

# **Unlikely settlers in exceptional times**

The impact of social class and selective migration policies on the recent migrations of trade skilled workers and their families from China to Perth, Western Australia

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Anthropology and Sociology

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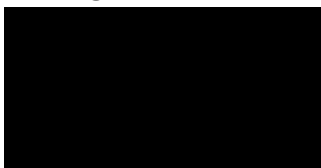
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Catriona Stevens

Date: 13 December 2019

# Abstract

During the mining and energy boom of the mid-2000s, new temporary labour migration schemes enabled employers in Perth, Western Australia to recruit globally to fill labour market shortages. Migration brokers brought skilled tradesmen, particularly welders and metal machinists, directly from factories in China to workshops in Perth. These men were followed by their wives and children and, despite departing China as sojourners, with fixed-term plans to return, many of this cohort have since become unexpected settlers - permanent residents and even citizens of Australia. This cohort are unusual in that their class backgrounds differ from the middle-class and tertiary educated people who comprise the majority of contemporary migrants to Australia, including those from China.

Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Perth over sixteen months in 2014-2016, this dissertation argues that within the context of changing Australian migration policies, social class has emerged as a critical dimension of contemporary migration, arguably replacing race as the most important determinant of entry. Class, in various scales and national frames, is a primary factor that conditions processes of migration and settlement in ways that intersect with ethnicity, nationality and race.

Migration policies have changed in two ways relevant to this argument: firstly, from unskilled and family migration to a selective program which valorises and legitimises certain forms of capital; and secondly, from an emphasis on permanent settlement to temporary, flexible and market-driven models. These deep paradigmatic policy changes now make class the most significant site of migration restriction. Differential access to national membership is afforded on the basis of migrants' capacity to demonstrate their possession of those forms of capital credentialed by migration regulations and visa criteria. Yet, despite their class background and these changes in migration policy, this most unlikely cohort of people are settling in Australia today.

Social class affects processes of migration, but migration also affects class. Nationally bounded homeland class frames are both replicated and challenged under the different economic and social conditions found in Perth. Trade skilled migrants, formerly urban workers or peasant-workers in China, experience social distance from middle-class migrants, who perceive their presence in Australia as transgressive, invoking *suzhi* discourse of embodied cultural capital when discussing Australian selective migration policies and contesting the figure of the (un)worthy migrant.

This dissertation explores social class in the context of international migration, bringing class into dialogue with other theoretical lenses including strategic citizenship, migration infrastructures, and the temporalities of migration. Trade skilled labour migrants' constrained mobility capital and low migration literacy makes them heavily reliant on commercial actors who mediate their cross-border migrations; they have sufficient resources to move but must do so in ways that are risky and expensive. These capital constrained pathways affect settlement processes and future migration imaginaries, creating disjunctures between expectations and lived experiences. Few of this cohort expected to stay in Australia, yet they have become almost accidental settlers, many with dreams of returning to China in later life. Finally, homeland class frames inform strategic naturalisation decisions as migrants must evaluate the instrumental worth of their Chinese national membership in light of the differential local citizenship this entails.

By taking class as a primary lens of analysis and emphasising the importance of national class frames in motion, this dissertation presents a fresh perspective on Chinese populations in Australia, and sheds new light on other intersectional dimensions of the migrant experience.

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# Authorship Declaration

This thesis contains versions of the following published sole-authored works.

**Chapter 7 *Thwarted returns: Mobility capital, returnee preparedness and the accidental settlement of labouring ‘sojourners’* is a later version of:**

Stevens, Catriona. 2017. “‘Now I can never go back’: the thwarted returns of temporary labour migrants from China in Perth, Western Australia.” *Transitions: Journal of Transient Migration* 1 (1): 65-83.

**Chapter 8 *Maintaining and subverting class boundaries: suzhi discourse meets the neoliberal logic of selective migration policies* is a later version of:**

Stevens, Catriona. 2017. “Maintaining and subverting Chinese class boundaries in Australia: do ‘people from different backgrounds keep to their own circle?’” In *Proceedings of The Australian Sociological Association Conference*, edited by Farida Fozdar and Catriona Stevens, 27-33. Perth: University of Western Australia.

**Chapter 9 *Temporal disjuncture and precarity: temporary jobs, permanent visas and circular dreams* is a later version of:**

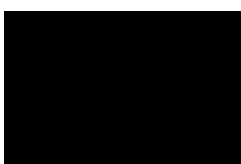
Stevens, Catriona. 2019. “Temporary plans, permanent visas and circular dreams: temporal disjunctures and precarity among Chinese migrants to Australia.” *Current Sociology* 67 (2): 294-314.

**Chapter 10 *Flexible non-citizens? Class, strategic citizenship and the citizenship dilemma* is a later version of:**

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Copies of these publications may be found in the appendices.

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# List of Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ANZ	Australia and New Zealand Bank
ANZSCO	Australia and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations
ATM	Automatic Teller Machine
AUD	Australian Dollar
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CSOL	Consolidated Skilled Occupations List
CNY / RMB	Chinese Yuan / Renminbi
DHA	Department of Home Affairs
DIAC	Department of Immigration and Citizenship
DIBP	Department of Immigration and Border Protection
ELICOS	English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
FIFO	Fly-In-Fly-Out
GFC	Global Financial Crisis
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
LGA	Local Government Area
LPG	Liquid Petroleum Gas
MLTSSL	Medium and Long-term Strategic Skills List
NESB	Non English Speaking Background
OMARA	Office of the Migration Agents Registration Authority
PR	Permanent Residency
PRC	People's Republic of China
RMA	Registered Migration Agent
RSMS	Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme
ROL	Regional Occupations List
SOE	State Owned Enterprise
SOL	Skilled Occupations List
STSOL	Short-term Skilled Occupations List
TAFE	Tertiary and Further Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WA	Western Australia(n)

# Notes on Transliteration and Spellings

Throughout this dissertation, Chinese words and phrases are transliterated using the *pinyin* system used in the People's Republic of China to render Mandarin words using Roman letters.

Exceptions include names and places that are well known in English by a different spelling, e.g. Hong Kong, or those that are more typically known under the Romanised form of another Chinese dialect.

Characters are grouped semantically in the *pinyin* transliteration.

Readers may refer to the glossary of Chinese terms in the appendices.

# Chapter 1 Introduction. Unlikely settlers: working class labour migrants and new selective migration policies

In mid-2017, I met a migration agent working in Perth who specialised in helping so-called “high net worth” individuals from China move to Australia under business innovation and investment visa streams. As we shared an interest in Chinese migration, I told him about my research project and the migrants about whose experiences I was writing. He was intrigued, agreeing that my dissertation focussed on a most unlikely cohort, arriving during an exceptional chapter in (Western) Australian history. “People like them will never come to Australia again, they couldn’t get in now,” he remarked.

His comment captures the essence of my thesis. “People like them” highlights the class background of my participants, and particularly their possession, or rather their lack, of certain forms of cultural capital that are valued under current Australian migration regimes. “Couldn’t get in now” indicates the second dimension of my arguments, that is, the dramatic shift in Australian migration policy which has occurred, and which is still unfolding. The agent’s comments, and this dissertation, position social class as a key lens through which to understand the case of these most unlikely settlers, a cohort of trade skilled workers and their families who came to Perth as temporary labour migrants during the resources boom of the mid-2000s and have since, in many cases, remained in Australia, albeit sometimes ambivalently.



In this dissertation I argue that within the context of changing Australian migration policies, social class is an increasingly critical dimension of contemporary migration. In order to adequately account for the changing meanings social class has for migrants moving through time and space (Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki 2017), I propose an engagement with national class frames in motion as central to an analysis of transnational migration. National class frames are naturalised in social theory and, more importantly, in migrants' own constructions of their social worlds; they have meaning for migrants before, during and after movements across borders and are variously transposed, reformed and reinterpreted by transnational migrants in their new context(s). Attentive observation of these processes, of how people, particularly first generation migrants, draw upon the class frames of their early socialisation to negotiate and understand their relative position(s) in new national contexts, provides a productive analytical lens to bring theories of class (back) into migration. Thus, national class frames in motion refers to the diverse ways that first generation migrants interpret their own intra-ethnic classed locations, as well as the locations of others, through the lens of homeland class maps and class discourses, while simultaneously contesting and changing the meanings of those nationally bounded class frames as they move with them through new transnational social fields.

Class, manifested particularly as the possession of varying degrees of mobility capital (Sheller 2010) and of what I call migration literacy, is a primary factor which conditions processes of migration and settlement in ways that intersect with ethnicity, nationality and race. A capitals-based approach to class (Bourdieu 1986, 1987; Savage et al. 2013) has particular value in this analysis as it relates to both nationally framed Chinese class structures and discourses (Kipnis 2006, 2007; Fong 2007; Hsu 2007; Yan 2008; Sun 2013) and to the ways that migration-facilitating capital (Kim 2018a) is evident throughout processes of migration and settlement (Van Hear 2014; Cederberg 2017). This dissertation proposes migration literacy as a key component of mobility capital that comprises a person's capacity to read and interpret migration legislation and related documentation, and to autonomously execute administrative processes required by the regulatory mechanisms of migration governance. Migration literacy is a critically important competency for would-be migrants, one that is shaped to a great extent by educational background and therefore social class.

Since the beginning of this century, Australian policy has changed in two ways that substantiate the central role of social class in contemporary migration: firstly, from an emphasis on unskilled and family migration to a selective program that valorises and legitimises certain forms of capital; and secondly, from a traditional country of immigration that privileges permanent settlement to an increasing focus on new temporary, flexible and market-driven models. These deep paradigmatic policy changes now make class the most significant site of migration restriction. In the past, all classes could migrate through family reunion and working-class labour was particularly welcomed. Today, points systems privilege education, language and professional skills and so restrict access to working classes. Differential access to national membership is afforded on the basis of class, determined through migrants' capacity to demonstrate their possession of those forms of capital credentialed by migration regulations and visa criteria (Bonjour and Chauvin 2018; Hawthorne 2011; Kim 2018; Shachar 2006, 2011; Walsh 2011).

And yet, despite their class background and these changes in migration policy, this unlikely cohort is living in Australia today. From November 2014 to March 2016, I sought out and spent time with migrants from China living in Perth, particularly those working in unskilled and semi-skilled employment. I encountered some people – the protagonists of this story – who stand out because their homeland occupational and educational backgrounds are quite different from those of most “hyper-selected” recent Chinese emigrants to the developed, Anglophone world (Lee and Zhou 2015). Since the end, in the mid-1970s, of the period of racially restrictive immigration under what is known as the “White Australia” policy, Chinese migrants from source countries across Asia, including the People’s Republic of China (hereafter ‘PRC’ or ‘China’) have tended to be middle-class and tertiary educated with credentialled professional skills (Jayasuriya and Kee 1999; Zhao 2000; Guo and Parr 2003; Lui 2006; Gao and Kee 2011). Against this backdrop of middle-class Chinese Australia, this cohort is unusual.

Over the course of a decade between approximately 2005 and 2015, a new cohort of trade-skilled migrants from the People's Republic of China came to Australia to work and, for some, to settle. Perth in the 2000s was a boom town. Exceptionally strong demand for mineral resources, including iron ore and oil and gas, fuelled a period of rapid expansion of extraction facilities across the state. During the construction phase of this resources supercycle, thousands of new jobs were created and labour force outlooks predicted significant shortages in tradesperson and semi-skilled occupational categories (NAB 2016a; Lowry, Molloy and Tan 2006). New temporary labour migration schemes enabled employers in Perth to recruit globally to fill these labour market shortages. Chains of migration brokers based in both China and Australia brought skilled tradesmen, particularly welders and metal machinists, directly from factories in Chinese cities to workshops in Perth, usually employed on four-year temporary contracts.

For trade skilled workers, disadvantaged by their declining class position in post-reform China (Walder 1984; Solinger 2004; Guo 2016a), a stint of well-paid work overseas was an agential response to the pressures they faced in their home country, which they typically perceived to be increasingly expensive, competitive and unequal. However, taking up such employment was not an easy undertaking. Their low migration literacy, meaning their limited capacity to interpret Australian migration law, resulted in them depending heavily on commercial actors to facilitate their movement and employment. Yet the high cost of such debt-financed migration proved a good investment for many as skilled manual work was well remunerated during the boom years.

These men were accompanied by, or, more commonly, later followed by, wives and children. Australian temporary labour visas, unlike those issued by most other regional destinations, permit immediate family members to accompany migrant workers, with implications for processes of settlement and belonging. Although members of this cohort usually viewed their initial contracts to work in Australia as a short-term undertaking, and certainly not as the first step towards a prolonged relocation, many of these temporary workers and their families have become permanent residents, even citizens of Australia. They found their circumstances changed during their time in Australia, rendering return more difficult than they first imagined. Others have not become permanent settlers. This is particularly true of those who arrived later, as the combined effect of changing selective visa criteria, particularly English language testing, with the downturn of the resources supercycle, led to constrained opportunities for sponsored employment and permanent visas. For some of these later migrants, the gamble of debt-financed labour migration has not paid off, and they have found themselves struggling to repay their debts before their temporary visas expire.

Throughout this dissertation, I demonstrate that it is the combination of these particular local conditions with the concurrent transformation of national migration policies that makes this case study so unique. Perth was an exceptional place during this period, and it is through the historically particular convergence of these economic circumstances with a migration program designed to both supply temporary labour to booming industries *and* increase the population through permanent settlement that these trade skilled migrants and their families have come to call Australia home.

## 1.1 Social class and selective migration policies

Australian migration policy is in the midst of a process of radical change. Since the late 1990s there has been a steady expansion of temporary migration, a dramatic departure from earlier models that emphasised permanent settlement, assimilation and a linear progression towards naturalisation and incorporation into the nation (Walsh 2014; Boese and Robertson 2017; Collins 2017). Alongside these rising numbers of transients and temporary residents, Australia does still maintain a large permanent migration program. However, this too has been reformulated to encourage the settlement of people deemed to have the personal attributes of greatest value to the national economy.

In line with trends in many migrant-receiving countries, Australia increasingly positions immigration as an exercise in “competing for global talent” or “picking winners” (Kuptsch and Pang 2006; Hawthorne 2005; 2011; Shachar 2006). A traditional “nation of immigrants”, population growth through migration has been a core Australian policy objective since the end of the Second World War (Castles, Vasta and Ozkul 2014; Jupp 1998). This continues to the current day, with a policy emphasis on the need to counteract the effects of an ageing population through the recruitment of new migrants of working age (DIBP 2014a,8). In the twenty-first century, the permanent migration program has grown to record levels, consistently around 190,000 per year in recent years, although falling to 162,417 in 2017-8 (Department of Home Affairs 2018, 220). This increase in permanent migration has been accompanied by a shift in the kinds of migration supported under the program. An earlier emphasis on family migration has been replaced by an expanded selective program targeting skilled migrants in the ongoing pursuit of “human capital” (Hawthorne 2011).

During the same period, the number of ‘temporary’ entrants has grown dramatically, now dwarfing the permanent program for the first time in history; 8.7 million temporary visas were issued in 2017-8, more than 45 times the number of permanent visas (Department of Home Affairs 2018, 220, Pezullo 2015). This figure includes tourists and business travellers, but also people with a longer-term presence in Australia, including students and graduates, (grand)parent visitors, working holiday makers and labour migrants on fixed-term contracts. Market-driven temporary-to-permanent pathways exist, but these produce bottlenecks where the value of an individual is again measured against criteria that privilege those with economic resources and/or the educational and other forms of cultural capital typically associated with elites and middle-class migrants (Walsh 2014).

The potential economic contribution of an individual and their family unit is increasingly quantified through points systems that valorise particular individual attributes, like educational credentials, language skills and/or wealth, as well as biopolitical characteristics such as age and health (Walsh 2011; Hawthorne 2011; Cully 2011; Castles, Vasta and Ozkul 2014). Market-driven temporary visas support access to international markets – whether for labour or international students – but without permitting those same people to make claims on the state (Boese and Robertson 2017). Access to and belonging within the space of the nation depends upon performing the role of “deserving migrant” and then “good citizen” within a normative “community of value” that promotes independence, productive work and economic contribution as the criteria for membership (Anderson 2013). Selective migration policies assume that such merit or deservingness may be reliably determined through the measurement and quantification of credentialled forms of capital.

As a result of these changes, class (understood here through a Bourdieusian lens [1986, 1987; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992] as the possession of economic, social and particularly cultural capital, in the form of educational credentials and work skills) is the primary factor determining an individual’s capacity to cross the border and remain in Australia. This stands in contrast with the racist policies of exclusion in the early- to mid-twentieth century, whereby ethnicity and race were once the main factors constraining entry to Australia. The state now plays an active role in determining which specific forms and manifestations of capital are valorised and convertible as migrants work with their intermediaries to achieve their migration objectives, objectives that may vary over time and in response to those same criteria defined by the state (Kim 2018). English proficiency is a visa application criterion granted ever-increasing weight, meaning that ethnicity and nationality remain characteristics or attributes that may intersect with class to shape individual opportunities in relation to selective migration policies. Yet English is a skill readily developed for those with access to the necessary resources, one form of global cultural capital possessed more commonly by middling and elite migrants who may thus also transcend nationally bounded socio-economic classifications (Fong 2011, 21).

Because of the unusual characteristics of the recent Chinese trade-skilled cohort under study - their strong technical skills but lower educational attainment, poor English, and different class background - the experiences of these migrants and their families provide a powerful lens through which to consider new migration trends in Australia, particularly as Australian migration regimes become more closely imbricated with wider changes in the Asian region. For my participants, the migration program and the anxieties, conditions and choices it creates are writ large throughout their accounts of their moves to Australia. Increasingly complex migration legislation, stringent and ever-changing selective criteria for both temporary and permanent visas, and the related development of new commercial actors positioned to facilitate, and profit from, the international movement of labour migrants are all important changes that may be interrogated with reference to this cohort. Within this context of selective migration policy, this case study provides a timely response to Van Hear's (2014) call to consider more closely how social class influences opportunities and decisions, routes and destinations, *throughout* the migration process.

