro-chemicals, from the 1950s onwards. For many years, this concentration of industry put the city among the top 10 in the world for air pollution, although in the last three years conditions have improved as some plants have been moved out of the city proper. Figures from the 2010 census put population of Lanzhou at 3.6 million, 2.2 million of which were in the central urban core. In 2016, Lanzhou Municipality reportedly had 680,000 registered migrants, but the total estimated migrant population was approximately 1.6 million (Xu 2016). Compared to coastal regions, a much higher proportion of migrants in Gansu as a whole are from within the province, around 72 percent in the 2010 census (Liang, Li, and Ma 2014).

Both cities have historically been dominated by the state-owned sector, Tianjin due in part to its previous history as a colonial treaty port (Blecher 2009), and Lanzhou as a centre for production of petrochemicals in the early PRC period and beyond. They are magnets for migrants within the regions in which they are situated, and contain enclaves of previous waves of migration, but given Lanzhou's location in the interior and Tianjin's coastal location not far from Beijing, the pool of potential migrants for both cities is quite different. Relatively speaking, however, both are less attractive than comparable locations to the kind of 'talents' that many cities want to absorb. For example, despite being a major destination for university entrants as it has a significant concentration of key universities, Tianjin has difficulty retaining graduates, while Gansu province is one of the least attractive locations for graduates (Liu et al. 2016). Many Lanzhou residents are ethnic minorities, particularly Hui Muslims and Tibetans. Lanzhou envisages itself more as a city of 'immigrants,' as I was frequently reminded by informants when I was there, while despite the complexity of Tianjin in terms of regional origins, the identity of 'Tianjiner' is more defined by the city itself, including a specific Tianjin dialect of Mandarin.

Over recent years, Tianjin regulations regarding non-*hukou* holders have been constantly changing. According to an official from a district labour bureau, overall these regulations are shaped by the perceived need of the locality for educated personnel, but national priorities may override local preferences, for example in requiring that the Municipality find employment for demobilized soldiers formerly stationed in the city. From April 2016, in accord with a State Council directive issued in 2014, Tianjin eliminated the distinction between urban and rural *hukou* holders in the municipality, allowing free movement of persons and a unified social welfare scheme for Tianjin residents. The municipality also adopted a points system for managing *hukou* transfer to the city, with the highest number of points given to people with university and vocational school degrees or technical qualifications and outright purchasers of commercial housing of specified value (Tianjin Municipal People's Government 2016). The scheme began to be implemented in trial form in 2015, allowing those with 'legal regular employment and residence' in the city to begin accumulating points to achieve local *hukou* status (Tianjin Municipal People's Government 2015). In 2015, Tianjin implemented a scheme to issue 'blue stamp' (provisional) *hukou* to buyers of unmortgaged properties. Purchasers were also required to

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<sup>6</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanzhou#Administrative\\_divisions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lanzhou#Administrative_divisions), accessed 2 Sept. 2016.

show that they had either paid tax or made social insurance contributions in the city for at least a year (Luohubang.com 2016). As mentioned by one informant, such blue stamp *hukou* was convertible to permanent 'red stamp' *hukou* after two years.

Cities also have other transactional means of conditioning settlement, even for graduates. For example, Tianjin has 'talent markets' (*rencai shichang*) where eligible people can, for a fee of several thousand yuan, temporarily lodge their personnel file while they are looking for employment.

Lanzhou began eliminating the barrier between urban and rural parts of the municipality in 2013. This same regulation allowed for those with 'legal settled residence' (meaning ownership of housing) and 'stable employment or source of livelihood' (demonstrated through social insurance contributions, payment of taxes, contract of employment and/or business license) to move their *hukou* into the city. Those who could demonstrate that they had invested three million *yuan* or more in the city could move their *hukou* into one of the four main city districts. Suburban counties were permitted to specify their own thresholds for achieving such investor *hukou* status (Lanzhou Municipal Public Security 2013).

The small scale of this study means that its findings are exploratory. It involved ethnographic observation in and around the two cities; qualitative interviews with migrant individuals and/or families; and a review of local policies on in-migrants. The ethnographic component involved exploring areas of the cities associated with migrants and talking to a range of people I encountered about migration to the cities, as well as an ethnographic approach to interviewing.

In both cities, I found interviewees who had been living and working there for a number of years and were from outside the city through personal contacts, but also sought to find potential interview subjects in locales where migrants live and work. This latter strategy was often difficult, as many potential interviewees of lower socio-economic status would respond by saying that their experience wasn't of value because they 'had no culture.' The interviews were designed as illustrative, rather than aiming to be representative of the overall migrant population of each city. Having done ethnographic fieldwork in Tianjin, I have contacts with more connections to ordinary people that enabled a wider range of interviews to be conducted there than in Lanzhou, where I relied mainly on professional people to introduce me to people they knew. I conducted all interviews myself in Chinese, and appropriate ethics procedures were followed. All names used below are pseudonyms. Many interviews were in coffee shops or restaurants, but some were in people's places of business. Informal interviews with people who were not willing to sit down for a formal interview usually took place in the interstices of their working days. Some brief information on the interviewees in each city is presented below.

In Tianjin, I conducted a total of eleven formal and seven informal interviews. Of the formal interviewees, six were young professional people, some in formal employment, and some involved in their own business ventures. Most had migrated into the city from neighboring provinces, either initially for study, or for work. The other five formal interviews were with migrants from rural areas running their own small businesses, or working for businesses, some run by other migrants. Most of the informal interviewees were also in this latter category, but also included a conversation with people in a district labour bureau in the city, and two with young professionals.



In Lanzhou, I conducted ten formal interviews, and three informal ones. A business woman introduced me to three successful entrepreneurs she knows, all working in construction related industries. Another contact introduced me to the general manager of a branch company of a national chain selling health products. I also spoke to a group of nurses from rural Gansu Province working in a private hospital in the city, the owner and a worker in a Hui Muslim restaurant, a bank employee and a couple running a garment wholesaling business in a huge indoor clothing market.

The interviews aimed at eliciting people's stories and understanding of their own mobility. Interviews were open ended, focusing on people's migration journeys and choices, short and long term plans, and experiences of living in the city in question, as well as other places. I also asked about how people dealt with the administrative business involved in mobility, particularly around *hukou* location and welfare entitlements, and what connections they maintained in their home areas and current place of residence. Migrant stories are inevitably complex, contingent and thus difficult to analyse, but some common themes emerged that I outline below.

### **Sorting through 'culture'**

One of the most dominant themes in the interviews was the distinction between people who 'have culture' (*you wenhua*) and those who do not. When I spoke to Mr. Fang, a highly successful property developer in Lanzhou, originally from Zhejiang Province, he repeatedly mentioned his 'lack of culture' (*mei you wenhua*) as a rationale for his exclusion from formal *hukou* status in the city, and the difficulties he had faced in his path to success.

His comment indicates that 'culture' may only be achieved through formal education, which is seen as a measure of what is called 'cultural quality' (*wenhua suzhi*). Formal education promotes aspirations for a certain style of life and work that may not be considered concordant with the type of place in which people's original *hukou* registration is situated, thus eliciting efforts to move to a location that matches the perceived level of culture. However, achievement of 'cultural quality' as demonstrated in educational qualifications is not merely aspirational in its effects, or an informal logic shaping forms of distinction in the sense of 'cultural citizenship' (Fong and Murphy 2006); it is also a status that is recognized formally by urban governments as a criterion for granting in-comers local *hukou* status in the specific city in question through a variety of routes (Nyíri 2010). In this article, I seek to capture both this formal dimension of 'culture' as represented by educational qualifications, and the more diffuse imaginaries related to it that connect 'culture' and 'quality' and relate to the pervasive character of what Kipnis calls 'educational desire' (2011).

Recent research on people who are able to formally move their *hukou* location has found that three main factors are important in facilitating such mobility: membership in the Chinese military, communist Party membership and education, with the latter being the most significant (X. Wu and Treiman 2007; X. Wu 2011). In both cities, people with tertiary educational qualifications are seen as 'talents' that governments wish to attract and incorporate. In Tianjin, the specific criteria for this are fairly clear and specific, especially as articulated in the new points system, but in Lanzhou criteria are not specified, and incorporation of 'talents' depends on requests from employers. However, not all educational qualifications are of equal value in such a calculus, and migrants' expectations about what

their formal qualifications entitle them to be based on a complex of factors including their origins, their aspirations and their social networks.