Social class is evident in multiple aspects of contemporary labour migration from China to Australia. The role of class can be observed in emigration decision making and the structural disadvantages that prompted these people to seek work overseas, in the reliance on commercial infrastructures that serve to mediate debt-financed cross-border migration, in differentiated experiences of settlement and employment, in strategic naturalisation decisions that incorporate class-based evaluations of the instrumental value of homeland citizenships, and in intra-ethnic relations between Chinese migrants living in Perth.

Social class is the central lens engaged in this dissertation because every stage of the migration stories I was told by members of this cohort is informed and conditioned by their classed positions in both China and Australia, their occupational and educational backgrounds, and their possession (or lack) of various forms of capital. Their first imaginings of a journey overseas through processes of recruitment, employment and settlement; their satisfaction and/or discontents with life in Perth; their citizenship and naturalisation decisions; family formation and reunion, transnational care arrangements and parenting choices; their long-term imaginaries, migration trajectories, and personal aspirations: all these aspects of their lives are influenced to a significant extent by class.

## 1.2 Portrait of a cohort

### Sam<sup>1</sup>

Sam was thirty-four when he heard about a recruitment agent who could arrange well paid work in various destinations overseas. Married, but with no children, Sam had worked as a welder in large state-owned workshops since leaving high school, initially in his hometown, a third-tier city in the heavy manufacturing heartland of China's northeast, later in Shenyang, the provincial capital nearby. Life was not easy; he only made RMB 2000 (AUD 340<sup>2</sup>) a month, often working overtime with no extra pay. Earning good money overseas for a few years seemed an excellent opportunity.

The agent found him a job in Perth, Western Australia, not somewhere he had considered before, and arranged for a subclass 457 temporary sponsored employment visa<sup>3</sup> that would allow him to remain for up to four years. The accreditation and application process took a few months. In mid-2007 Sam stepped off the plane into an entirely unfamiliar and foreign world. He couldn't speak English. He didn't know anyone, nor anything else about this strange place. Even work was not straightforward. He remembers that when he started working, he didn't know what to do, couldn't understand his instructions. Fortunately, the boss was kind, patient and understanding; Sam was to stay with this employer for the next three years, learning how to work in Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> All participants have been given pseudonyms. The pseudonyms reflect the way that I know and address the participant. Where I know them by an English name, as with 'Sam', an English pseudonym has been assigned. Where I know them by a Chinese given name, disyllabic family name plus given name, or by family name only, an appropriate Chinese pseudonym has been assigned.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation, where currency conversions from Chinese yuan *Renminbi* (RMB) to Australian dollars (AUD) are provided, they are calculated using historical rates relating to the time discussed by participants. For example, in this case Sam reported deciding to apply for an overseas visa in mid-2006. The conversion rate used is that of 1 July 2006 when RMB 1 was worth AUD 0.17. Historical rates were retrieved through online currency tables, accessed here: <https://www.xe.com/currencytables/>

<sup>3</sup> The subclass 457 Temporary Work (Skilled) Visa, formerly Temporary Business (Long Stay), was the visa held by most of the trade skilled labour migrants who participated in this research when they first arrived in Australia. Usually known in both English and Chinese as simply '457' (four-five-seven / *si-wu-qi*), at the time of fieldwork, this visa allowed a worker and their dependent family to live and work in Australia for up to four years. The role of the 457 in broader policy shifts towards demand-driven and temporary migration programs is discussed in Chapter 2.



During the first year, Sam lived in a shared house with four other Chinese welders from work. He hadn't met them before arriving, but they came to know each other well over the course of that year, cooking and eating together. They are all still in Perth. About a year later, once life was more settled and he had his own place, Sam's wife came out to join him. However, she became pregnant shortly after arriving and so returned to China and the support of her family to give birth. Sam was left alone in Australia once more.

The following year, Sam's employer offered to sponsor him and his family for permanent residency (PR) in Australia.<sup>4</sup> While this had not been their original plan, they accepted his offer, figuring that they could still return to China if they wanted. Having PR simply meant more flexibility. Their visas were granted in early 2010; shortly afterwards his wife and one-year-old daughter came to Perth to share his home. While Sam liked his boss very much and was grateful to him for sponsoring his PR application, he experienced increasing conflict with his local Australian co-workers. He felt they were discriminatory towards him and other Chinese welders. Eventually, he could stand it no longer and left this company to find a new job.

This turned out for the best. Sam by now spoke reasonable English, having studied hard to satisfy the English language criteria for their permanent visas. With his new language skills and Australian work experience, he found he could now secure a much-coveted FIFO (fly-in fly-out) job on a mine site, offering far higher wages than he could expect in a workshop in Perth. Sam working away from home was hard for their newly-reunited family, but worth the sacrifice, they felt, for the extra money he could earn.

The downturn at the end of the mining boom was tough for many Chinese welders as work dried up and many found themselves unemployed. Sam was one of the lucky ones; he managed to retain his FIFO job, but the shift roster changed so he had to work longer swings away with less time at home. He finds this tough, particularly as it means he gets to spend so little time with his children. In 2014, his wife gave birth to their second child, a son and an Australia citizen. Her father came over from China to spend a year in Perth helping her. Sam's father-in-law doesn't much like being in Australia, it's an unfamiliar and difficult place to live for someone his age. Nonetheless, he agreed to stay for the whole year because his daughter would otherwise struggle on her own.

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<sup>4</sup> Most members of this cohort were sponsored for PR by their employers under the Temporary Residence Transition stream for a subclass 186 Employer Nomination Scheme visa or a subclass 187 Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme visa.

Sam has some regrets about the move to Australia. He feels the distance from his own parents keenly and is particularly saddened that their grandchildren don't get to spend much time with them. His wife, too, is not entirely happy. When they first discussed him going overseas for work, she never anticipated them settling in Australia. Raising two children in a strange place without the support of family nearby, and with a husband working long shifts away from home, is not easy.

Still, Sam is proud of what he has achieved; with a nice home and a new car, his material life is far better than if he had stayed welding in workshops in China. Even though things are hard for him and his wife as first-generation migrants, he thinks it will be better for future generations. In China, he told me, there is an expression saying that eighty per cent of what we do, we do for our descendants.

### **Miriam**

Growing up in an industrial city in north east China, when Miriam left school in the mid-1980s she went straight to work in a large state-owned construction company where she was, by her own estimation, an "ordinary worker" and trained to operate heavy machinery. She and her husband, a welder and pipefitter by trade, had one daughter whom they raised in the neighbourhood of their work unit, close to Miriam's parents and her brothers' families.

By the mid-2000s people in her home city were all very excited about the "frenzy for going overseas" that was common at the time. Everyone was talking about how living abroad was like being in paradise, that life there was good, and that the environment and the air were so clean, particularly in Canada and Australia. She and her husband were also worried about their daughter, then in junior high school, who was struggling with the rigours of a pressured and competitive education system. School in other countries was said to be less onerous, plus, like many other parents they knew, they wanted her to be able to go to an international university. This would be cheaper and safer if they could all move to another country, rather than paying international fees and sending her away on her own.

Realising this dream of a life overseas turned out to be surprisingly straightforward. They were already in their forties and so were advised they needed to act quickly as the cut-off age for employer-sponsored permanent visas in Australia was forty-five. Her husband found an agent who arranged for him to undertake skills assessment with the representative of an Australian employer. Within a few months he was on a plane destined for a mine site in regional Western Australia, while Miriam stayed in their hometown with their daughter.

A friend already living in Perth helped her husband to find a job in the city, and about a year after that, once he had found his feet, she and their daughter flew out to join him. Barely more than a year later their permanent residency was approved, and they could relax, knowing that they could stay. The transition to life in Australia was challenging. On arrival their daughter's language wasn't good enough for mainstream school so she first had to attend a school for migrant children. However, she made many friends there and quickly was able to transition into mainstream education, pass her high school leavers examination and enrol at university. She is now doing fine, studying full time while keeping a part-time job in a shop near their home. Miriam too has her own tale of overcoming adversity. When she first arrived in Australia, she made a little money doing informal cleaning and ironing work, but she really wanted to find something more reliable and better paid. She met another migrant from China, far more established than she, who runs an aged care staffing agency. Working in aged care in Australia requires English language skills and a 'Certificate III' vocational qualification. Miriam had neither of these, but she did cleaning work for the agency while she studied for her exams. It was hard. Miriam hadn't studied for over twenty-five years, had never formally learned English; the course took her much longer than expected. Eventually she passed all her units and now enjoys caring for old people while she also gets to practice her English in her daily work. She even won an employee of the year award at the agency in recognition of her dedication.

Miriam now lives a quiet life in Perth, rarely getting to catch up with the few friends she has here. Life is busy, working all day and then going home to prepare dinner and look after the house, maybe watching some television in the evenings. Yet she does not feel too lonely. When she watches Chinese television channels and can chat with friends and relatives on WeChat, China does not seem so far away. Her mother is still living in their hometown, but Miriam doesn't need to worry about her care as she lives near Miriam's brothers' wives and they make sure she is looked after. Her mum also has an active social life, spending her days with other older people from the neighbourhood. Both Miriam's mother and mother-in-law have visited Perth. Although they liked the look of the place, they found it was all too spread out and inconvenient for daily life. Without the ability to drive a car, the sprawling suburbs of Perth can lead to spatial and social isolation, so unlike the population density and proximate shops and services of urban China.

Miriam is ambivalent about the future and where she might like to grow old. Her daughter is an Australian citizen now making a good life here, but Miriam and her husband have retained their Chinese citizenship as they may one day choose to return. Her brothers all work overseas, but their wives and children still live in their old neighbourhood in their home city. Miriam likes to remain flexible and keep her options open.

## **Yang**

When Yang and his wife divorced, leaving him and his mother to care for his two children,<sup>5</sup> he knew it was time to make a change. The family had been struggling financially since his father had died a few years earlier, forcing them to leave the home assigned to them by his father's work unit. Yang was working away from home as a welder in small private factory in a city over a day's travel away from the rural county town where he had grown up and where his own children were now in school. The work was steady, and he made enough to send a little money back to the family, but they would never become rich, nor even comfortable, on his wages. This was back in 2004, when the supply of impoverished workmen leaving the Chinese countryside still far exceeded the demand of the urban manufacturing hubs that attracted them. Barely scraping by on RMB 1000 per month (AUD 160), Yang's meagre income was not enough to sustain a growing family, so when he saw an advertisement offering monthly salaries of RMB10,000 for a two-year contract in Korea, this seemed too good an opportunity to miss. Two years passed quickly enough, but at the end of his contract he was sent back to China with a pay packet in his hand and ambitions to find a better path in his heart. Reviewing his options, Yang recognised that as long as he remained in China the odds would be stacked against him. Poor men from backwater country towns faced institutional barriers to getting on in life and social discrimination at every turn. With their rural background, his children were barred from moving to bigger, booming cities, plus he had experienced firsthand how unwelcome migrants to the cities were made to feel by established urban residents.

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<sup>5</sup> In China, children commonly remain with the father and their paternal family following divorce, particularly in rural families. This relates to traditional patrilineal practices and the importance of carrying on the family name but is also because fathers are typically in a stronger financial position and because single mothers are stigmatised (Liu 2013).

He decided to go overseas for a second stint. Chinese brokers at that time were sending labourers and technical workers all over the world: Japan, Singapore, Dubai, Korea, Australia, a confusing jobs market. With the help of a more educated relative, Yang learned that not only did Australia offer somewhat longer, four-year visas for temporary workers; there was also the possibility, however remote, of remaining in Australia permanently. He didn't think this was at all likely, permanent residency was "unimaginable" at that time, but he did hope to make enough money over a four year contract to make a real difference at home. He resolved to find the money required for agents' fees, visas, health checks and airfares, financed through a combination of savings from Korea and loans. His visa was granted in 2007, but his departure to Australia was delayed as a result of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Eventually, in mid-2008, Yang arrived in Perth.

At first, life was pretty tough. He lived with five workmates in a three-bedroom house in suburban Perth. They depended on each other as none of them spoke English, but they also argued since they were essentially strangers drawn together by circumstance living in close quarters. Their employer paid the rent and bills; Yang earned just \$600 per week after these expenses. Yet two years later, to his great surprise, his employer did sponsor him for PR, after which he could secure better paid work and, in 2012, get a mortgage to buy his house. Established in Perth, he sent for his children to join him; now in their early twenties they live in his home and will continue to do so until they marry. The move to Australia has been challenging for them. They arrived in the final years of high school so their English is only good enough for manual jobs, a common problem, Yang reflected, for children of middle-aged labour migrants like himself. Yang has remarried, to a younger woman, also from China, whom he courted online before arranging for her to move to Australia. They have a young child together, just starting primary school.

Yang enjoyed affluent years during the boom, working lots of overtime. Since the downturn things are more difficult; where once he could make up to \$2000 in a week, his current job earns him less than \$800 and so he has started doing gardening work at weekends. If his English were better, he thinks, he might work FIFO for a mining company, and so he also attends language classes when he can find time. He is frustrated by his more straitened circumstances, particularly with a new family to provide for. Yet, despite the difficulties, he is happy with life in Australia, missing China less and less as time goes by. He used to yearn to go 'home' and dreamt about retiring in China, but now considers growing old in a cheaper third country like Vietnam or Thailand. For the time being, his focus is raising his young son here in Perth.

**Sarah**

Sarah and Alan were only in their mid-twenties when they heard how much money a welder could make overseas. Recruitment agents' adverts suggested that employers in various regional destinations would pay a welder like Alan many times his current salary to do exactly the same work. And if he went to Australia, so the broker said, then Sarah could also go there and work. Recently married and planning to have a child, this seemed a good way to get rich quick and provide the next generation with more opportunities than they had had as the children of ordinary urban workers.

Before seeing these adverts, their lives had been stable and predictable. Growing up in a northern provincial capital, when they finished high school, they had both been allocated work with a large state-owned enterprise (SOE) easy walking distance from their family homes. It was an easy life; Sarah did basic administration, while Alan received his training in a metal fabrication workshop. With good, reliable jobs like these, Sarah told me, you wouldn't want to change, even if you didn't like the work that much. After marriage they got their own apartment, but still lived close to their parents and siblings, going to one of their parents' homes for dinner each night after work.

Leaving this comfortable life for Australia was not an easy decision, but they knew it was just for a short while and then they'd be back home and much better off. Alan travelled to a distant city in southern China to attend a skills assessment with an Australian employer who had been flown in by the agent for the recruitment process. This broker told Alan that not only could he provide a job in Australia, the company would even sponsor his family to live there too. They didn't fully believe him at the time. Being in a distant city in China is like being in another country, said Sarah, and in strange places you can't trust what you're told.

They decided to borrow the substantial sum needed to pay the agent fees, and soon the agent had arranged both Alan and Sarah's 457s. Alan set off for his new job in a regional town of Western Australia, where Sarah planned to join him after six months once he'd found his feet. It was not to work out that way. Barely two months after arriving, Alan sustained a serious injury at work that required surgery. Although his medical care was provided through his employer, he was afraid of being unwell and alone in a strange, foreign country. And so, Sarah flew out earlier than expected to take care of him.

Once she arrived, she also needed to find a job. This was harder than expected. Having always worked in the same place, she didn't know how to begin looking for a job. She set out into the heat of the Australian summer but didn't know where she was going and didn't understand the language. Lost and baking in the glare of the hot sun, she stood by the side of the road and cried.

Things slowly got better. She found a cleaning job in a motel and enrolled in an English school, even though it required cycling 40 minutes each way in the heat. It was good to learn some English and her confidence grew, but life was tiring with work and study, plus having to prepare meals to feed themselves every day, a taxing domestic chore they had never had to face while living near their families in China. During their second year, Alan's boss offered to sponsor them for PR but they declined. They just wanted to work out the contract, pay off their migration debt, save some money and return home.

Time can change a person, Sarah noted as she reflected on her migration story. Friends told them that in time they would feel differently, that they should take PR and then consider their future choices. Fortunately, the offer from Alan's employer was still there, and a few months later Sarah and Alan received their permanent visas.

It was during this early period that Sarah became pregnant with their first child, born shortly before their PR was approved. Sarah flew back to China to give birth, and then quickly returned to Alan and her job in Australia, leaving the baby with family. This proved a poor solution as the growing toddler was passed from pillar to post, sleeping most nights with her ageing paternal grandmother but spending the days and evenings with various aunts, friends and cousins, with no routine or opportunity to develop regular eating and sleeping habits. This went on for four years before she was finally brought to Perth; Sarah still frets about the impact this difficult start may have had on her first-born child.

Once they had received PR, they no longer faced the same employment restrictions and were not tied to Alan's employer in a regional town. They had heard that Perth was a better place to live. Firstly, many factories in Perth employed Chinese welders so jobs were easy to find. The large Chinese population also made life more convenient; imported foods were readily available, it was easy to make Chinese-speaking friends, while Chinese-owned businesses simplified the administrative tasks of daily life.

Before moving to Perth, Sarah and Alan went back to their hometown to spend six months with their families and young daughter. This was a much-anticipated trip, their first long visit home in over three years. And yet home was not quite how they remembered. The North China winter felt colder than before, the pollution was oppressive, and the seasonal sandstorms that swept through the city were thoroughly unpleasant. They also found daily life more challenging than in the past. Laughing, Sarah remembers that when they tried to get jobs done, like going to the bank, they'd find themselves at the back of the queue, no longer able to assert their way through the crowd. They realised they had grown accustomed to the slow pace of an Australian regional town and were ill-equipped for the hustle of a big Chinese city.

Returning to Australia, the first seeds of doubt had been sown. When they lived in the regional town, settling overseas was never an option and they were sure they would be better to go back to China. After moving to Perth however they started to imagine a life in Australia and began to think about buying a house.

Now they are homeowners and reunited as a family, with a second child born in Perth an Australian citizen. Since the downturn, Alan works short agency contracts, sometimes in Perth, sometimes a FIFO role further afield. Sarah does not work as she has no family support to help care for the children, but they make ends meet and take in lodgers, usually international students. Once the children are older, they hope to buy a small retail business where they can work together. Perhaps they will return to China one day; Sarah certainly has no plans to trade her Chinese citizenship for an Australian passport. The practicalities of returning with children are too daunting, however, particularly as their youngest was born an Australian. For now, at least, life in Perth is quite satisfactory.