The contrasting stories of two women I interviewed in Tianjin, both originally from rural areas, illustrate how these distinctions shaped their strategies for navigating the parameters of these institutional frameworks to achieve their goals in life.

Ji Xueping, originally from rural Henan, is studying for an MBA in Tianjin. She chose a western-style café for our interview. A poised young woman with an air of sad determination approaching 30, she hasn't yet married as she's been focused on her goal of escaping her origins. Since she started school, she and her parents agreed that she should 'escape rural life' by going to university. She also talked about how, as the eldest, she had to be a model in her studies for her younger sister and brother. She aspired to attending one of the best universities in Beijing, but despite spending two extra years of study to improve her score in the university entrance exam (*gaokao*), she wasn't able to achieve a high enough mark to get into a Beijing university, and did her BA at Zhengzhou University in Henan.

After graduation, at a recruitment fair at Zhejiang University, she was offered a job at a food service company in Tianjin. Through this route, she obtained a 'collective *hukou*' so she could stay in Tianjin as long as she worked at that company. When she enrolled in the MBA program, her *hukou* was transferred to the university, and when I talked to her, she was studying and working as an agent for a company selling personal insurance. To keep her *hukou* in Tianjin, she's scrimped and saved to purchase a flat, which would allow her to transfer her *hukou* permanently to the city. I asked why it was so important for her to transfer her *hukou*, and she talked about the importance of giving her child (when she had one) a better chance in life—students from Henan face very high odds in the university entrance exam.

Mrs. Zhang, by contrast, has no expectations of being able to stay in Tianjin long term, despite having been there for about eight years. From rural Chongqing, she's 44 and has a daughter aged 20 and a son of nine. She works as a masseuse at one of the fancy spas where Tianjiners go to relax and unwind, in this case part of a chain headquartered in Chongqing, and she worked in the Chongqing branch before moving to work in Tianjin a year after her son's birth. I listened to her story while she gave me a foot massage. The work is hard—and clients are sometimes rude to her because she's not a pretty, young hostess. She tells me several times about a client who told her rudely to 'get out of my sight!'

Her wages and those of her husband, who is a migrant construction worker in another city, are aimed at improving her family's situation through supporting their children's education and building a house in the township near her village. She evidently prefers urban life, and talked about the conveniences of living in the township. The pressure to earn to achieve her goals means she rarely goes home, and usually stays in Tianjin even during the major Chinese holiday of Spring Festival, when most migrant workers go home for an extended period.

Mrs. Zhang has no contact at all with the local state or its agents in Tianjin, but lives as if encapsulated in a displaced Chongqing. She hasn't dealt with any formalities for working in Tianjin, relying on her boss to do anything necessary in that regard. Her employer provides her with dormitory accommodation and meals, and the occasional trip. She has no days off, no expectations of any social insurance benefits through her current job and no employment contract. She said, 'If we want to work, we work.' At several points in her story, she said, 'We're from the countryside after all!' She feels her lack of 'culture' makes it hard

for her family to ensure their children do well in school—although her daughter trained as a nurse in a vocational college (*zhongzhuan*). They are paying 800 *yuan* a term for their son to get tutorial help from his teachers.

Despite their common rural origins, these two women's strategies differ due to Ji's having gained non-agricultural *hukou* through entering university, and struggling to retain this as an expected entitlement commensurate with her educational qualifications. Now Ji seeks to ensure that her future child will have an easier path to achieving recognition as a 'cultured' person than she did. By contrast, Mrs. Zhang feels her lack of 'culture' means her ability to transform is limited, but at least she wants her children to obtain sufficient education to be eligible for 'proper' formal employment and an urban life. To achieve this, she has to spend many years away from home doing sometimes degrading work and missing much of her children's growing in the process. She does not expect either the state at home or in her place of sojourn to help her achieve her life plan.