## **Xu**

Xu knew from an early age that it would be up to him to change his own path. The son of farmers from a village in north east China, his childhood was poor with long, cold winters. In the early 1990s at the tender age of 19, he left his village to join the army. He remembers it was hard leaving the love and support of his parents but worth it to learn how to be independent and to rely on himself.

After serving four years, he found a job as an apprentice mechanic in a small workshop in the provincial capital. Life there was no better than the army; he lived in a workers' dormitory onsite and initially earned just RMB 200 (AUD 43) per month, rising to RMB 300 after three months' probation. He worked there for two years before moving on to another workshop and then another; by the mid-2000s he was a talented and experienced mechanic, specialising in servicing quality imported vehicles.

In 2006 he decided to go overseas. He wasn't struggling financially. On the contrary, because he was a fast and skilled worker earning piecework rates, he was doing very well, sometimes making more money than his manager. But he wanted something more. He did not want to become a workshop supervisor as he is not a natural administrator, so where could he go next? A long working life spent servicing the same vehicles in the same place stretched out before him.



Xu had seen an advert for overseas employment and learned from the broker that his qualifications and experiences perfectly matched the requirements of those demanded by Australian employers. His 457 was granted in early 2008. When he set off, he knew no one in Perth at all. His employer had hired three Chinese mechanics at the same time, including one other northeasterner, but they only met upon boarding the plane.

At first it was very confusing. Xu didn't speak a word of English, although the agent had arranged a workplace translator in the first days to help ease the transition. Still, the work was different to that he had done in China, and his new boss didn't have enough appropriate work for him to do. He really wanted to go home but resisted since he had just paid his agent a great deal of money. The boss encouraged him to stay a bit longer and soon Xu had plenty to do and was familiar with his new work.

He stuck at it and a couple of years later was sponsored for PR. The following year his wife joined him, and the year after that his daughter, then aged ten, came over too. She adjusted very quickly. Having already learned English since kindergarten, she soon made friends and is now scoring top marks in high school. Xu's wife, however, did not like Australia. She didn't speak English, had no friends and didn't know what to do for a job. She had previously worked in a large factory with low expectations around worker productivity, and was accustomed to an easy life chatting with her co-workers. She is now a self-employed cleaner and feels more settled in Australia but, unlike her daughter and husband, has not chosen to take Australian citizenship.

Xu meanwhile left his employer to start his own business. He worked from home for the first three years, servicing clients' cars on their driveways, before getting his own workshop. He now has a steady client base and employs three people. Work keeps him busy in the days, but he spends evenings and weekends with his family. It's not like China, he reflects, where it's rare to get time at home since men are always out having dinner with colleagues and clients.

Xu does not hope to return to China. His mother is still there, splitting her time between the old village and the city where Xu's sister now lives. She's getting older and he worries about who will care for her when her health declines; his sister also has her mother-in-law to look after. Yet bringing her to Australia seems impossible; the visa she would need is prohibitively expensive, plus they are out at work all day so they could not adequately care for her. Aside from these worries, Xu is satisfied with his move. It hasn't been easy, but he is proud to have given his daughter new opportunities to excel at school, opportunities he ruefully regrets were not there for him as a youth. He hasn't seen much of Australia as he has been so busy with work, but likes visiting Albany, a small town in the southwest that he admires for being clean and quiet, with a great climate. Perhaps, he reflects, one day he might be able to retire there.

### **Defining a cohort of trade skilled migrants**

This handful of vignettes demonstrates how difficult it is to make generalisations about the people who came to Australia during the resources boom as part of this cohort of trade skilled labourers and their families. They are all different people with their own stories to tell. Yet although there are differences to be found between individuals who each have their unique experiences, there are commonalities to be found, recurring threads in the stories I heard that weave together to form the aggregate tale of the cohort presented in this dissertation. These common threads include:

***Class background*** - Members of this cohort can be defined with reference to occupational class. The male family heads (and primary visa applicants<sup>6</sup>) are all trade skilled workers. While there is variation within this category of occupational class, members of the cohort share similar experiences, particularly in relation to the processes by which they were hired out of China, and to their employment in Australia. Their wives are typically employed in unskilled occupations, a reflection of their poor English and uncredentialed work skills in Australia.

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<sup>6</sup> This is the term used in Australian migration legislation. When a group of more than one person (for example, a family with dependent children) makes a joint application for a visa, the primary applicant is subject to different visa criteria than the secondary applicants (spouse/partner and dependent children). Where the application for a skilled visa, for example, the primary applicant will be required to demonstrate relevant qualifications and work experience for the skilled occupation in demand by their employer, whereas the secondary applicants only need to meet more general criteria, such as those relating to age, health, prior visas, and security concerns.

***Non-traditional sending regions*** – Most of this cohort are originally from provinces in north and north-east China. These are regions without an established tradition of emigration, unlike provinces in the southeast like Guangdong and Fujian, or wealthy, internationally oriented cities like Shanghai, from whence migrants have departed to destinations in Asia, Australia and further afield for generations.

***Staggered migration of family unit*** – Male migrants, the primary visa applicants, came to Australia first, often months or even years before being joined by wives and/or children. Children were often left in China in the care of grandparents so that wives could join their husbands to work in Australia, and only brought to Perth later once the entire family unit had permanent resident status.

***Initial plans of temporary labour migration*** – With very few exceptions, members of this cohort did not intend to migrate to Australia on a permanent basis. They left China as temporary labour migrants, planning to return with some savings at the end of their visa, often entirely unaware of the possibility of applying for Australian permanent residency in the future. They therefore experienced an unexpected transition to permanence, with implications for long-term settlement and belonging.

***Heavily mediated migration*** – This cohort relied on teams of labour brokers, based in both China and Australia, to introduce employers, arrange skills assessment and job offers, and manage the complex administration required to leave China and enter Australia for work. They paid high fees for these services, ranging from RMB 150,000 to RMB 220,000, the equivalent of several years pay in China.

Although this cohort of trade skilled migrants are the core focus of the dissertation, during my fieldwork I also met and interviewed many other migrants from China. Just under half of my participants (26 of 55) are trade skilled migrants and their family members; the remaining 29 are more diverse and include some people from more educated backgrounds, including a few in professional employment and several deskilled through migration. Chapter 4 explains in detail how I came to recruit a diverse group of participants and, through this process, to see the significance of this unusual cohort.

However, it is precisely this diversity that has permitted many of the findings presented here. Analysing class as a relational social category can only work where there are negotiated relations to be considered and varied experiences to be contrasted. While this dissertation is an ethnography of a cohort delineated through parameters of class and nationality, also incorporating the emic perspectives of other Chinese migrants provides fresh insights into national class frames in motion.

## 1.3 Overview of dissertation structure

This is a dissertation of three parts. Chapters 2 to 4 introduce the research project and my methods, provide the theoretical context, and describe much of the background information to this case study, the specific geographic and historical circumstances that produced the experiences of this cohort of unlikely settlers. Chapters 5 to 7 explore how social class has framed the processes of migration for members of this cohort. This includes the initiating drivers that prompted their emigrations, the mechanisms of heavily mediated migration on which they relied, their experiences of settlement in Australia and future mobile imaginaries. Finally, the third part of this dissertation, Chapters 8 to 10, considers this cohort of working-class migrants in relation to the wider China-born population of Perth through three lenses: the temporalities of migration, intra-ethnic class conflict, and strategic citizenship choices. I conclude with a review of the key findings and contributions to the literature.

**Chapter 2 *From gold rush to boomtown: a history of Chinese migration to Australia*** provides the background and context to this dissertation, including a history of Chinese migration to Australia, and contemporary receiving and sending country contexts. Social class as a central lens through which to interpret both the historical trends and contemporary structural conditions that frame the case study of this cohort of trade skilled migrants from China to Australia.

The story of Chinese migration to Australia is necessarily also the story of Australian migration policies, which have at times encouraged or prevented the cross-border migration and/or settlement of certain people. Australian migration policy has shifted from restricting immigration on the basis of race in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Yong 1977; Ryan 1995a; Jupp 2007), to today selecting desirable migrants on the basis of class (Hawthorne 2005; 2011; Walsh 2011; Cully 2011; Kim 2018). Within this new policy context, Chinese Australians, including migrants and their descendants from the PRC and from other source countries, have become part of Australia's "multicultural middle class" (Colic-Peisker 2011; Zhao 2000; Li 2006; Lui 2006). In China, Australia is understood as an "elite migration" destination (Shao 2014); international student and investor migration streams include large proportions of Chinese nationals (Shao 2014; Xiang 2016). A cohort of trade skilled men and their unskilled (at least with regards locally credentialled skills) wives are unusual, as their class background differs from that of most ethnic Chinese living in Australia today.

In the field site of Perth, Western Australia, the exceptional economic conditions of the mining and energy boom offered lucrative employment opportunities for people with heavy trade skills. In post reform China, the class position of workers and farmers has declined over the past three decades. The widening gap between rich and poor, an increasing competitive jobs market and the rising cost of living in Chinese cities created new pressures for people in traditional working-class occupations (Davis and Wang 2009; Wu et al. 2010). These pressures led to new creative and agential responses, including international labour migration to various regional destinations, of which Australia is one. This is an unusual cohort, arguably the first traditional cohort of Chinese labour migrants since the nineteenth century. It is the exceptionalism of both the time and the place, and indeed the people, that make them such a compelling case study for examining the relationship between social class and migration.

### **Chapter 3 *Capital, migration literacy and national class frames in***

***motion: theoretical context*** proposes that just as migration scholars have underemphasised the importance of class (Van Hear 2014), similarly class analyses have tended to be articulated with reference to nationally bounded populations. Since studies that engage class and international migration must account for the different meanings social class has across geographic spaces and time periods (Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki 2017), I argue that this demands a thorough engagement with the national class frames that are naturalised in social theory and, more importantly, migrants' own constructions of their social worlds.

First generation migrants are socialised into class frames that are formed and forged in homeland national contexts. This entails both class as identity and group consciousness and class as structural position and variable life changes, since, following the logics of new class analysis, the material and symbolic dimensions of class are mutually constitutive (Bourdieu 1984; Savage 2000; Crompton, Devine, Savage and Scott 2000; Anthias 2001a; Crompton and Scott 2005) National class frames in motion are an important component of a transnational perspective because these frames have meaning for migrants before they move and continue to have meaning during and after their movements across borders; they are transported, reformed and reinterpreted by transnational migrants in their new context(s).

This chapter briefly reviews some of the ways that class is framed, lived and discussed within the national context of the PRC, since these Chinese national class frames are central to the emic perspectives of first-generation migrants from China to Australia. The declining material class position of workers and farmers is also reflected in their declining symbolic value (Solinger 2004; Sun 2013) and new class discourses that validate particular forms of individualised and embodied cultural capital (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006; 2007; 2011; Fong 2007; Hsu 2007; Yan 2008). An important consequence of these changes is that spatial mobility – both domestic and international – is now imbued with class-based judgements of value (Jacka 2009; Nyíri 2010; Fong 2011; Liu-Farrer 2016; Coates 2018; Sun 2019). These homeland national class frames and the related ways that mobility is differentially constructed as either desirable or transgressive shape intra-ethnic relations in Perth.

While this dissertation engages more than one dimension of class, a capitals-based approach (Bourdieu 1986; 1987; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Savage et al. 2013) is particularly useful because it can be readily applied to both contemporary Chinese class discourses and to the ways that class, manifested as mobility capital or migration-facilitating capital (Sheller 2010; Kim 2018) may be observed throughout the processes of migration and settlement (Van Hear 2014).

In **Chapter 4 *Methodological notes*** I explain how I conducted the research which informs this dissertation. Sixteen months of fieldwork from November 2014 to February 2016 featured ethnographic methods of participant observation and unstructured interviewing. These methods were ideally suited to a process of patiently and iteratively coming to understand a cohort of migrants whose presence in a particular urban environment, while unusual and intriguing, is also to some extent obscured by the circumstances of their migrations.

This chapter explores my positionality as a researcher; I am an ethnic and racial outsider, yet other sites of identity granted degrees of insider status, in particular my shared experiences of migrating to Australia, that affected the collaborative production of knowledge with participants (Merton 1972; Merriam et al. 2001; Voloder 2014; Van Mol 2014). The chapter further discusses how participants were recruited and how accessing the field can change the kinds of knowledge produced.

In conducting this research, I embraced an abductive analytical paradigm (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), recognising the co-dependency of observation with theory, of discovery with justification. It was my interactions in the field that firstly made me aware of this unusual cohort, and secondly highlighted the relevance of class for this cohort, particularly in relation to and comparison with other migrants from China. The theoretical insights arising through abduction from surprising findings helped me formulate the intriguing questions of why and how they came to be in Australia, an example of the power of the field to shape social research (Kalir 2006).

**Chapter 5 *Coming to Australia: class and ethnicity in the initiating drivers of migration and experiences of early settlement***, the first ethnographic chapter in the second part of this dissertation, argues that for this cohort of trade skilled migrants the processes of migration and settlement were fundamentally shaped by both social class *and* ethnicity. A chapter of two halves, it portrays firstly the circumstances of their initial out-migrations, and secondly how they experienced their early days, weeks and months in Australia.

The early migration experiences of members of this cohort, including their pre-departure circumstances and deliberations, the process of finding employers through paid intermediaries, and the events of travelling to Perth, finding their bearings, a home and, for trailing wives, suitable employment, are informed and shaped by their personal characteristics. This includes their nationality, as some dimensions are particular to PRC citizens. It includes their ethnicity, language and race, as they saw Perth through a Chinese lens. It includes their social class, and it is these dimensions that most interest me as they are factors that distinguish this cohort's processes of emigration and early settlement from those of many other China-born migrants to Western Australia.

The structural factors conditioning outmigration can be understood here in terms of "driver complexes". In this chapter I borrow this typification of drivers from Van Hear, Bakewell and Long's (2018) "push-pull plus" model to make sense of the exceptional circumstances that prompted their emigrations. An analysis of the driver complexes acting upon members of this cohort shows that most factors can be clearly linked to their social class and technical manual skilled occupations.

However, their decisions to go overseas were made in the context of national normative discourses that valorise mobility (Nyíri 2010; Sun 2002), discourses that influence the migration decisions of Chinese from all class backgrounds. Although trade skilled participants typically frame their emigration decisions in financial terms that echo neoclassical theories of migration (Harris and Todaro 1970; Passaris 1989), the other aspirations and frames they express demonstrate the cultural and economic logics of migration are mutually constitutive and cannot be meaningfully separated (Coates 2018; Carling and Collins 2018; Ho 2014).

This chapter further argues that participants' impressions of arriving in Australia, particularly those who came at a time when the China-born population of Perth was still comparatively small, were shaped by their working class and regional backgrounds, their limited English skills and their constrained mobility capital. Although some aspects of their early settlement are shaped by ethnicity and so are common to those of co-nationals from middle class families, there are key differences. By exploring these similarities and differences, this chapter presents some of the ways that *intra-ethnic class* is manifested through the migration experiences of this cohort.

**Chapter 6 Migration literacy and commercial infrastructures: the logics and risks of debt-financed labour migration** explores the ways that trade skilled migrants and their families relied on commercial actors to mediate their employment in Australia. Both China and Australia have large developed migration industries, comprising recruiters and intermediaries, as well as other individual and institutional actors like education providers or skills assessors (Xiang 2012a; 2013a; 2017a; Khan 2019). Almost all the migrants in this cohort paid high fees, the equivalent of several years' income in China, to chains of brokers who introduced employers and managed the administrative requirements of Chinese emigration and Australian immigration.

I argue that the intensive mediation of labour migration (Xiang and Lindquist 2014) has three main effects for this cohort. Firstly, it increases the cost of labour migration for individual migrants. Substantial broker fees must be paid in advance, a costly endeavour, particularly when, as has often happened, migrants find that the promised job is not there for them upon arrival in Australia. Secondly, and clearly related, these migrations are debt-financed; fees are usually covered through homeland borrowing and must, of course, be repaid. Migrants rely heavily on long hours of overtime to cover these costs, increasing the risks for those arriving later in the economic cycle. Finally, it creates a situation where migrants are potentially at risk of exploitation, or exposure to poor working conditions through the actions and misinformation of employers and/or agents. These risks are exacerbated by the debt trap typically experienced in the first months and years following departure from China.



Xiang and Lindquist (2014) highlight the complex entanglements of actors, institutions and technologies that collectively facilitate, condition and constrain contemporary international migration, paradoxically working to make cross-border movement simultaneously more free and more difficult. The commercial and regulatory dimensions of these *migration infrastructures* are particularly relevant to this chapter. I bring social class into this discussion through a focus on how forms of capital, and particularly constrained informational and social capital make individual migrants dependent upon commercial intermediaries. I further propose the concept of *migration literacy* as a critical dimension of mobility capital and way of articulating the particular dependencies engendered through low information capital in relation to the regulatory regimes of the immigration state.

In **Chapter 7 *Thwarted returns: mobility capital, returnee preparedness and the accidental settlement of labouring ‘sojourners’***, an earlier version of which has been published in *Transitions: A Journal of Transient Migration*, I argue that class background and low mobility capital may have just as significant an influence on return and life course retirement migration as they do on initial labour emigration. Members of this cohort of trade skilled migrants mostly first came to Australia as sojourners, with fixed term, temporary plans. Yet, often to their great surprise, many have been thwarted in their plans to return and have instead experienced an unexpected transition to become permanent residents, even citizens. This chapter considers the divergence between the migration imaginaries of many of this cohort of migrants when departing China and their actual experiences after coming to Australia, drawing on this case study as a contribution to critiques of the dichotomy of ‘settlers’ and ‘sojourners’ established in Australian migration histories and preserved in the contemporary lexical equivalents of permanent and temporary migration (Jupp 2007; Fitzgerald 2007; Boese and Robertson 2017).

This chapter argues that while return and discourses of return must be understood within contemporary migration models that emphasise circular, transient and open-ended mobility, the processes of return migration are nonetheless constrained and conditioned by class and individual resources (King 2000; Gold 2001). While recognising the contemporary shift towards mobile and transnational lives among migrants of all class backgrounds, it is important not to overlook the very real and material barriers to return that some temporary migrants experience. Constrained mobility capital and low “returnee preparedness” (Cassarino 2004) are factors which condition the choices and opportunities available. This can result in dissonance between expected plans and actual outcomes, and some consequent feelings of dissatisfaction with life in the new ‘host’ setting.