While the level of culture distinguishes these two women, experiences of the constraints imposed by *hukou* location for graduates born with urban registration were quite different. Their migratory journeys were not motivated by a search for urban *hukou*. For example, Ji's friend and fellow Henan native Wang Xi who accompanied her to our interview, is from what she called a 'third tier' city. Despite the low-ranking level of her home city, Wang said, 'I don't care about hukou.' She had moved to Beijing for what she described as 'emotional reasons.' Another woman I spoke to, Pu Liqing, who's from a city in Shanxi and works at a medical research institute in Tianjin, said '*Hukou* is meaningless today.' Lili, a businesswoman originally from Jilin, said that after graduation from university, she could have gone anywhere, Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan (where she'd studied), or Tianjin, where she has ended up. For these women, having an urban registration and being 'cultured' meant that they could disregard the attachment to place related to *hukou*, and that they took mobility for granted.

A common thread in the narratives of the university graduates I interviewed was a sense of entitlement to the rights of the city—although for those with rural origins this required more of struggle to achieve. For the latter, this meant more resort to the risks and uncertainties of less formal employment or entrepreneurship to achieve a settled urban existence. Two graduate men I interviewed in Lanzhou, both originally from rural Gansu, expressed this combination of anxiety and entitlement, despite evidently being successful in their jobs, respectively as general manager of the Lanzhou branch of a national food product chain and an officer at a private investment bank. The latter told me that his *hukou* remains in his rural home town, but that he is still able to access Lanzhou social insurance, with contributions paid through his company. When he marries, he will transfer his *hukou* to the city, to ensure access to education for his offspring. He said *hukou* matters for people who don't have work—meaning formal employment—but if you are in such a position, it is no problem.

By contrast, the narratives of graduate urbanites, including those who had moved place, evinced more of a choice between settling for a stable if quiet life, or ambitious moves towards higher income and more 'advanced' locations. But these graduates shared an expectation that they could navigate the institutional barriers to mobility fairly easily, deploying their own resources, without recourse to personal networks (*guanxi*). For example, when asked about how he dealt with administrative procedures related to transferring his *hukou* in Tianjin where he was living and working, Mr. Shi, a graduate in chemical

engineering and technology from northeastern Heilongjiang Province, said that if he had to do such business in his home city, he would use his *guanxi* connections to facilitate it, but he had no need to do so in Tianjin.

### **How much culture is enough?**

As the story of the restaurant manager couple with which I began this article shows, urban residence alone does not confer the sense of entitlement expressed by graduates. The sense of lack evinced by Mrs. Zhang's account, then, was not necessarily an imaginary connected only to rural residence, but could also be felt by those without 'culture' from urban locations lower down in the hierarchy of place. Thus the threshold for what is a sufficient amount of culture to fit a particular person for a specific location is contextual, relating both to formal regulations that set criteria for in-migration to that specific place, to particular types of educational qualifications and to imaginaries of what is possible and desirable. These ambiguities often left people struggling to find their place in the city.

An example is those with tertiary qualifications below degree level—such as vocational college certificates (a lower level is called *zhongzhuan* and a higher level *dazhuan*). These qualifications are liminal in that they are not degree level, and thus the entitlements of their holders are perceived as somewhat ambiguous. In this category were three young nurses from rural Gansu I interviewed at a private hospital in Lanzhou where they all worked. All three had completed nursing qualifications at *zhongzhuan* level. None had employment contracts, although these are required by law, and all accepted the hospital's scheme of only paying for social insurance for workers who'd been at the unit for three years or more. Despite achieving a tertiary qualification, their rural origins meant that it often seemed a struggle to find the means to settle in the city and achieve a life fitting with their aspirations.

The oldest, aged 26, had already been in Lanzhou for six years, and wanted to move her *hukou* into the city, but seemed somewhat unsure about how she could do this. However, later she said that she and her boyfriend, a migrant IT worker from Shanxi who she'd met at the hospital when giving him an intravenous infusion, planned to buy a flat and attach her *hukou* to it, but retain his rural *hukou* and entitlement to land at home in Shanxi. She was seeking a more stable employment situation at a larger hospital, as she would get 'better treatment'—more access to employment related benefits as well as a degree of job security.

Although she'd already been in Lanzhou for six years, having done her nursing qualification there, one of the younger nurses, aged 22, said she felt she 'hadn't gained anything from being in the city, it is very hard to establish yourself, the pressure is very high.' She didn't like her work, and hoped to go into business. She wanted to settle in Lanzhou, but due to a lack of awareness about the policy framework in Lanzhou, she had missed an opportunity to transfer her *hukou* there while she was studying, and now it was hard for her to do so. She was looking towards marriage as a means to change her life, saying she was seeking a boyfriend with 'ambition and responsibility.'

Not only those born outside the two cities faced such uncertainties. From a shopfront in a Tianjin neighbourhood, Zhu Flatbread makes and sells the delicious griddle-baked breads that are a common in northern Chinese cuisine. His son was in a similar situation to the Lanzhou nurses, even though he had been born after the family moved to the city from nearby Hebei Province. Zhu said his son had obtained a nursing certificate, and the family

owned not one, but two apartments in the city; a one-room he had prepared for his son's marriage, and the apartment they lived in. Yet the son would only be eligible for a Tianjin *hukou* after he had worked at one of the city's public hospitals for two years on a formal contract of employment.

These interviewees expressed uncertainty about their ability to navigate the framework for official mobility. While their achievement of some tertiary education creates aspirations for an urban life, cities do not necessarily recognize these qualifications as making people desirable 'human resources.' Evidently, the Lanzhou nurses' unsureness about the entitlements pertaining to their diplomas—as well as their rural origins—also affected their efforts to make a life in the city. Interviewees in this category often faced a struggle to get into the formal sector as a means of making these lesser qualifications meaningful for their urban settlement plans, and in the process, often accepted labour conditions that were technically illegal, such as working without a contract or being excluded from social insurance schemes.

### **'Failure' as driver for children's future**

For parents who have 'failed' to varying degrees in to achieve success in the fiercely competitive education system in China (Kipnis 2011), creating conditions for their children to succeed in this arena is a key objective of migration, one that is especially pressing for parents of rural origins. Their desire is one manifestation of a pervasive wish of Chinese parents for children to attend university (Kipnis 2011), but elicits distinctive strategies among migrant parents. Realizing the potential for upward mobility through educational qualifications requires significant accumulation of resources, which may be unachievable for many migrant parents, and may actually involve sacrificing a good family life in the process. The stories of two migrant businesswomen, one in Tianjin, one in Lanzhou, demonstrate these dynamics.

Mrs. Jiang, a lively intelligent woman in her mid-40s, runs a small convenience shop outside the gates of one of the largest universities in Tianjin with her husband. From rural Henan, she took the university entrance exam in the mid-1990s, but was unable to get a high enough score because she 'did not have the conditions.' She's lived in various different places in the country doing migrant work, and she and her husband built up a business in Tianjin after starting off working for others. One of her objectives in choosing the city was to ensure good schooling for her son, which entailed paying 40,000 *yuan* in tuition fees during his first two primary school years. When he was young, she described her son as 'very pitiful' as sometimes she had to lock him into their room alone while she and her husband went out to work. Now 16, her son passed the exam to attend one of the best high schools in the city. She said of her aspirations: 'My hope is that [my son] can have his horizons opened a bit wider, to not be like us and be limited to one place, we haven't had the conditions, so I'm struggling to provide the conditions for him.'

Garment wholesaler Qing Gu, 40, described a life of repeated migration across semi-rural locations in pursuit of profits in an extended family network of clothing retail and wholesale linked to her hometown near Wuhan. As for a number of the entrepreneurs in Lanzhou I spoke to, she and her husband reversed the direction of migration of most of the young professionals in my sample towards the 'big city' on the eastern seaboard, seeing opportunities in bringing commodities to the hinterland. She had spent five years in a town in Qinghai selling clothes to local women, and described this as a great experience.

A major driver in this itinerant life is her son's future. Qing and her husband have purchased housing at home in suburban Wuhan, in part so her teenage son can go to the kinds of schools that prepare him for getting into a key high school and a 'key university.' This strategy meant that she had lived apart from her son for much of his childhood, something she felt very regretful about: 'I'm sorry for our child, [he's] been looked after all along by my father- and mother-in-law, on Saturday and Sunday, [he] does revision with the teacher.' However, she did not consider the option of bringing him to live with them in Lanzhou, as if he took the *gaokao* entrance exam there he would have to have 'at least 100 points more' in to get into the kind of university she hoped he could attend.