The first chapter in Part Three, **Chapter 8 *Maintaining and subverting homeland class boundaries through migration***, a version of which has been published in refereed proceedings of The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) 2017 Conference, engages with the central theme of social class but inverts the focus of inquiry by asking not how class affects migration but rather how migration affects class. I argue that homeland class hierarchies originating in China were replicated but also challenged by the exceptional conditions and “blue collar affluence” (Forsey 2015) of the Western Australian resources boom.

This chapter addresses a gap in the literature as intra-ethnic class is largely absent from Australian studies of ethnicity. Earlier work focussed primarily on class as a fault line that divides ethnic and racial minorities from the dominant Anglo-Celtic majority (de Lepervanche 1980; Jakubowicz 1984) while the few more recent studies (Baldassar, Pyke and Ben Moshe 2017; Colic-Peisker 2002; 2008; Khorana 2014) consider class only between different migration waves, arriving in Australia at different points in time. This chapter provides new insights into *intra-ethnic class*, moving beyond these analyses to consider classed relationships between co-nationals arriving in Australia at roughly the same point in history. Social class both interacts with and (importantly) is discussed with reference to the changing structures of migration governance. This last point is particularly interesting, as it points to the ways that migrants from China internalise, interpret and reproduce the neoliberal logics of Australian selective migration policy with reference to Chinese national class frames.

Migration to Australia has created more opportunities for Chinese from different class backgrounds to interact in their daily lives; encounters arise because of a shared language in a strange land, ethnic concentrations in some suburbs, and ethnic rental markets and other niche economies. The unique local economic conditions of the resources boom meanwhile subverted occupational hierarchies now firmly established in contemporary China. This chapter explores how transgressive class mobilities are negotiated by migrants from diverse class backgrounds and considers common boundary-maintaining responses.

**Chapter 9 Temporal disjuncture and precarity: temporary jobs, permanent visas and circular dreams**, an earlier version of which has been published in *Current Sociology*, contributes to an emerging literature on the temporalities of migration (Cwerner 2001; Griffiths 2014; Conlon 2011; Coe 2014; Robertson 2019a; 2020). I consider the disjuncture that exists between the temporalities of legal status and those of migrants' lived experiences and explores the relationship between precarity and temporality. While migrants may hold temporary or permanent visas, their migration objectives and settlement processes do not necessarily accord with their formal status. I argue that although migrants from China from various class backgrounds can and do experience temporal disjuncture and prolonged temporariness (see also Robertson 2014; Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2014), the nature of these experiences is conditioned by social class and, significantly, by the pressures and risks of debt-financed, heavily-mediated migration.

Some participants arrived in Australia with the intention of quickly attaining permanent residency yet continue to experience the precarious employment, liminality and family disruption that comes with a prolonged and indeterminate temporariness. Meanwhile others, as described in Chapter 6, have become permanent residents despite arriving as self-imagined sojourners, employment in Australia very often the next step in a series of temporary labour migrations within China or to other countries in the region. Even after years of permanent status, however, many of these people experience a limited sense of belonging and imagine futures that entail circular patterns of on-migration. This further unsettles the permanent-temporary dichotomy as it disrupts ideas about permanence that are implied in secure legal statuses and provides further evidence of the lasting impact of precarious temporalities (Goldring and Landolt 2011).

**Chapter 10 *Flexible non-citizens? Class, strategic citizenship and the citizenship dilemma***, the final ethnographic chapter, a version of which has been published in refereed proceedings of The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) 2019 Conference, addresses the “citizenship dilemma” (Ho 2011a) faced by most migrants from China living in Australia. Dual nationality has been possible under Australian law since 2002, however China does not permit dual nationality. If a Chinese citizen acquires the citizenship of another country, they are deemed to have relinquished their Chinese citizenship and are thereafter treated as aliens under Chinese law and by systems of Chinese public administration. For those with ongoing ties in China, whether remaining relatives, or personal financial affairs, 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), and so naturalising in Australia may make longer visits and return or retirement migration much more difficult.

The case studies presented explore this citizenship dilemma provides a new perspective on the “instrumental turn” in citizenship (Joppke 2019) whereby national membership is no longer a sacred and exclusive pact between the individual and the state, but rather a commodity with instrumental value. By bringing class into this analysis, I demonstrate that differential citizenship within China has a material role to play in instrumental calculations of value. Since *hukou* functions as a “local citizenship institution” (Vortherms 2015), the differential benefits, both material and symbolic, of urban membership in the large cities of China forms a critical part of these calculations, over and above the national level membership within which local *hukou* citizenship is nested. I apply Bauböck’s (2010) constellations approach to this analysis, demonstrating the complexities of balancing the relative value of overlapping memberships acquired through migration and nested membership resulting from local citizenship with China.

Many participants have determined that their best course of action is either flexible non-citizenship or forming a *split nationality household*. Those choosing not to naturalise argue that the combination of Chinese citizenship with Australian permanent resident denizen status offers, on balance, the greatest accumulation of rights across the two jurisdictions. Others create split nationality households where one or more members take Australian citizenship, while others remain Chinese nationals. This extends the constellations approach beyond a consideration of the individual as the unit of analysis to include broader family memberships.

Finally, **the conclusion, *Bringing class (back) into migration: migration literacy and national class frames in motion*** summaries the key findings presented in this dissertation, and reflects on limitations and possible directions for future research.

This dissertation contributes to (re-)theorising the relationship between class and migration by providing a detailed case study of class-situated patterns of capital accumulation and conversion in processes of migration; the findings illustrate how capital-constrained trade skilled migrants with low migration literacy strategically operationalise various species of capital to achieve migration objectives. However, I further demonstrate that a study of class and migration has particular purchase when examined in reference to China precisely because of the ways that Chinese national class frames have become so deeply imbricated with spatial mobility and the framing of movement both within and beyond borders as either desirable and something to be emulated or transgressive and something to be controlled.

While social class and the resultant resources individual migrants can mobilise undoubtedly affects the migration trajectories of people of all national backgrounds, an analysis based on the individualised capitals of migrants and their engagement with selective migration policies and the infrastructures of migration governance is not quite enough to understand the varied and complex ways that class features in the lives of first generation migrants. In response to the gaps this approach leaves unanswered, I propose the concept of national class frames in motion as an important analytical framework to explore dimensions of class in transnational contexts. National class frames in motion refers to the diverse ways that first generation migrants interpret their own intra-ethnic classed positions, as well as the positions of others, through the lens of homeland class maps and class discourses, while simultaneously contesting and changing the meanings of those nationally bounded class frames as they move with them through new transnational contexts. As migrants are socialised into class frames that are formed and forged in homeland national contexts, these same national class frames necessarily have ongoing meaning during and after their movements across borders; they are transported, reformed and reinterpreted in receiving country contexts.

# PART ONE

## Chapter 2      From gold rush to boomtown: a history of Chinese migration to Australia

The history of Chinese migration to Western Australia begins in the very first days of European settlement. Moon Chow (*Zhou Man*) is the first recorded Chinese to live in the place that is now called Perth. He arrived in 1829, the same year that the Swan River colony, as it was then known, was founded by the British (Ryan 1995a, 41). However, the progression from that first arrival through to the vibrant and growing Chinese populations in Perth today was complex, troubled, and far from linear.

The changing fortunes and changing composition of the Chinese population in Australia can be best understood with reference to shifting migration policies over time. Australia, the first country in the world to establish an Immigration Department in 1947, has since Federation in 1901 explicitly linked national security and economic growth to managed immigration and an expanding population. Migration policy has fundamentally determined which kinds of Chinese people have come to Australia and when.

This extended chapter provides much of the background and context necessary to understanding the findings presented in this dissertation. This includes both the history of Chinese migration to Australia from early nineteenth century colonial era settlement through to the present day, as well as contemporary receiving and sending country contexts. I argue throughout that class is a central lens through which to interpret both the historical trends and contemporary structural conditions that frame the case study of this cohort of trade skilled migrants from China to Australia.

Recent trade skilled migrants may be understood as the first example of a classical labour migration from China to Australia since the start of the twentieth century, after which the exclusion of non-European migrants under the White Australia Policy effectively curtailed the Chinese labour migration of the pre-1901 colonial era. People from China and ethnic Chinese from other parts of Asia and the wider world have moved to Australia in the intervening decades, and most that stayed have found some form of work. However, it is only with the advent of this latest resources boom that there has been a revival of a more traditional pattern whereby working-class labourers were recruited directly from overseas to fill a temporary labour market shortage in Australia.

There are striking parallels between the trade skilled cohort of migrants and their families who came to Perth from the mid-2000s and the colonial era labour migrants to Australia. Similarities include a heavy reliance on intermediaries, ‘sojourner’ expectations in relation to short-term work, and family migration patterns whereby solitary men came first, only later followed by trailing spouses. There are also discontinuities. In contrast with their colonial era antecedents, contemporary migrants from China are not barred from settlement and normal family formation on the basis of race.

By considering the shifts from the racist politics of exclusion that framed the migrations of indentured labourers and early (would be-) settlers of colonial Australia, through to the many waves of Chinese migrants from South East Asia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the PRC during the contemporary era of official multiculturalism and selective skilled migration, I explain just how complex and diverse the ‘Chinese’ population of Australia is today. I further show that while colonial era arrivals from China were predominantly working-class labourers, more recent Chinese migrants from various Asian source countries tend to be highly educated and professionally skilled, members of a new “multicultural middle-class” (Colic-Peisker 2011). The cohort of trade skilled labour migrants whose experiences are central to this dissertation differ in important respects, particularly their more modest educational backgrounds, from the majority of recent Chinese migrants from the PRC and other Asian source countries in the post-White Australia era.

“Chinese migrants in Australia” is a term with no specificity, one that should provoke far more questions than it answers. The aggregate term “ethnic Chinese” is similarly an imprecise descriptor, encompassing a wide range of people of different nationalities, sub-national ethnicities, languages, religions, political outlooks, and so on. Yet I use this term “ethnic Chinese” throughout the dissertation to describe all people with Chinese ancestry as this reflects the way that Australian public administration captures demographic data relating to race and ethnicity.<sup>1</sup>

I avoid using the term “diaspora” to describe any or all of the Chinese “communities” found in Perth today, rejecting the heterogenous, or even essentialised and chauvinistic, interpretations of ethnicity this can too often entail (Brubaker 2005, 12; Ho 2019, 4; Gabaccia 2000). As Skeldon (2003, 63) has argued:

Diaspora appears to imply some form of uniformity, of a single great wave of oriental peoples that may threaten other societies. That wave is made up of many separate and distinct parts. To include them all as if they were part of a

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of how race and ethnicity are measured in Australia and how this has changed over time, see Fozdar and Stevens (2020).



single migration is extremely deceptive. ...There has perhaps been a Chinese diaspora but, more meaningfully, there has been a varied and complex migration of Chinese peoples.

I hesitate also in referring to a Chinese “community” or “communities”. In Baumann’s (1996, 16) compelling attack on ethnic reductionism he suggests this is a word that should perhaps only be used with scare quotes since in dominant discourse it so often serves as the “conceptual bridge which connects culture with ethnos”. Similarly, I try to avoid the naturalisation of “groupism”, critiqued by Brubaker (2002, 164), particularly where reified ethnicity or race is assumed to delineate “discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogenous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life”. Ethnic Chinese are perhaps the “group” that most clearly illustrates the fallacy of a groupist paradigm since the segmented incohesive realities of people with fluid, flexible identities distinguished by class, generation, region of provenance, subethnicity, length of residence, etcetera belies the fixedness implied in any “group” (Ang 2013; Benton and Gomez 2014).

While this dissertation accounts for a particular cohort of migrants, defined and delineated by ethnicity, nationality, time of arrival in Australia and occupational background, the stories told are those of individuals and their families. My participants talk about and spend time with other migrants from China. They have friends and colleagues, working and social lives that are shaped by race, ethnicity, and particularly nationality and language, but I found this was rarely articulated in ways that reflect the identity politics engaged by terms like “diaspora”, “community” and “group”. Indeed, one interesting aspect of participants’ experiences addressed later in this dissertation (see Chapter 5) is that they often describe themselves as pioneers in Australia, with little reference to the long history of Chinese migration and settlement which pre-dated their arrivals. Notwithstanding this sense of distance from other, more established Chinese “communities”, this chapter seeks to situate these individual stories and messy realities within the historical and contemporary Chinese ethnic landscape of metropolitan Perth.

## 2.1 Working class colonial “sojourners” in a White Australia

Since the first years of the British colonies, and particularly after Federation in 1901, Australia pursued large-scale, state-sponsored migration programs. These were designed to populate the vast southern continent, and to maintain the British, or as a second best, European characteristics of the new nation (Jupp 1998, 2018; Jayasuriya, Walker and Gothard 2003). Despite this emphasis on European migration, Chinese also play a significant part in the history of the early Australian colonies.

In his influential histories of the Nanyang Chinese diaspora, Wang Gungwu (1959; 1992; 2000) identified the prevalence of a sojourner outlook among *huaqiao* overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Colonial era Chinese migrants to the Anglophone world were often conceived as “sojourners” in the mould of Paul Siu’s (1952) ideal type, neither desiring nor capable of assimilation to the mainstream. Chinese labour migrants to Perth in the colonial period may be seen to fit this pattern. They typically travelled via Singapore, their journeys managed by chains of migration brokers, with a heavy male gender bias. Although some married European women and raised families, many Chinese in Western Australia remained unmarried, the result of both normative expectation of male emigration and restrictive Australian policies limiting settlement rights for non-European women (Ryan 1995a; Fitzgerald 2007; Baldassar 2017). Yet “sojourner” has become a dirty word in Australian migration studies, steeped in racist histories that contrast white (British) settlers with unassimilable Asian sojourners. It is a term that served as a weapon of exclusion, routinely deployed against Chinese migrants on the basis of race, but also sometimes deployed between early Chinese Australians to delimit belonging and present some lineage groups as more committed to life in Australia than others (Fitzgerald 2007; Reeves and Mountford 2011, 118).

Despite these discourses of exclusion and the restrictive immigration policies enacted across Australia, many Chinese did come to Australia during the colonial era and some did settle in Perth. The first Chinese migrants to Western Australia were predominantly working-class labourers, recruited by brokers to work in primary industries throughout the colony. Although not all early Chinese migrants to Perth came from poor families, and indeed some had sufficient wealth and influence to found Australia's first pan-Chinese association in the Perth suburb of Northbridge in 1908 (Cai 1999), by mid-century the Chinese in Perth were very marginalised. Policies of exclusion and restrictions on Chinese businesses resulted in an impoverished population working predominantly in ethnic niche sectors, particularly laundries and market gardens (Ryan 1995a; Atkinson 2001). The next section charts the creation of mid-twentieth century working-class Chinese Australia.

### 2.1.1 Chinese labour migration to the Australian colonies

In 1829, the colony of Swan River was founded and the new agricultural settlement initially attracted both middle class investors and labourers from Britain (Cameron 1981). However, news of hard conditions, colonial administrative failings and widespread disease got back to London, and as the flow of willing settlers dried up, the colony faltered (Stannage 1979).

The west of Australia then faced a shortage of workers. Landholders, eager to profit from the agricultural potential of their new territories needed cheap labour in plentiful supply. Indigenous Australians, dispossessed of their land by the fiction of *terra nullius*, were deemed not fully human by the new colonists. They were further considered inadequate in number and unsuitable as farm labourers in the new colony (Saunders 1982). Transported convicts from Britain and Ireland provided some of the much-needed manpower, particularly under the prevailing model where they were assigned to landholding masters and dispersed through the country (Hirst 2009). Transportation of Anglo-Celtic prisoners, and increasingly free settlement from the 1840s onwards, also suited the designs of London to create a "New Britannica", a land of agricultural wealth peopled primarily by the British.

That Australia was imagined as a British outpost profoundly shaped immigration throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Britain was the largest source country of migrants from 1788 to 1996, while Australian policy distinguished between “British” and unnaturalised “aliens” until 1983 (Jupp 2007, 12). Although Irish have been part of the story of the European settlement of Australia since the First Fleet, they were often segregated from the primarily Protestant British, suffering consequent economic disadvantage that was evident as late as the 1970s. Their incorporation into the charter group of Anglo (Celtic) Australia was slow, echoing the experiences of Irish in North America (O’Farrell 2001, Ignatiev 2009).

Despite the transportations and the efforts in London to encourage settler migrants, there remained a critical shortage of farm labourers throughout all of the colonies of Australia. Influential landowners argued for the introduction of indentured labourers, a common model throughout the British Empire at that time (Saunders 1982). The first shipload of Chinese workers embarked at Amoy (now Xiamen) for New South Wales in 1848, and by the time gold was first discovered in Victoria in 1851, perhaps 3,000 Chinese had been brought to Australian farms (Choi 1975). News of the gold rush reached the ports of south east China within one year, prompting the arrival of independent migrants seeking their fortune. The Chinese population of Victoria exploded: according to the 1854 Census there were 2,341 Chinese in the colony; by the 1857 Census this number had peaked at 25, 424 (Choi 1975).

Throughout the colonial period prior to Federation in 1901, Chinese immigrants to Australia were predominantly, though not exclusively, from poor, rural families. They tended to follow the sojourner pattern common to Chinese migration throughout the Asian region (Wang 1990; 1992; 2000; Amrith 2011); many left their villages out of desperation and a requirement to fulfil their given role in strategies intended to improve the circumstances of larger family or agnate groups through the labour migration of some members.

The Chinese in colonial Western Australia, differed in two important respects from those in the eastern colonies. Firstly, they were far fewer in number. Only 5,000 Chinese worked in Western Australia over the course of the nineteenth century, with population peaking in 1897 at 1,937 individuals (Ryan 1995a, 14). Secondly, they came from diverse places within China and spoke a variety of different dialects; this was because they were recruited not from Hong Kong, but rather through Singapore, where brokers channelled Chinese labourers to destinations throughout the British Empire (Ryan 1995a; Cai 1999, 40).

Under pressure from timber merchants, pastoralists and pearlers, the colonial government in Perth subsidised the recruitment of Chinese indentured servants to ease the labour shortage. The first Chinese arrived under this program in 1849, and while the numbers were initially limited as Britain sought to resolve the issue through the transportation of convicts between 1848 and 1869, after the supply of convicts ceased more government-subsidised Chinese were recruited during the 1870s and 1880s (Ryan 1995a). These indentured labourers were employed as farmhands, servants, gardeners and cooks and were often poorly treated, disadvantaged by both class and race. Many died as a result of hard work and exposure, and suicide rates were far higher among Chinese than the European population at the time (Ryan 1995b).

### 2.1.2 Anti-Chinese sentiment, restrictive migration policies and the White Australia era

Across Australia, Chinese immigration faced strong opposition from majority British settlers throughout the nineteenth century. Anti-Chinese feeling was underpinned by the racist logics of the colonial era, however the expression of anti-Chinese feeling in Australia was often tied to circumstances of economic competition, as seen in the Buckland River riot of 1857 and the violent disturbances at Lambing Flat in 1860-1 on the goldfields of New South Wales and Victoria (Cronin 1982; Wang 2001). In urban areas too, competition in particular industries typically led to anti-Chinese agitation, whether among brick manufacturers in Bendigo, furniture makers in Melbourne or market gardeners in Perth (Lovejoy 2011; Wang 2001; Ryan 1995a).

The labour movement which gained traction in Australia in the 1880s and 1890s was instrumental in campaigning against the Chinese. Editorials in newspapers like *The Worker*, and *The Boomerang* demonstrated extreme xenophobia and racism towards all non-white workers, while calls for immigration restriction drew on discourses of contamination and disease that contrasted Western hygiene practices with “dirty aliens” (Saunders 1982; Ryan 1995b; Watters 2012; Walker 2003).

Legislators responded to grassroots opposition to Chinese migrants by introducing measures such as poll taxes to control new arrivals. Over two decades the other colonies independently implemented piecemeal legislation to restrict Chinese migration, as popular anti-Chinese feeling became more strident. Western Australia was the notable exception. At the Intercolonial Conference of 1881, all the representatives apart from those from Perth agreed that restriction was needed. The Legislative Council in Perth did not pass restrictive legislation until 1886, and even then, Chinese labourers brought to the colony under the Imported Labour Registry Act 1884 were exempt from the restrictions (Wang 2001, 202-3). Western Australia achieved responsible government far later than the eastern colonies, which all reached this point of democratic development during the 1850s. Western Australia was governed by a Legislative Council until 1890, meaning powerful landowners retained influence in Perth at a time when politicians needed to appease working class electorates (Jupp 1998, 53).

Demographic change ultimately prompted a policy shift in Western Australia. An influx of Anglo, Celtic and other European migrants from the eastern colonies followed the discovery of gold at Halls Creek in 1886 and Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie in 1892-3, ending the critical labour shortage that had previously troubled the colony (Ryan 1995b). By the time of the Intercolonial Conference on the Chinese Question in June 1888, Western Australian representatives were just as keen as their eastern counterparts to control the arrival of Chinese on Australian shores. All of the colonies passed similar legislation between 1888 and 1890 to exclude Chinese migrants, resulting in a significant reduction in new arrivals from China to Western Australia; 200 Chinese arrived in 1893, but this number dropped to 56 in 1894 and just 25 in 1895 (Wang 2001, 204; Ryan 1995a, 61).

The earliest legislation of the newly formed Federal government included the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* and the *Naturalisation Act 1904*, the combined effect of which was to further limit the arrival of non-Europeans to Australia, while also barring people not of European descent from becoming naturalised members of the new nation (Yong 1977). Restricting the entry of Asians through an immigration dictation test led to a fall in the Chinese population from 32,717 in 1901 to just 14,349 by 1933 (McKeown 2008, 197). New migration from China effectively ceased in the twentieth century as the “White Australia” policy took effect. While earlier migrants were not compelled to leave, return- and on-migration, coupled with an imbalanced sex ratio resulted in only a small residual population of early migrants and their descendants. By 1966, Chinese and half-Chinese<sup>2</sup> comprised less than 0.3 per cent of the Australian population, of which over a third were second- and later-generation Australian-born Chinese (Inglis 1972, 266). Throughout the early- to -mid-twentieth century, many of the diminished and marginalised China-born population of Perth found work in niche industries like laundries and market gardening (Ryan 1995a).

While non-European immigration to Australia was effectively curtailed following Federation, governments at Commonwealth and State levels argued that continued immigration was necessary to maximise the potential of Australian natural resources. The primary target source country was Britain, and bilateral subsidised migration programs intermittently worked to bring working age and child migrants to Australia (Roe 2001; Sherington 2001). While migrants from other European regions, including Ireland, Italy, Greece and the Balkans, also arrived during the inter-war period, they were not the targets of government migration programs, and often faced discrimination, even violent hostility from the “native” British Australians (O’Farrell 2001; Price 1963; Huber 1970).

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<sup>2</sup> In 1966, the Australian Census still employed a biologically racial logic of population enumeration, whereby non-European ancestry census respondents were counted as ‘full blood’, or ‘half caste’ where one of their parents was European. Mixed race individuals with parents of two different non-European ancestries were counted as ‘full blood’ following the race of their father (Fozdar and Stevens, 2020).

Following the Pacific War, Australia implemented new immigration policies that were to fundamentally change the national population. Migration from Eastern and Southern European source countries was increasingly encouraged under both post-War displaced person schemes and, later, family reunion programs. The primary policy goal of this period was to deliver unskilled manual labour to Australian agriculture and the growing manufacturing sector. Like the Chinese labour migrants of an earlier era, these new arrivals were predominantly working class and rarely educated beyond primary or lower secondary levels (Jayasuriya and Kee 1999).

The post-War decades also led to closer Australian engagement with its Southeast Asian neighbours. Multilateral efforts under the Colombo Plan to contain the spread of Communism in the region entailed Australian involvement in aid and infrastructure projects, technical assistance and overseas training for foreign students. Of significance to the history of Asian immigration to Australia, some 5,908 Asian students attended Australian universities under the program between 1950 and 1965 (Oakman 2010, 82). These students paved the way for institutions to offer courses to other fee-paying students from Asian countries, who came in great numbers. The presence of these students initiated a shift in popular attitudes towards people of Asian descent, and a political change as Labor politicians joined campaigns on campuses supporting the anti-White Australia cause (London 1970). The educational mobilities of these young Asian students also marked the beginning of a major shift in the class composition of the ethnic Chinese population of Australia. Far from the marginalised market gardeners scraping a living in the riverside plots of South Perth, these young people were pioneers of the middle-class student and skilled migration pathways that were to become the dominant model over the later decades of the century.

The combined effect of the passing of the Racial Discrimination Act in 1975, the (re)establishment of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs in the same year, and the introduction of explicitly non-discriminatory settlement policies in 1979, resulted in a drastic change in the regional origins of new migrants to Australia. By 1979, 29 per cent of migrants arriving were from Asian source countries, more numerous even than those from Britain and Ireland combined, at 19 per cent (Jupp 2007, 41). The era of White Australia had ended and a racial - and classed - shift in the nation's demography began.



## 2.2 Selective migration policies and the Chinese Australian middle class

The Australian migration policy shift from the mid-twentieth century recruitment of low-skilled migrants to a current focus on qualified, educated “human capital” suited to work in a restructured post-Fordist economy has had a profound effect on the class composition of migrant groups in Australia. Where “ethnics” or, to use the official language of the time, non-English speaking background (NESB) migrants who entered through family reunion migration streams were once overwhelmingly working-class, expressed both in their educational attainment prior to migration and their occupational opportunities after arriving in Australia, this has now changed. Upwardly mobile second- and third-generation migrants combine with more recent arrivals with higher educational attainment to produce what Colic-Peisker (2011) has called a “multicultural middle class”.

Amidst this shift, Chinese migrants have emerged as a “model community” (Gao and Kee 2011). While such claims or perceptions of “model minority” status may carry risks of racialised stereotyping (Wong et al. 1998; Wu 2014), there is nonetheless an evident aggregate link between the skilled and educational mobilities of ethnic Chinese to Australia and the “massive upward mobility of the entire Chinese community in the 1990s and 2000s” (Gao and Kee 2011, 12). Peter Li (2006) has written about the making of the Canadian Chinese middle class, a process through which skilled and investor migration transformed a formerly impoverished, socially and economically marginalised visible minority into a community characterised by professional, technical and managerial occupations, transnational connections and comparative affluence. Chinese Australia experienced similar changes during the late twentieth century.

Since Australia abandoned the discriminatory legislation restricting the migration of non-Europeans and introduced multicultural settlement policies, new ethnic Chinese arrivals from East and South East Asia have predominantly been from more educated backgrounds. With the key exception of Indochinese refugees following the Vietnam War (Thomas 1997; Coughlan and Thatcher 1997), ethnic Chinese migrants to Australia and New Zealand have included professionals (Kee 1988; Ip 1993, 2001; Wu 2003; Da 2003a; Wu et al. 1998; Chiang 2004a, 2004b; C Ho 2006a; E Ho 2006; Lui 2006), students and students-turned-migrants (Forth 1994; Fung and Chen 1996; Gao 2001, 2009, 2011, 2013; 2013; Fong 2011; Martin 2017, 2018), or entrepreneurs and investors (Ip 2001; Collins 2002; Shao 2014; Wang 2014; Leong 2016; Xiang 2016). Many have been deskilled through migration (Ip 1993; Fung and Chen 1996; Henderson 2003; Chiang 2004a; Gao 2006), a process which is sometimes though not always gendered (Liu 2004; Chiang 2004b; C Ho 2006a, 2006b), while others have maintained a transnational middle-class lifestyle, engaging in life course migration practices such as educational and retirement migration or astronaut parenting (Inglis and Wu 1992; Pe-pua et al. 1998; Chiang 2004a; Mak 2006; Ip 2011; L Liu 2011, 2018).

This same period has been characterised by two key changes in Australian migration policy: firstly, the increasing emphasis on selecting “skilled” migrants whereby the state credentialises and valorises certain forms of economic, social and especially cultural capital; and secondly, the more recent shift towards temporary, market-driven labour and educational migration streams which now exist alongside while also dwarfing the permanent migration program.

### **2.2.1 Diverse waves of Chinese migrants to a newly multicultural Australia**

From the mid-1970s onwards, assimilationist migration policies that emphasised the British nature of Australian society were increasingly unsustainable in the face of an evidently diverse Australia, the result of large-scale post-War migration from Southern and Eastern Europe. These changed demographic circumstances, coupled with global anti-racism movements and shifts in public opinion, produced an environment where Australian governments could embrace and implement a new multicultural political philosophy.

The move towards an officially multicultural Australia commenced under the first Whitlam government (1972-1974) when advocates successfully lobbied both Labor and Liberal politicians, sowing the seeds of bipartisan support necessary to see through the broad-reaching policy changes that were to follow (Lopez 2000). Beginning under the Liberal Fraser government of 1975-83 and expanding under the Labor Hawke government of 1983-91, new migration and settlement policies were introduced to support new arrivals, including those previously excluded under the discriminatory regimes of the earlier twentieth century. This included Federal and State agencies providing targeted services to migrants, funding for ethnic community organisations, and the establishment of Ethnic Communities Councils and Migrant Resource Centres to support new arrivals (Jupp 2007; Markus, Jupp and McDonald 2009; Moran 2017).

Through the 1980s and 1990s, multiculturalism and diversity were explicitly articulated as core values of an immigrant nation, values which could supersede or complement the earlier insistence on the fundamentally British basis of the Australian identity (Moran 2011; Jupp 2007). Because of this, and despite the recent retreat from multiculturalism in many liberal democracies (Brubaker 2001; Joppke 2004; Vertovec and Wessendorf 2009), settler-society multiculturalisms like those of Australia and Canada are perhaps rooted more deeply in dimensions of national identity (Joppke 2004, 244; Kymlicka 2012, 11; Moran 2011, 2017), although critics argue that the racist logics of the Federation era continue to find expression in the political, economic and cultural hegemony of middle-class Anglo-Celtic Australia (Jakubowicz 1984; Hage 1998; Stratton 2009, 2011). In terms of policy and practice, multiculturalism in Australia has been primarily focussed on practical matters of settlement and integration, emphasising service provision for first generation NESB migrants (Jupp 2007). Although not a key focus of this dissertation, participants in this project are largely complimentary of Australia's "multicultural society" (*duoyuan wenhua shehui*), while many have directly benefitted from multicultural service delivery, including the provision of interpreting in public administration, and particularly the 500 hours of free English classes provided to new permanent residents.

During this period the countries of origin of ethnic Chinese migrants began to diversify. While pre-White Australia Chinese migrants had almost exclusively come from China, after the recommencement of Asian migration, several separate waves of migrants from different source countries complicated what it means to be Chinese in Australia. This was in large part a reflection of the many changing diasporic definitions of “Chineseness” that evolved in response to the politics of East and Southeast Asia over the course of the twentieth century (see, for example, Reid 2009; Wang 2009; H Liu 2011) and that continue to inform ethnic identities for Chinese of different national origins in Australia (Ang 2014; Li 2016). Despite these differences, however, the class origins of ethnic Chinese migrants in Australia have tended to converge, producing a new Chinese Australian middle-class.

### **2.2.2 Reluctant exiles and international students: Hyper-selected migrants form a new transnational Chinese middle class**

This change in the class composition of Chinese migration to Australia was the result of new priorities in Australian migration policy, specifically (as already mentioned) a shift since the mid-1990s towards skilled migration and economic rationalism that accompanied the transition to a knowledge-based rather than manufacturing economy, combined with certain geopolitical “push” factors causing greater emigration from some source countries in the region (Ip 2001; Lui 2006).

However, even before the implementation of selective visa application criteria under skilled migration streams, migrants from Asian source countries were already hyper-selected (Lee and Zhou 2015), meaning they were educated to a far higher level than the national averages in their home country, than the Australian average, and also than migrants to Australia from most other places. In 1996, for example, 29.07 per cent of immigrants born in Malaysia, and 22.91 per cent of the Hong Kong born held tertiary qualifications, compared with only 9.98 of the Australian-born population. Earlier cohorts of migrants from Southern European source countries, by contrast, had typically received far less education; in the same year, 3.11 per cent of Italian immigrants and 2.78 of Greek immigrants were tertiary educated (Jayasuriya and Kee 1999, 40). This reflected educational mobilities, the new migration pathways being forged by migrants from Asian source countries in the second half of the twentieth century.

The very first waves, commencing in the late 1970s comprised Malaysian-born students and graduates, including many who had previously attended Australian institutions during the Colombo Plan era, as well as a large intake of humanitarian entrants following the defeat of the southern forces in the Vietnam War. These earliest waves were followed in the 1980s by increasing numbers of skilled and business migrants from both Hong Kong and Taiwan. Finally, beginning in the mid-1980s, but only growing in number from the early 1990s, new arrivals from the PRC joined the mix comprising the ethnic Chinese communities resident in Australia. Alongside these key waves, there were also many other ethnic Chinese migrants from other regional source countries, including Brunei, Singapore, East Timor, Cambodia, Indonesia and Laos (Coughlan 1998).

Considering the “push” factors for these new migrants, including political uncertainty, war and racially motivated violence, out-migration increased from many source countries in the region. This included refugees from Indochina following the Vietnam War and Chinese Indonesians who remembered the atrocities of 1965-6 and feared new and rising discrimination in the late 1990s following the collapse of the New Order regime, but also wealthier Taiwanese and Hong Kong emigrants concerned about an uncertain future as China resumed a more assertive position in the region (McNamara 1997). Migration from Hong Kong, for example, peaked in 1985 and 1992 as “reluctant exiles” responded to, firstly the signing of the Sino-British Joint Agreement outlining the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997, and secondly the June 4 Tiananmen Incident in 1989 (Skeldon 1994; Wu et al. 1998; Lui 2006).

However, this is only one part of the story. While concerns about regional instability and the desire for instrumental or flexible accumulation of legal citizenship (Ong 1999; Joppke 2019) in the perceived safety of Australia informed some of these migrations, Australia’s new selective migration policies and Chinese migrants’ desire for lifestyle and educational mobilities are far more important to understanding these changes.

A closer examination of the genesis of the PRC-born population of Australia illustrates this point. This story begins with student migration during the 1980s and the Australian government's response to the June 4 Tiananmen Incident in 1989. International students from China began to arrive in Australian universities from the early 1980, but the PRC-born population grew more rapidly only after 1986, when Australia launched a new educational product aimed at attracting fee-paying international students, particularly those from Asian source countries. English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) were aggressively marketed to the emerging China market by Australian colleges. The ensuing "Australia fever" resulted in ever more students applying to study in Australian colleges (Gao 2013).

The events of June 1989 are well known. Following months of student-led protests in Tiananmen Square, government leaders determined to use military force to dispel the demonstrators. Bloodshed in the streets of central Beijing shocked people around the world and demanded responses from countries hosting Chinese educational migrants. By 1993 approximately 45,000 students had successfully lobbied to obtain the right to remain in Australia, the largest single intake of onshore humanitarian migrants in Australian history (Gao 2001; 2009; 2011; 2013).

The students who first came to Australia were generally from more privileged backgrounds in China. Although ELICOS courses did not require any formal qualifications, almost all Chinese students had already completed undergraduate or postgraduate courses in China. Furthermore, they predominantly came from Shanghai, Beijing, Guangdong or Fujian, comparatively rich cities and industrialising coastal provinces, and were typically the children of government cadres and employees, academics or technical professionals. This is not surprising since in the 1980s only Chinese from such backgrounds were likely to be able to raise sufficient sums to pay Australian tuition fees (Gao and Liu 1998).

In the 1990s and 2000s they were followed by ever-growing numbers of new migrants from China. These cohorts included their family members and friends, sponsored and encouraged by the first wave of Tiananmen-generation student migrants (Gao 2013) as well as new cohorts of international students and graduates.