### **Housing markets as entry to cultured status**

Like most of the entrepreneurs I spoke to, Qing Gu's strategy for dealing with the uncertainties of the future was familial and based in investment in property in her original home location, as well as plans for the education of her son. She expected and received little from the local state in her home and places of sojourn, relying on her business to provide resources for her family's long term security, such as by defraying the costs of privately-purchased insurance.

As sales of land use rights and associated housing development are key drivers of city economies, generally urban governments allow migrants who have accumulated resources substantial enough to buy market housing of a certain specified value entry to local *hukou*, regardless of their level of education. Purchasing housing thus often becomes a critical means for migrant parents who lack 'culture' to deal with *hukou*-related issues and provide access to education for their current or future children. The market allows them entry, but at a high price, as mentioned above. This was certainly the case for my interviewees in Lanzhou and Tianjin. Municipal regulations regarding housing purchase by outsiders are variable, and in both cities I studied, migrants can transfer in their family's *hukou* with a smaller amount of expenditure if they purchase property in areas outside the central city. For example, in order to ensure that her son can take the entrance exam in Tianjin, convenience shop owner Mrs. Jiang and her husband spent 700,000 *yuan* (approximately US\$100,000) on purchasing a flat on the outskirts of the city so they can obtain a local *hukou*, although she has no desire to settle permanently in Tianjin. They rent out the flat as it is too far from their business and their son's school.

However, housing purchase may not be sufficient for obtaining local *hukou*. In the case of Zhu Flatbread and his family, neither of the two properties they own entitled them to Tianjin *hukou*. In both cities, only property that is new-build, commercial housing, purchased outright without a mortgage and above a certain specified monetary value can enable *hukou* transfer. In some places, purchasers also have to have paid into the municipal social insurance scheme for two years.

Housing purchase is not only important for rural-origin entrepreneurs with few other opportunities to gain a foothold in the city. It also allows graduate outsiders who have moved into a city through formal employment that has provided them with collective *hukou* to make the transfer permanent. Ji Xueping had gone this route, as noted above. Mr. Shi, the native of a 'very, very small' city in Heilongjiang Province described above, works for a company producing environmental technology in Tianjin. He had also managed to purchase a flat in the city after several years of working there with collective *hukou*, and was waiting for the completion of the apartment to be able to effect the formal transfer of his *hukou*. As for Ms.

Ji, he said this would be a formality once he had the title deed to the flat, and for both of them, the main purpose was to ensure that their future children (yet unborn) would have local Tianjin *hukou* and thus access to city schools.

Although the young professionals I spoke to relied on their immediate family to a certain extent, particularly for the purchase of housing, they were much freer in choosing where to go. Ms. Fu, from a small city in nearby Hebei who works as a PA for a large company in Tianjin, wanted to live in 'a big city' and insisted on this, over her parents' objections. Eventually, they had helped her to buy a flat there, not so much for purposes of transferring her *hukou*, but so she could become an eligible marriage partner for a local man. One young man, also from a Hebei city and working for a large private company in Tianjin, said that after graduation he had decided he wanted to work in a 'development zone' and his original idea was to go to Shenzhen. But then he saw some news about the establishment of the Binhai New Area in Tianjin, and decided to go there instead. Among people in similar positions, the more ambitious aspired to move to higher ranking locations—such as Beijing—but generally through proving their worth in formal positions as well as through continuing study. Families often support their children's individualized life projects, whether through education or through the housing market.

### **Outside the culture calculus**

Many of the migrants I spoke to saw little or no possibility of entering into the 'culture' competition, or regularizing their urban citizenship. These migrants expect little or nothing from the local state.

For example, Xiao Bai, who's from Shandong and is in his early 30s, has worked Tianjin for more than 10 years on his family's fresh vegetable stall in the local market. He said everything in the city is about money, but emphasized managing to 'be a person' despite his outsider status, valuing his personal relationships in the city, and connections with home and family. He has few expectations of the local state in Tianjin, but seeks to ensure that his child will get a good education.