During the 2000s, Australia engaged in a decade of “policy experimentation” (Hawthorne 2010, 5), explicitly linking migration pathways to the internationalisation and commodification of higher and vocational education (Robertson 2013). Throughout this process, China remained a core target market. With one exception in the program year 2008-09, citizens of China have consistently comprised the largest number of international students in Australia; in 2017-18 they made up 23.2 per cent of all student visas granted (DIAC 2010, 18; DIBP 2016a, 20; DHA 2018a, 34). This student population has been widely explored with reference to, for example, their educational preferences (Yang 2007; Bodycott 2009; Wang, Taplin and Brown 2011; Cao and Tran 2015), their digital lives (Zhao 2017, 2019; Martin 2018; Chang, Gomes and Martin 2018), and paid employment in Australia (Nyland et al. 2008; Li 2017; Martin 2017; Campbell, Boese and Tham 2016).

In keeping with this over-representation of Chinese nationals among the international student population, Shao’s (2014) review of the state of Chinese migration to Australia identifies three categories comprising the “elite migrants” (*jingying yimin*) coming to this preferred destination: “intellectuals” (*zhishifenzi*), including students; “skilled personnel” (*jishu rencai*); and the “new rich” (*xinfu*). Many of this last category entered Australia under business investment streams, which have attracted ever increasing numbers of Chinese nationals. In program year 2006-07, for example, Chinese applicants received nearly 50 percent of permanent investor visas granted (2,814 of a total 5,836), rising to over 60 percent (4,791 of 7,796) by 2010-11 (Shao 2014, 163). This is in keeping with similar trends in other developed destination countries where wealthy Chinese have increasingly driven demand for immigrant investor programs. In the US, for example, Chinese nationals received 85 per cent of immigrant investor visas in 2014, a similar figure to the 87 per cent of Australian Significant Investor Visas that were granted to Chinese migrants in the period 2012-2017 (Xiang 2016, 4; Liu-Farrer 2016).

These new arrivals have further changed the composition of the China-born population in Australia as cohorts of students, graduates, skilled migrants and business investors complicate the landscape of Chinese Australia. However, all these streams tend to have middle class backgrounds, middle class educations, and/or middle-class lifestyles and consumption practices.

Yet despite late twentieth century ethnic Chinese migrants being hyper-selected, comprising this “new middle class” of professionals and managers (Zhao 2000; Li 2006; Lui 2006), many were deskilled through migration, unable to find work commensurate to their education and experience (Ip 1993; Ip, Wu and Inglis 1998). The earliest generations of China-born migrants tended to experience yet lower socio-economic attainment in Australia than ethnic Chinese who arrived from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the various source countries of South East Asia (Coughlan 1998, Guo and Parr 2003, Wu 2003). Lui (2006) explains this difference with reference to their different pathways to migration, as Hong Kong and Taiwanese migrants more commonly arrived through business investor programs, but also their lower levels of English proficiency; in 2001, for example, 38.4 per cent of PRC-born in Australia spoke English not well or not at all, compared with 14.4 and 24.3 per cent of the Hong Kong- and Taiwan- born populations. For these first new Chinese migrants, their “golden dreams” of a life outside China faded to “grey realities” as the problems associated with a living in Australia as a non-English speaking migrant became evident (Forth 1994, Fung and Chen 1996).

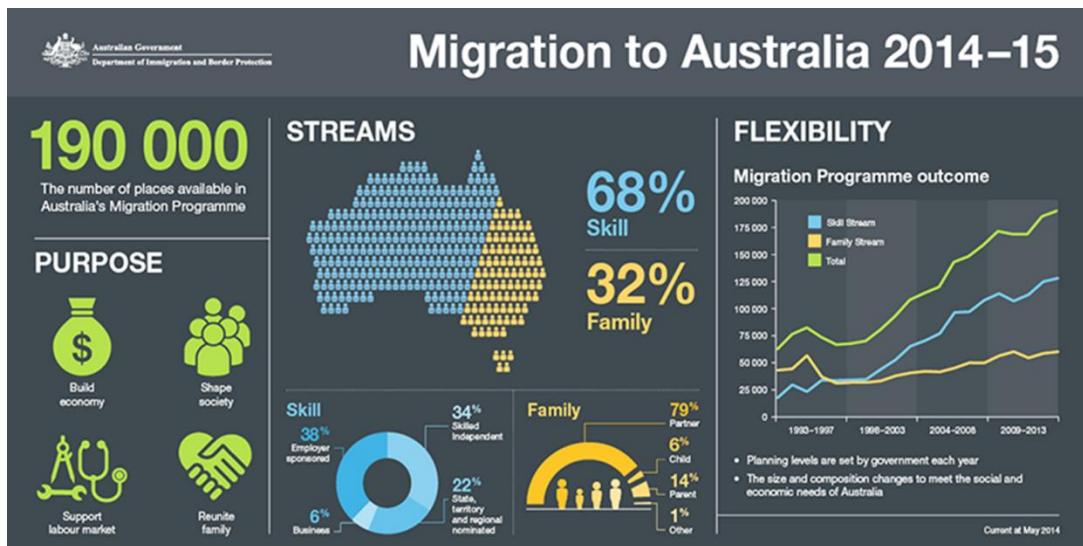
However, although many first generation ethnic Chinese migrants faced constrained opportunities, their children have typically demonstrated high participation rates in tertiary education (Birrell and Khoo 1995). Such high educational attainment mirrors that observed in second- and later-generation Chinese migrants in other contexts, particularly North America, and may be linked to the culturally-informed roles of their parents in relation to achievement motivation (Dandy and Nettelbeck 2000) and the success frames that first generation hyper-selected Chinese migrants bring with them in their moves overseas (Lee and Zhou 2015). Following the pattern Colic-Peisker (2013) observes across many migrant groups in Australia, upward social mobility among second generation migrants combines with first generation migrants filtered by selective migration policies to form a Chinese Australian middle class.



### 2.2.3 Skilled migration and the selective logics of new permanent and temporary visas

Two decades ago, the demographer James Coughlan (1998, 340) observed that greater integration with Asian economies would mean that “Australia will have to modify both its permanent and temporary immigration procedures and programmes in order to facilitate efficient economic development through the smooth movement of human capital”. That outlook was prescient. While many (see, for example, Jupp 2007; Castles 2017) have argued that this kind of economic rationalist approach to managing migration was not an inevitable development, but rather one facet of the broader shift towards neoliberal principles of government, Australia has indeed enacted such modifications.

Over the last three decades, Australian migration policy has pivoted away from the older models that pursued twinned goals of economic and population growth through the recruitment of permanent settlers destined for low-skilled agricultural and manufacturing work. Migration policy in the new century instead embraces neoliberal technologies of governance which combine both market-driven temporary and permanent migration schemes and emphasise the state-led quantification of skilled migrants’ potential economic contribution to the nation. The shift towards this kind of “hybrid migrant-selection” model (Papademetriou et al. 2008) has occurred amidst a broader global rhetoric that positions both developed and developing countries as competing to attract the best and brightest individuals in order to fuel ever greater growth. A key element of this emergent economic rationalist approach to migration management has been the development of points-based systems that grade the desirability of newcomers on the basis of education, qualifications and work experience, as well as more personal and biological characteristics such as age, health and English language proficiency (Castles, Vasta and Ozkul 2014; Hawthorne 2005; 2011; Jupp 2007; Kuptsch and Pang 2008; Walsch 2011, 2014; Cully 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the current emphases of the permanent migration program, in particular the primacy of skilled migration over family migration, the dramatic increase in the number of places granted to skilled migrants since the mid-1990s, and the department’s mandate to build the economy and support the labour market through migration.



**Figure 1 Visual depiction of the aims and outcomes of the Australian permanent skilled and family migration program. Source: DIBP 2015**

In the 1990s, the Australian federal government systematically changed its focus and approach to the management of migration (Jupp 2007). The introduction of new Migration Regulations in 1994 formalised the transition to a more complex model of migration administration as a broad range of new visa classes were introduced, including several new temporary visa subclasses. Through the administration of visas, “the categorical grid through which the state perceives noncitizens, grants them different types of legal and administrative identities, and distributes to them differing degrees of access to its territory, labour market, and citizenship” (Kim 2018, 267), the Immigration Department valorises and credentialises certain forms of economic, social and cultural capital.

The deep changes to Australian migration governance enacted since the mid-1990s have been variously described as “a country of immigration in transition” (Castles, Vasta and Ozkul 2014) and both the “causes and consequences of neoliberal restructuring” (Walsh 2011, 861). However, this shift towards migration selection along such “pragmatic” lines so that Australia might compete with other key destinations in attracting “acceptable human capital” (Hawthorne 2005, 690) is not unusual in global context (Kuptsch and Pang 2006; Shachar 2006). During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries there has been significant convergence of migration policies across different national contexts (Hollifield, Martin and Orrenius 2014). Contrary to public perception, however, policies have not become more restrictive, rather they are increasingly selective, employing criteria to restrict or encourage entry on the basis of migrants’ skills, class and nationality (de Haas, Natter and Vezzoli 2018, 342).

Nationality is central to the “global mobility divide” whereby individual mobility rights are sharply bifurcated (Mau et al. 2015). Only citizens of rich and OECD countries, winners of the “birthright lottery” (Shachar 2009) enjoy visa waivers and/or preferential visa application criteria, such as demonstrating lower levels of savings to qualify for temporary visas. However, the quantification of particularly cultural capital through selection criteria and points systems means that social class has now replaced race as the most significant site of in/exclusion in Australia.

Australia differs from migration systems in most regional Asian countries where there is strong differentiation between “low-skilled” and “high-skilled” migrant workers. In Singapore, for example, temporary migrants are streamed by income and occupational category, administrative distinctions expressed through differing visa conditions and unequal access to local membership and social rights such as accompanying family members (Yeoh 2006; Baas 2017). In contrast, Australian skilled occupation lists<sup>3</sup> for migration include professional, managerial and para-professional occupations but also those manual trades that are considered a separate, and far less valued, stream in other regional labour destinations. Skills assessments are handled by different bodies, but in terms of application criteria and visa conditions, Australia does not differentiate between professional or trade occupations that appear on the same list. Occupation (one indicator of class) therefore affects to a far lesser extent both the kinds of skilled visa a migrant may apply for and the conditions attached to a visa that is granted.

Nonetheless, when considered in combination with other application criteria, particularly English-language competency and credentialled vocational training, the regulations still operate in practice by selecting (or excluding) on the basis of class and its close proxy, education. These selection criteria have changed over time, meaning that while a welder or similar tradesman from China could in 2006 have easily been sponsored for a temporary or permanent visa, within a few years this changed so that only tradespeople with more education and/or native English-speaking skills could meet the required criteria for those same visas.

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of research, eligible occupations for permanent and temporary skilled visas were respectively detailed in the Skilled Occupations List (SOL) and Consolidated Skilled Occupations List (CSOL). These have since been replaced by the Medium and Long-term Strategic Skills List (MLTSSL), the Short-Term Skilled Occupation List (STSOL), the Regional Occupation List (ROL) and the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (RSMS) ROL list. All these lists are based on ANZSCO occupational codes, despite critics suggesting this occupation scheme is unwieldy and not fit for purpose (DIBP 2, 32).

Alongside this shift towards selective and skilled migration, there has been a contemporaneous change in the types and numbers of visas granted in Australia. Processing temporary visas is now the core work of the Australian Immigration department<sup>4</sup>. For example, the 189,770 permanent visas granted under the 2015-16 migration program are dwarfed by the 4.8 million visitor visas, 310,845 student visas and 85,610 subclass 457 temporary work visas granted in the same period (DIBP 2016b, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e; Pezzullo 2015). These changes have been accompanied by a rise in “two-step” migration (Hawthorne 2010), where individuals may first enter Australia on a temporary visa and then only later apply for a permanent visa, sometimes after acquiring Australian qualifications or taking other steps to ensure they could meet more visa criteria or score more highly in points-based testing (Hawthorne 2011; Birrell and Healy 2012; Robertson 2013; Boese and Robertson 2017).

Throughout the Asia-Pacific region, flexibilised migration schemes facilitate entry for less highly skilled workers in response to market demand while simultaneously maintaining their temporary status and effectively compelling their return “home” or, at least, their bodily removal from within borders. These schemes function as an effective mechanism for ensuring regional nation states retain sovereign control of cross-border labour migration, one facet of what Xiang (2013b) has called the (re)nationalisation of transnational mobility.

While Australia has introduced a range of temporary visa classes, alongside mechanisms to prevent or restrict long-term residency for those deemed “undesirable”, Australia’s very different circumstances do not permit similarly strict measures to manage segmented migrant labour markets. Multiple factors, including the historical experience and national myth of a “country of immigration”, strong trade unions and labour laws, and the legacy of policies promoting multiculturalism, migrant settlement, and demographic growth driven by migration, have resulted instead in a hybrid approach whereby market-driven temporary migration is encouraged, but temporary-permanent pathways are still supported.

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<sup>4</sup> The Federal Australian government department responsible for immigration has changed its name over the course of this research project. At time of writing, immigration sits within the Department of Home Affairs (DHA), but during my candidacy it has also been in the portfolio of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP).

One visa of particular relevance to this dissertation is the subclass 457 Temporary Work (Skilled) Visa, formerly Temporary Business (Long Stay) and commonly known in both English and Chinese as simply “457” (four-five-seven / *si-wu-qi*). Described by Stratton (2009, 4) as a visa that “typifies the neoliberal understanding of the primacy of the market”, the 457 was designed to permit Australian businesses to respond nimbly to labour market gaps by recruiting temporary workers from overseas, while linked employer-sponsored permanent visas permitted a “try before you buy” approach towards new arrivals in Australia.

At the time I conducted my research, a 457 allowed a skilled worker, together with their partner and dependent children, to live and work in Australia for up to four years. First introduced in 1996, visa regulations required the sponsoring employer to demonstrate a business need for the nominated role that could not be met through recruitment within Australia, while the primary applicant was required to meet application criteria demonstrating skills relevant to the position, as well as meeting health, character and language criteria.

The primary visa applicant was sponsored by their employer and had to remain working for that employer in their nominated role for the duration of the visa, as not doing so was a violation of visa conditions that could result in visa cancellation. After two years of employment in the nominated role, if the sponsor was willing to support the application, they could then apply for permanent residency on a subclass 186 Employer Nomination Scheme visa or a subclass 187 Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme visa.

Changes to English language application criteria for both temporary 457 and permanent 186 or 187 visas materially affected the migration processes of Chinese trade skilled migrants. Depending on year of arrival, members of this cohort found that their level of English proficiency, one expression of their limited formal education and class background had a direct bearing on the ease with which they could apply for employer-sponsored visas in Australia.

Prior to 1 July 2007, applicants for subclass 457 temporary work visas were not required to meet any English language criteria, whereas after this date applicants were required to score an average of 4.5 in an IELTS<sup>5</sup> test. English language requirements were later raised again, requiring scores of 5.0 overall, with a minimum 4.5 in each of the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. However, applicants could be exempted from assessment if their salary was sufficiently high. The legislated minimum salary increased each year and was more than standard wages paid for welding and other trade skills. For example, in program year 2015-16 the income threshold for English requirements exemption was AUD 96,400.

Applicants for employer-sponsored permanent visas were also required to meet English language criteria after 1 July 2007, but could apply for a waiver if they were enrolled in an English course (Cert I, II or III) at TAFE (Technical and Further Education) colleges in lieu of English language assessment. A migration agent I spoke with advised that this waiver provision was removed in 2012 because it was applied inconsistently by immigration officers. However, before the abolition of the waiver it was a critical mechanism to secure PR for many trade skilled participants with limited English.

The 457 was abolished in May 2017, a largely performative policy shift responding to a political climate of increasingly protectionist public opinion (Boese and Robertson 2017, 2). It has since been replaced by two new streams under the subclass 482 Temporary Skill Shortage Visa that serve a similar function to the 457 in supporting demand-led recruitment of foreign workers into Australian businesses. However, the 457, along with related selective employer-sponsored pathways to permanence, sits at the heart of the case studies presented in this dissertation. Most (22 out of 26) participants in this project from the cohort of trade skilled labour migrants and their family members began their time in Australia as holders of a 457.

## 2.3 Unlikely settlers in exceptional times: contemporary trade skilled labour migration from China to Perth

This cohort of most unlikely settlers travelled overseas for work under historically and geographically particular conditions in both Australia and China, combinations of factors that prompted and made possible the movements of these people between these places at this time.

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<sup>5</sup> IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is the form of assessment most commonly undertaken by Chinese migrants seeking to satisfy visa criteria relating to English language competency.

The field site of metropolitan Perth has experienced exceptional economic conditions over the last fifteen years. Since the first years of colonisation, Western Australia's processes of demographic and social change have moved in tandem with the economic cycles of primary industry. A "boom-and-bust" mining town of longstanding, Perth experienced an unprecedented resources supercycle in the mid-2000s. This in turn drove rapid demographic growth as workers were encouraged to migrate to meet a critical – but ultimately short term – demand for specialised labour. The exceptional combination of these unique local economic conditions with a particular moment in national migration policy created the circumstances under which the temporary-turned-permanent migration and settlement of this cohort could occur.

Turning to the sending country context, China too has gone through an exceptional period of economic, political and social change. The shift since the 1980s from a communist political system with a command economy and full state employment to a hybrid society featuring private enterprise, private employment and private property has produced new economic inequality and new national class frames. For urban workers and rural residents, disadvantaged by their declining class position, overseas migration for temporary employment was an agential response to the circumstances they faced.

### 2.3.1 Boomtown Perth: exceptional times

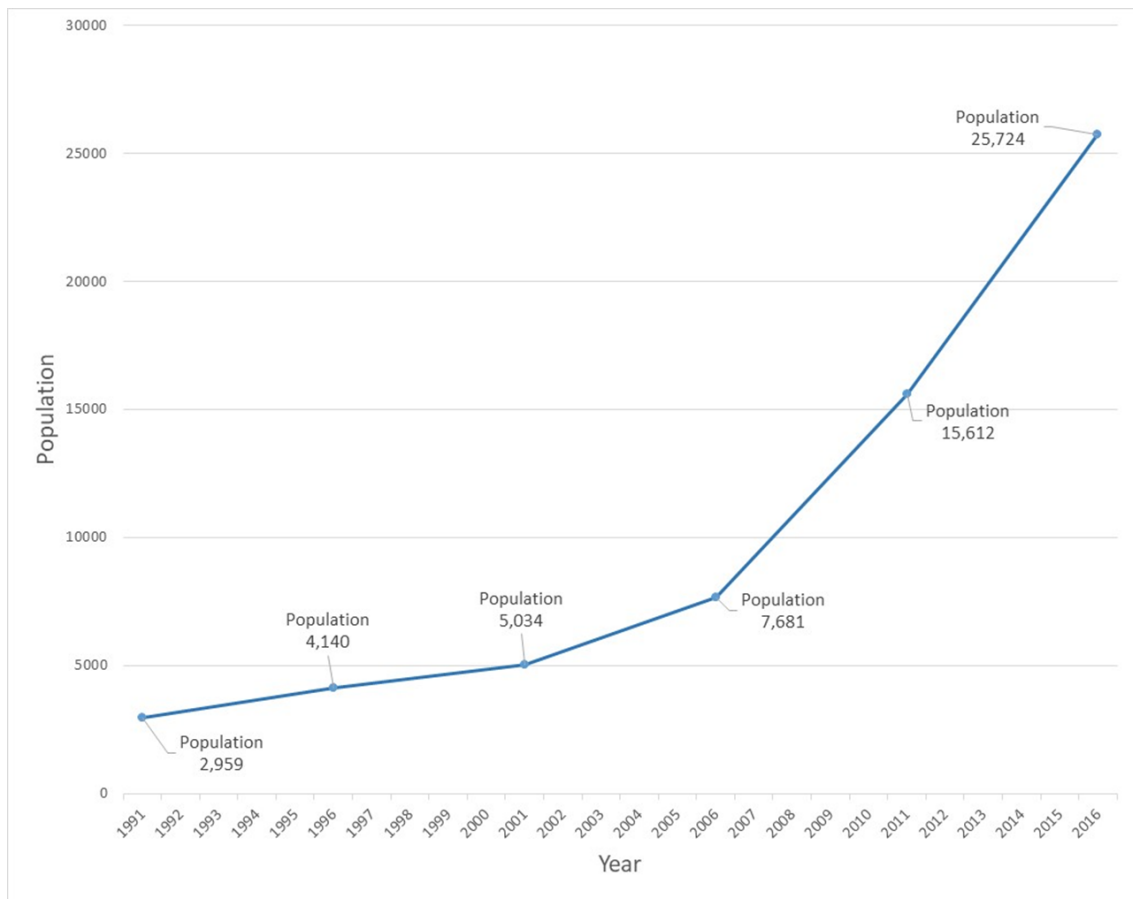
Perth is a regional economic centre that enjoys close geographic proximity to Asia and has relied heavily on international migration to support its recent rapid expansion. The state capital of Western Australia with a total population of 1.85 million, Perth only comparatively recently became home to a larger Chinese population. In 1991, just 2,959 of Perth's 1,143,249 residents were born in China. Twenty-five years later, in 2016, the number of China-born residents living in the Perth metropolitan area had increased almost tenfold to 25,724, see Figure 2 (ABS 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> While the Census provides arguably the most accurate and up-to-date overview of Australia's changing demography, it is not without limitations. David Ley (2010) has reflected on the drawbacks of using Census data to capture mobile populations as they merely provide a snapshot of a moving subject which shifts again the moment after the shutter has closed. Moreover, some population groups are underrepresented in the count, particularly migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds. This is partly due to a lack of familiarity with the forms, and confusion as to who is required to participate in the Census. In 2011, migrants from China had the highest net undercount rate: 14.9 per cent, compared with 6.6 per cent for the Australian-born population (ABS 2012).

While earlier cohorts of ethnic Chinese migrants from various source countries had already settled in Perth, they too were far fewer in number than in the eastern states capitals of Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney (Coughlan 2008; Leong and Gong 2014). Perth increasingly features in the social imaginaries of some from Southeast Asia, particularly Singaporeans who value the proximity to “home”, a shared timezone, and the easy lifestyle (Leong 2018). However, as the most geographically isolated Australian capital, among PRC migrants Perth is considered a provincial, dull place to live, lacking the services, shops, dining and nightlife found on the eastern seaboard.

The sudden increase in the China-born population of Perth occurred in the context of a wider pattern of rapid population growth. Over the course of a decade, the total population of the metropolitan area grew almost 30% from 1,339,993 in 2001 to 1,728,865 in 2011. The city continued to grow from 2011 to 2016, albeit at a much slower rate, rising by some 6.8% to 1,847,126 (ABS 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016).



**Figure 2 China-born population of Perth metropolitan area 1991-2016**



Western Australia experienced a resources supercycle through an investment and construction boom in mining, oil and gas during the 2000s and early 2010s. Strong international demand for commodities, driven in large part by construction in China, led to unprecedented levels of investment as firms raced to expand production and develop new projects. At its peak, mining capital expenditure reached 8 per cent of Australia's GDP, with most of this activity concentrated in Western Australia and Queensland. Mining construction is a labour-intensive stage in the extraction of new resources. Nationwide, approximately 169,000 new mining jobs were created between the start of the mining investment boom in 2004-5 and the peak in 2012-3; these comprised 122,000 construction jobs, 34,000 operational jobs and 13,000 exploration-related jobs (NAB 2016a, 2016b).

Labour force projections at the start of this period identified skills shortages as a major constraint on resources sector growth, with the greatest shortfalls in semi-skilled (trade) occupations (Lowry, Molloy and Tan 2006). Resource sector employers sought to address the skills shortage by recruiting workers from countries outside of Australia, including China. Western Australian recruitment and migration intermediaries were engaged to source tradesmen, particularly welders, from across China. They partnered with colleagues based in China to advertise the roles, conduct interviews and skills assessments, and to arrange passports, visas, travel and training for the trade skilled labour migrants destined for Perth.

While the boom increased employment in the resources sector, the impact in other sectors was also substantial, cushioning Western Australia from some of the effects of the GFC. In the same period of 2004-5 to 2012-3, nationwide the health, education and professional services sectors respectively saw the creation of 364,000, 244,000 and 174,000 new jobs (NAB 2012a). This multi-sector expansion was evident in Western Australia: the boom and consequent opportunities in Perth led to a dramatically increased number of new migrants to Australia choosing to live on the west coast. While in 2003-04 only 12 per cent of migrants to Australia intended to settle in the West, by 2012-13 at the peak of the boom, this proportion had risen to 19.3 per cent (DIAC 2013, 6).

This was not the first time Perth experienced rapid demographic expansion driven by the resources sector. From 1891 to 1901, Perth's population grew from 16,000 to 61,000 in response to the Goldfields mining rush (Weller 2009, 19). Half a century later, the development of newly discovered deposits, particularly bauxite in the Darling Ranges, led to the creation of new jobs. More migrants moved to Perth and surrounds just as Australia became established as a mineral exporting country, feeding the global economic growth of the 1950s and 60s (Blainey 1969, McKay, Lambert and Miyazaki 2000, Caunt 2007).

While the resources supercycle at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century could be seen as just the next chapter in Perth's long history of resource cycle activity, this boom was exceptional. This was due to the volume of mining investment, and the comparatively protracted length of the cycle, but also in the ways in which the boom worked to fundamentally transform the demography of the state, and also to disrupt traditional occupational hierarchies and class relations for the best part of a decade.

I will later argue that these exceptional economic conditions created employment opportunities for tradesmen that subverted Chinese homeland national class frames (see Chapter 8). However, such a challenge to established discourses that validate social mobility through education was not experienced only by migrants from China. Forsey (2015) found that the "blue collar affluence" created through boomtime high-income, low-skilled employment in the Western Australian mining town of Karratha undermined the "modernist myth of education-based meritocracy" and created class-based anxieties among more educated residents. Chinese migrants to Western Australia in this period similarly found that homeland occupational hierarchies were disrupted in the new setting, emerging as a point of contention and dissatisfaction for many middle-class migrants.

This demographic transformation of the state of Western Australia occurred because the resource boom coincided with a particular moment in local, national, and indeed, global approaches to the management of migration. The expansion of the skilled migration program, combined with employer-sponsored temporary-to-permanent visa pathways, resulted in overseas workers recruited during the boom years being able to remain in Australia, drastically altering the population of Perth.

However, the inherently cyclical nature of the resources industry meant that the good times were not set to last. Mining and heavy industry construction peaked in 2011-12, after which many new projects began to move into the operational phase (CCF 2016). Net overseas migration to Western Australia peaked in the same year at 82,100 and then slowly declined, dropping to 79,800, 71,600 and then 66,200 in the following three years (DIBP 2018, 65). Of the 169,000 mining jobs created during the boom, only 20 per cent were operational roles; the downward turn of the mining supercycle resulted in constrained employment opportunities for trade-skilled workers, including those recently arrived from China. Heavy trade jobs that had been so plentiful and so well paid in the years from 2006-2011 became more difficult to find. For China- and Australia-born workers alike, wages dropped, overtime hours became harder to get, and rosters changed to require more hours on the job for the same pay. Many people found themselves unemployed or lurching between short-term casual contracts.

For new migrants, particularly those with temporary visas, this downturn also resulted in fewer opportunities for employer-sponsored permanent residency, alongside declining wages and reduced overtime. Since migration processes are sustained through their own internal dynamics, including social networks and commercial intermediaries (Castles 2004), changing circumstances at the point of destination did not immediately slow the flow of new arrivals from China. New forms of precarity were produced for some members of this cohort when opportunities for sponsorship declined while brokers still were still working to deliver new migrants to Perth.

Throughout the waxing and waning of the resources supercycle, the stories of this cohort are framed by these exceptional times. The combination of national migration policies with local economic activity created conditions where the migration and settlement of this most unusual cohort could occur. However, these “pull” factors of exceptional economic conditions are insufficient in and of themselves to fully explain the presence of Chinese trade skilled workers in Perth. The sending context structural factors framing the emigration of this cohort are also critical to understanding why these people moved when they did.

### 2.3.2 Post-reform China: the declining class position of workers and farmers

Adults migrants who have recently left China have all lived through a period of dramatic social change. Since the end of the socialist era in the late 1970s, China has enacted far reaching political and economic reforms. These reforms led to the development of new, competitive labour markets, a shift from a broadly equal cradle-to-grave welfare state to a new system where risk and responsibility has been largely devolved to the individual, and the expansion of a significant rich-poor divide.

Social changes wrought by the reforms that produced material inequality and new social stratification prompted many of this cohort to seek work abroad. These included the restructuring of state-owned industries, the introduction of private home ownership, and the marketisation of healthcare, education and pensions, resulting in the declining class position of both urban workers and rural residents who migrate to Chinese cities for work. Changes up to and including the first decade of the new century are most relevant, as these explain the conditions under which most participants in this project decided to leave China.

Following the end of the Maoist period, China entered a new era characterised by the introduction of private enterprise, increased market competitiveness of state-owned sectors, and a widespread increase in prosperity – and inequality. Effectively abandoning the equalising distributive mechanisms of the socialist command economy, the new mantra was that in China’s rush towards the grand targets of modernity and development, some would need to “get rich first” (*xianfu lun*). Not until the mid-2000s were central government measures introduced to counter the disequalising effects of market reform (Fan 2006).

Prior to the reforms, China was a remarkably equal place with a 1981 Gini co-efficient around 0.20 (Goodman 2014, 2). People were generally poor, and incomes had been in decline for twenty years, yet within these constraints, resources were equitably distributed (Walder 1984; Lieberthal 1995, 128; Andreas 2016). In the absence of private property, workers and farmers did not own the means of production, but they did own their jobs for life. In urban areas this “iron rice bowl” of lifelong employment also included welfare, education, healthcare, housing and pensions (Walder 1984; Andreas 2016; Wang 2005a).

The reform process entailed a reorientation of the formerly isolationist economy to global markets. This “opening up” to the world economy happened to coincide with the Reagan-era expansion of global capitalism. Preparing for accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2001 exposed China’s SOEs to international competition. Soft budget constraints and the social responsibilities that had informed earlier operational objectives were replaced by new performance targets that demanded improved efficiencies and the reduction of bloated workforces (Harvey 2005; Davis and Wang 2009b; Won 2009).

While reports of the number of workers suddenly rendered jobless in this process vary widely, from 20 to over 60 million, it is clear that the ranks of the urban poor grew rapidly in the 1990s and 2000s. National Bureau of Statistics figures, which are likely conservative, state that in the four years from 1997, the total number of state sector employees was reduced by a third down to 76.4 million. Combined with young people and migrants from rural areas joining the urban workforce, this resulted in widespread urban unemployment and downward pressure on wages. Urban workers, including those that kept their jobs, experienced significant reductions in income (Solinger 2004, 51; Wu et al. 2010).

Falling incomes were exacerbated by the simultaneous marketization of housing, education and health care, responsibility for which had rested in pre-reform times with the state through the mediated distribution of the work unit. Nationwide housing privatisation policies created entrenched difference between those who acquired privately owned accommodation before the urban property boom and those who did not (Gao 2008, Tang 2013). Later development of gated communities projected economic divides onto the spatial dimensions of cities, making social stratification more visible and more rigid, and reducing the opportunities for interaction between people from different backgrounds (Huang 2005; Tang 2013; Tomba 2016a).

New and rising healthcare costs likewise increased the living expenses of Chinese tradesmen and their families prior to their emigration. The quality of healthcare in China has improved since the reforms, but this was accompanied by the devolution of expense from the state to families. Market-based insurance programs introduced in cities covered less than 50 per cent of the urban population, while in the countryside, the old cooperative medical system that had provided primary care ceased to operate (Cai 2009, 145-6). The ill health of a relative can now have devastating consequences for the financial wellbeing of a family. Such costs can continue to have implications for migrant family members living in Australia, as many need to send money for the medical expenses of parents still in China.

By the mid-2000s, when welders, mechanics and other trade-skilled migrants began to leave China for work in Australia, China had been substantially transformed by the processes at work since the isolated socialist state first opened the door to global capital. Reform created clear “winners” and “losers”; the widening gap between rich and poor, an increasing competitive jobs market and the rising cost of living in Chinese cities created new pressures for those in traditional working class occupations. These pressures led to new creative and agential responses, of which international labour migration is one relevant to this dissertation.

### 2.3.3 Trade skilled migrants: an unlikely cohort of new Australians

Of all the 511,300 people who came to Western Australia from overseas over the ten years of the resources supercycle from 2005-06 to 2014-15 (DIBP 2018, 64-5), this dissertation is primarily concerned with one small subgroup; Chinese trade skilled workers, most notably welders, but also metal machinists, mechanics, other tradesmen, and their dependent family members. As the life history narratives presented in the introduction demonstrate, these migrants are in many respects quite diverse. I will, however, attempt to make some broad generalizations. Most participants belonging to this cohort are middle-aged with children. They usually have one child born in China; many also have another, younger, Australian-born child. A smaller number only began a family after migrating to Australia. There is also a heavily gendered dimension to this cohort; the primary visa applicants with the in-demand skills are all men. Their wives typically do not have credentialled skills in Australia, and often share their husbands’ poor English abilities; most female participants of this cohort either provide full-time care for young children at home, or perform unskilled work like cleaning or food processing and packaging. For many of these women, this experience of deskilling through migration is a source of frustration and dissatisfaction.

Members of this cohort tend to come from non-traditional sending areas, places that until the late twentieth century did not have a tradition of international emigration. The 28 trade skilled migrants and trailing spouses whose life histories I recorded are predominantly from the north of China, particularly the Dongbei region, which comprises the three north eastern provinces of Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang, and the North China Plain provinces of Henan and Shandong, see Table 1.

That trade skilled migrants are predominantly from the north is not surprising. The north of China, particularly the north east, is the traditional home of Chinese heavy industry. Prior to migrating, these tradesmen worked in roles where they could develop the technical skills needed by the Australian resources sector. Those from the big northern cities typically received their training in large SOEs. In contrast, those from second- and third-tier cities, and those with rural backgrounds, tended to have learned their skills as domestic migrant workers in smaller privately owned, sometimes foreign-invested, firms. The north of China is also a significant source of new international labour migration because these “Rust Belt” regions were most affected by widespread unemployment and underemployment following the restructuring of bloated, inefficient, state-owned heavy industries (Xiang 2007a, 71; Solinger 2004; Davis and Wang 2009a; Gold et al. 2009; Wu et al. 2010). While the regions of origin of migrants from China to Australia are changing, northern provinces have until recently been underrepresented as earlier migrants predominantly come from the southeast, particularly Guangdong, or the major cities of Shanghai and Beijing.

**Table 1 Home provinces of trade skilled migrants and their family members**

<b>Dongbei region of North East China</b>		<b>9</b>
	Heilongjiang	1
	Jilin	2
	Liaoning	6
<b>North China plain</b>		<b>13</b>
	Henan	5
	Shandong	7
	Shanxi	1
<b>Other</b>		<b>4</b>
	Fujian	1
	Guangxi	1
	Shanghai	1
	Xinjiang	1

Most importantly, these new labour migrants have different class backgrounds from the majority of Chinese migrants in Australia who are typically tertiary educated. The welders and mechanics recruited to work in Perth are, in contrast, usually educated to junior or senior high school level, or have perhaps attended technical college. There are class distinctions *within* this cohort, particularly in the division between those from urban or rural backgrounds. However, considering the cohort as a whole, their different class backgrounds in China result in their experiencing migration differently to their middle-class co-nationals as nationality, ethnicity and social class intersect to affect migration and settlement processes.

Quantifying this cohort is not straightforward. ABS census data shows that in August 2011 there were 490 Greater Perth residents who were born in China and employed in occupations relating to “Structural Steel and Welding”. By 2016, this number had increased to 578 (ABS 2011, 2016). However, these figures likely represent just a fraction of the total number of people comprising this cohort. During fieldwork conducted in 2014- 2016, Chinese welders in Perth often complained of unemployment and underemployment, facing limited job opportunities for their skills. Following retrenchments in the resources sector, many welders and metal machinists could only find short-term, temporary work in their skilled occupation. Many proposed “changing direction” (*gai fangxiang*), or had already done so, finding low-paid work in construction or catering, or starting their own small businesses, such as restaurants, cafes and other eateries, massage shops, nail bars and newsagents, or providing owner-operator trade and handyman services, including plastering, painting and gardening. Neither those men who have found alternate employment, nor their wives and children, are included in the ABS occupational data, yet they all comprise this cohort.