For Mr. Ma, the patriarch of a Hui family from rural Lingxia, a Hui Muslim region in Gansu Province, who runs a successful restaurant in Lanzhou, doing business depends on ethnic and family networks. As I interviewed him in a quiet time after lunch, his employees came to give in money for payments or get change. The restaurant's financial system was a plastic bag of cash in his pocket. His workers are all Hui, children of friends and family from back home.

These two stories are fairly typical of the migrants outside the formal sector I spoke to. The entrepreneurs with little formal education mainly wished just to be left alone to pursue their business ventures, although those running larger businesses did need to find ways, often through locals, to deal with administrative demands of the local government. They relied primarily on family networks and savings to ensure the long-term security of themselves and their families, and thus had to maintain connections with their home places in a way that was unnecessary for those who could officially move. These migrants' complaints about local government or discriminatory treatment generally related not to exclusion from social citizenship, but to interference in their business affairs, which they often perceived were more onerous because of their 'outsider' status.

Ironically, perhaps, if migrant business people become very successful, the local state may seek to incorporate them into formal frameworks. For example, the construction

entrepreneurs I spoke to in Lanzhou were all associated with home town business associations that linked the city government with networks of migrant business people from their home regions. In the case of Mr. Fang, the developer, such incorporation even extended to inviting him to join the municipal People's Consultative Conference, an advisory arm of the city legislature composed of local worthies.

## Conclusion

During the research for this article, I never heard complaints about the hierarchies created by 'culture'; no one questioned exclusion from urban entitlements on grounds of lack of education. The education system and its associated measures of 'cultural quality' are seen as creating legitimate forms of inequality among citizens (Kipnis 2011), with the outcomes widely accepted, and serving to shape family strategies of moving and staying, as well as people's sense of entitlement to rights in the city, including social rights. However, the sense of culture as being a key measure of value, or a function of discourses of 'quality,' is not just an imaginary; it is a key means by which the local state determines who can actually settle in the city. Those who demonstrate their culture through their educational qualifications can be eligible for city residence, depending on the perceived requirements of each city.

In restricting access to various services and benefits to locals, urban governments privilege citizens with *hukou* in that city, while perceiving outsiders as 'human resources' to be deployed in city development. The local character of policy regimes makes entitlements relatively illegible for migrants from a different area. The fact that the regulatory regimes are constantly changing makes this difficulty even more acute, as shown in some of the stories recounted above.

Here again, the expectations created by 'culture' matter: young professionals who take mobility for granted expect to become full citizens in the places in which they have decided to settle. Education enables people's insertion into formal systems—of employment, *hukou* transfer, housing purchase and so on—that allow for mobility to go along with settlement, and grant access to benefits of local citizenship. Formal employment gives them access to information about local citizenship entitlements, and the confidence to seek access to these benefits. People employed in more formal settings are also more able to have recourse to the local state if they get into a dispute with their employer, and to have their labour rights enforced. By contrast, those with fewer educational resources may not imagine they can be entitled to similar social provision with locals. What they expect also depends on their individual aspirations and expectations, developed in relation to the institutions and cultural norms with which they have become familiar during the course of their lives.

Migrant aspirations are shaped by engagement with formal education, as well as rural or urban origins. People variably embody the sense of being 'advanced' and thus entitled to a particular style of life. Educational 'failures' can only rely on their own resources and those of family, friends and social networks. Current citizenship frameworks facilitate mobility for those who measure up, but force others to live lives that are stretched between different locations, separating families, requiring constant movement and effort in an often elusive quest for future comfort. Money can make up for some disadvantages—particularly through the mechanism of housing purchase—but only to a certain extent. Some larger cities are now restricting *hukou* transfer through housing purchase.



Looking at migration as regimes of mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) reveals how institutional and cultural systems intersect to create and legitimate distinctions among citizens, and contribute to a proliferation of internal bordering practices (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). But these are very evidently not only generated by the state: market actors and mechanisms are also involved in ‘bordering’ practices, with examples highlighted in this article being the role of employers in issuing labour contracts (or failing to do so) and collective *hukou*, and the involvement of property developers in housing purchase. Both institutional and cultural frameworks make the city an emblem of a pervasive desire for a modern life. Perversely, perhaps, the inaccessibility for many migrants of these goals, and the local state bordering tactics that enforce them, may actually serve to increase this desire.

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