Furthermore, by August 2016 some participants had already re-migrated to other Australian cities, particularly Melbourne, in search of reliable work and a better living environment. When discussing these plans, they reflected their peers often discussed domestic migration, and cited examples of friends who had already left Perth and found welding work in the Eastern States. Other tradesmen did not remain in Perth and instead returned to China. I did not speak with any returnees, a sampling bias arising from my single-sited ethnography, the methods and rationale of which are discussed in Chapter 4, but people I did meet spoke of friends and colleagues who had gone back.



Overall, the Census clearly represents only some of those people who originally came to Perth as trade skilled labour migrants. One well-informed participant suggested as many as 3000 trade-skilled workers and immediate family members settled in Perth during this period. A migration agent likewise told me that his colleague who at the time specialized in 457s for Chinese welders had processed “hundreds” of applications. While the precise numbers are uncertain, these men and their families collectively make up a significant part of the rapidly growing China-born population of Perth, or approximately one seventh of the 20,000 increase since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2.4 Conclusion

Since Mr Chow first disembarked on Western Australian shores there have been Chinese arrivals and departures, residents and visitors, settlers and sojourners, peasants and merchants, diplomats and labourers, students and investors, Hongkongers, Taiwanese, Malaysians, Vietnamese, PRC Chinese, and many more national backgrounds besides. All these diverse people and their descendants comprise the complexity of Chinese Perth today.

The story of Chinese migration to Australia is necessarily also the story of Australian migration policies, which have at times encouraged or prevented the cross-border migration and/or settlement of certain people. Australia has actively pursued population growth through migration since the nation was first established, but the policies through which this has been achieved have changed from those that restrict on the basis of race to those that select on the basis of class.

Over the last half century, Chinese Australia, although internally diverse, has become predominantly middle-class. This is the combined effect of two factors: firstly, migrants from Asian source countries are hyper-selected, with more resources to emigrate than other co-nationals; and secondly, increasingly selective Australian immigration policies restrict entry on the basis of credentialed cultural capital, such as tertiary qualifications and English skills, that is more readily acquired and operationalised by middle-class migrants.

Within this context, a cohort of trade skilled men and their unskilled (at least in terms of credentialled skills) wives are unusual. They arrived in Australia during an exceptional period when their technical skills were in high demand and readily verified by credentialled skills assessors *and* when the English-language application criteria for both temporary and permanent visas were either not in place or operating at a far lower level of English proficiency than that required today. For a brief window the structural conditions in both China and Australia aligned. These were exceptional times during which trade-skilled migrants, these most unlikely settlers, might decide to live in Australia on a temporary or permanent basis.

It is the exceptionalism of both the time and the place, and indeed the people, that make them such a compelling case study for examining the relationship between social class and migration, and for observing related changes in Australian migration policy and practice over the course of the last decade. In the next chapter I provide a discussion of the conceptual background that contextualises my analysis of migration and class, including an overview of nationally framed theories of class, conceptualisations of class in China, and a review of the ways social class has been engaged in the migration and ethnicity literatures.

## Chapter 3      Capital, migration literacy and national class frames in motion: theoretical context

In this chapter I present my reflections towards improving an analysis of national class frames in transnational contexts, exploring the roles social class plays within processes of migration, and explaining dimensions of intra-ethnic class. The arguments presented in this dissertation are concerned with, firstly, the effects of social class before, during and after migration, particularly how various forms of capital shape the processes of migration, secondly, dimensions of intra-ethnic class in migration and settlement, particularly the relevance of homeland national class frames to first generation migrants, and thirdly, how national class frames are impacted by mobility.

I am not aiming to extend theories of class analysis, but rather seek to explore, highlight and theorise some of the ways that class intersects with migration and vice versa. This dissertation is a contribution to an emerging literature that seeks to (re)introduce class, in various dimensions, to discussions of cross border migration and settlement, including an evaluation of the intersections between ethnicity and class. I borrow from various definitions and conceptualisations of social class that help with understanding what is happening in this particular case study, and thereby demonstrate the continued significance of social class to migration.

Under the globally integrated conditions of late modernity, the freedom to move has emerged as a key stratifying factor, with deterritorialised global elites at one pole, and the immobile, spatially constrained poor at the other (Bauman 1998). Between these extremes, the international mobility of migrants and aspiring migrants is determined in multiple ways by social class, alongside nationality, language, race and ethnicity. At the same time, spatial mobility may itself function to produce social mobility and new classed positions. Doreen Massey (1993) described this in terms of geometries of power, whereby different groups and individuals have different power in relation to flows, movements and interconnections – some have the power to choose to initiate movement, others are moved or are affected by the movements of others in ways they cannot themselves control.

This ability to move, or refuse to move, of one's own volition is characterised as an unequally distributed resource (Cresswell 2010, 22; Carling 2002), one which may be variously deployed in response to those "spatial, infrastructural and institutional moorings" that produce (im)mobility (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006, 3; Sheller and Urry 2006). Despite this clear interdependency between cross-border migration and social inequality on local, national and global scales, there is surprisingly little research considering *how* social inequality shapes the processes and outcomes of migration (Faist 2016, 322), including, in particular, a limited engagement with social class.

Class has a long and much contested place in theorisation of inequality. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century, social class could be considered the master category of British and, by extension, Australian sociology. An interest in class, from government-led occupational categorisations through to politically charged assessments of the relations of capital and labour, directly accompanied the rise of sociology as a discipline in these two countries. British interrogations of the social in the 1950s and 60s necessarily engaged "class" as an anchor to a legitimatised theoretical tradition (Savage 2000, 3-5), while in an Australian academic context, Hiller (1981) observed that even cognate disciplines like economics, politics and anthropology increasingly framed their enquiries with reference to class following the establishment of sociology departments in many universities through the late 1960s and 1970s.

Yet, despite being such a mainstay of much sociological analysis since the days of Marx and Weber, class has been, if not disregarded, certainly underemphasised in migration studies, and particularly in Australia, in comparison with other points of difference between people, such as ethnicity, gender or religion (Van Hear 2014; Freznosa-Flot and Shinozaki 2017; Kim 2018; Bonjour and Chauvin 2018; Cederberg 2017). Social class is an analytical lens that deserves more scholarly attention in migration studies.

Similarly, much as studies of migration and ethnicity have underemphasised the significance of social class, class theories and schema have been largely developed, operationalised and tested with reference to nationally bounded populations, including of migrant groups as racialised class fractions (Phizacklea and Miles 1980) within nation states. The twentieth century territorialisation of the social sciences and the prevalence of analyses limited to the container nation-state resulted in social theory that became “obsessed with describing processes within nation-state boundaries [and] ... lost sight of the connections between such nationally defined territories” (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002, 307). Critiques of methodological nationalism in migration studies are equally pertinent, perhaps even more so, when considering scholarly work on class. This is an important point to note, but I do not consider this a theoretical limitation since nation-based lenses do have application in migration studies as national boundaries and national frames act in affective, imaginative, administrative and experiential ways upon actors who move across borders (Anthias 2012, 103).

This chapter presents an overview of theories of class analysis, including reflections on class in Australia, national class frames that are interpreted by Chinese migrants, followed by a description of class frames in the national context of the PRC, and a review of some of the ways that class has been engaged in migration and ethnicity literatures. I conclude the chapter with a detailed discussion of how I will use class as an analytical tool through the ethnographic chapters in Parts Two and Three of the dissertation.

### 3.1 Shifting analyses of national class frames

Wright (2015) identifies three key streams in the theory of class analysis. He terms these three dimensions the individual attributes approach in the stratification tradition, the opportunity hoarding approach in the Weberian tradition, and the domination and exploitation approach in the Marxist tradition (see also Crompton [1998, 11] for a similar tripartite summary). Other scholars (e.g. Bottero 2004) have suggested that the latter two may now be considered one single school of thought as, despite their claims to different intellectual genealogies, they insist on a narrower definition of class in primarily economic terms. Bottero contrasts these economically deterministic approaches with more recent calls for a drastically expanded scope of class theory that encompasses culture, lifestyle and taste without losing sight of how economic resources are mobilised in the formation and maintenance of class structures. This new culturalist class analysis seeks to understand how “in various settings of social life, processes of inequality are produced and reproduced routinely and how this involves both economic and cultural practices” (Devine and Savage 2000, 196).

It is perhaps going too far to conflate neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian class analyses, since these distinctions informed the key debates of the twentieth century. However, Edgell (1993), Crompton (1998, 14-15) and Anthias (2001a, 371) likewise observe significant convergence in the development of these streams of analysis. For example, Goldthorpe's (1987) seven-class schema combined both relational and gradational conceptions, while Wright (1985) included skills and expertise in his analysis, indicating status claims beyond a purely materialist approach (Edgell 1993, 23, 45-6). This convergence is such that even avowed neo-Marxists like Wright (2015, 2) claim to have abandoned the "Great Battle of Paradigms" in favour of a more pragmatic integration of different theories and their various causal contributions to social inequality and the intergenerational replication of inequality. Wright (now [2015]) argues that within all capitalist societies these three approaches work in concert to shape different aspects of class structure.

While I borrow from various dimensions of class in applying the concept to the migrations detailed in this case study, it is an expanded, culturalist approach that lends the most to my arguments. This is because firstly, selective migration policies operate through the quantification of credentialled cultural capital and secondly, because participants articulate their relative class position with reference to both structural constraints *and* socially negotiated measures of cultural distinction.

Culturalist theories build on the work of Thompson (1968) and Bourdieu (1984; 1986; 1987; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Although Thompson approached class analysis from a materialist relational perspective, he extended his arguments beyond narrow economic relations of production to consider the ways that class consciousness is produced and embodied in cultural forms, including value-systems, institutions and traditions.

Bourdieu (1984) went further to position cultural practices as a site of class contestations. Class dispositions or habitus, he argued, are inscribed upon and made visible through the site of the individual human body (1986). These embodied class signifiers and their collective validation, judgement and reproduction are at the heart of group-making processes:

The individual or collective classification struggles aimed at transforming the categories of perception and appreciation of the social world and, through this, the social world itself, are indeed a forgotten dimension of the class struggle. (Bourdieu 1984, 483)

This broadens the basis of class formation from a restricted focus on materialist relations and economic capital to an expanded scope that encompasses forms of symbolic capital. Bourdieu's (1987, 4) familiar formulation of the concept explains that there are multiple species of capital that may be differentially distributed, deployed, validated and converted within particular social contexts:

The social world can be conceived as a multi-dimensional space that can be constructed empirically by... discovering the powers or *forms of capital* which are or can become efficient... in the struggle (or competition) for the appropriation of scarce goods of which this [given social] universe is the site.

...these fundamental social powers are... firstly, *economic* capital, in various kinds; secondly, *cultural* capital or better, informational capital, again in various kinds; and thirdly two forms of capital that are very strongly correlated, *social* capital, which consists of resources based on connections and group membership, and *symbolic* capital, which is the form the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognized as legitimate.

This represented a decisive conceptual movement away from classes as structurally deterministic, a “brute given inscribed in the differential distribution of life chances” (Wacquant 2013, 276). Instead, they are formed, dissolved and reformed through an endless struggle of symbolic performance, recognition and group-making, “a constant and variegated work of inculcation and imposition of categories of perception that contribute to making social reality by molding its representation” (ibid.).

Towards the end of the twentieth century, some scholars argued, however, that processes of atomised individualisation and the increasing significance of other sites of identity, such as nation, gender or ethnicity, had resulted in the fragmentation of older class solidarities (Beck 1992; Giddens 1994). Beck (1992) argued that the late modern rise in precarious employment, and widespread exclusion from a stable, predictable workforce, combined with the decline in unionisation worldwide, had reduced the importance of class-based identities to the point that class was no longer a useful analytical category. Bauman (2000) further proposed that in an age of liquid modernity, privatised individuals no longer needed to ground their dreams, identities or personal trajectories in such fixed locations as place, kin or class.

Rather than submitting to the “death of class” (Pakulski and Waters 1996) implied in these perspectives, new proponents of class analysis have responded that the concept requires “renewing” (Crompton et al. 2000) and a drastically widened scope to adequately explain contemporary manifestations of inequality. At the very least, class has analytical value because it continues to be a category invested with social meaning. In an Australian context, for example, Phillips and Western’s (2005) cross-generational research indicated that while young people may have lower levels of institutional class awareness than older cohorts, manifested as weak connections to trade unions or political parties, they nonetheless articulate a strong sense of identity based in class, alongside other territorial (state, nation, sporting team) and status-based (gender, ethnicity, religion) identities.

To explain the continuing salience of social class, new approaches borrow from Bourdieu to drastically expand the scope of class analysis. Primarily based in UK institutions, new class theorists argue that rather than viewing the “social relations of production, exchange, distribution and consumption” as narrowly economic relationships, concerned only or primarily with wealth and property, analyses should instead also encompass sociological and psychological perspectives, so that class might be “seen as referring to a much broader web of social relationships, including, for example, lifestyle, educational experience and patterns of residence” (Bradley 1996, 19; Reay 1998).

Moreover, this new school claims to go beyond what they see as a reductive economic determinism in Bourdieu’s (1984) analysis of the relationship between class and culture (Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1999, 17; Devine and Savage 2000, 193-194, 2005, 16), and thereby better explain how material and symbolic dimensions of inequality are mutually constitutive (Anthias 2001a), how multiple forms of cultural capital and distinction are employed to define classed boundaries in both Australia (Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1999) and the UK (Bennett et al. 2009), and how (de-)legitimised forms of embodied cultural capital are central to contemporary patterns of class relations, exploitation and struggle (Skeggs 2005, Bennett et al. 2009).



This approach has been most thoroughly operationalised by Savage and colleagues (2013), who propose a model that accommodates the varied ways that economic, social and cultural capitals may combine to constitute complex and multi-dimensional manifestations of social class inequality. While the seven-class structure they propose is empirically grounded only in the British context, their approach has application elsewhere and, most importantly, illustrates the persistence of class divisions and polarisation of inequality under the flexibilised labour market conditions typical of late capitalism. They suggest that the traditional sociological forms of a middle and a working class, although long debated and hard to define, are now evidently divided into more segmented categories of interstitial classes. These include, for example, new affluent workers who possess moderate economic and sometimes social capital without acquiring the cultural capitals previously associated with higher positions in a hierarchical class structure. In a Western Australian context, this was highlighted in the “blue collar affluence” (Forsey 2015) arising from the resources boom that disrupted popular understandings of the collar line dividing manual workers from the educationally credentialled and wealthier middle class.

Sheppard and Biddle (2017) have applied Savage et al.’s (2013) approach in Australia, finding that Australia is similarly divided into six new classes which they term “precariat”, “ageing workers”, “new workers”, “mobile middle”, “emerging affluent”, “established affluent”. They further found that, unlike the egalitarian classlessness of national myth (Western 1991; Western and Baxter 2011), Australians are keenly class conscious and not at all unwilling to name the traditional broad class (upper / middle / working) with which they identify.

Savage and colleagues’ (2013) gradational approach has been criticised for departing too dramatically from an economic relational analysis of class, and for an inescapable, inherently subjective bias when operationalising measures of cultural capital (Bradley 2014. Anthias (2013, 122-3, 124) further contends that determining cultural capital depends on formulations of taste that are not only subjective but also Anglo- or Eurocentric, failing to account for both the diverse ways that symbolic hierarchy may be expressed in a multiethnic context.

However, the “new orthodoxy” (Bradley 2014, 430) of Bourdieusian class analysis is now so widely embraced because it can be modified and applied in many different contexts. Anthias (2013, 133) warns against assuming white and western articulations of class distinctions have application elsewhere and “the danger... that sociologists may extrapolate from their knowledge base to wider social relations in an ethnocentric and westocentric way.” Yet it is not necessarily westocentric to observe that boundary-making cultural practices in China are enacted in ways that are distinctly Chinese but still reminiscent of the collective evaluations of symbolic cultural capital analysed by new class theorists in European contexts. While I draw on more than one dimension of class in this dissertation, a capitals-based approach is most useful because it can be readily engaged in relation to both contemporary Chinese class discourses and to the ways that class, manifested as mobility capital or migration-facilitating capital, may be observed throughout the processes of international migration and settlement, including in Australia.

Although, as already stated, much theorising of class entails nationally bounded analyses, this does not mean it is not accurate or useful. National class frames are naturalised in both social theory *and*, most importantly, in common sense or popular discussions of social class. The experiences of the participants in my study suggest that national class frames have meaning for migrants before they move. These same frames continue to have meaning during and after their movements across borders; national class frames are transported, reformed and reinterpreted by transnational migrants in their new context(s).

Participants in this study live in Australia, in most cases for at least several years, yet I have found that Australian national class frames have limited relevance to their accounts. This is not to say they are absent entirely from my findings, as some aspects of Australian class, refracted through a Chinese lens, are invoked by participants, and are explored in Parts Two and Three. These include, for example, the emergence of a new affluent working class of great relevance to high earning trademen in the boom years, or observations that social interactions are rarely as conditioned by class as they might be in China. However, Chinese national class frames have far more relevance to the experiences of first-generation migrants from China to Australia. Any analysis of how class conditions both the processes of Chinese emigration to Australia as well as the localised dimensions of intra-ethnic class, that is, between migrants from China living in Perth, demands an understanding of some of the ways that class is framed, lived and discussed within the national context of the PRC.

## 3.2 Class in the People's Republic of China

While Marxist class theory naturally casts a long shadow across socialist China, since the onset of the reform era in the early 1980s both political language and academic analysis have recognised the need “to write class conflict out of the script of contemporary politics” (Goodman 2014, 189) and instead find new non-oppositional interpretations of inequality that do not pose an ideological impediment to market reform, private enterprise and the widening gap between rich and poor (Guo 2009, 2016a; Anagnost 2008; Davis and Wang 2009). New sociological models emphasising a hierarchical categorisation of social strata based on measures of occupation and income have been embraced in official political language (Lu 2004; Li 2016; Guo 2008, 2016b). Both official and popular discourses meanwhile reflect the culturalist dimensions of class analysis, drawing on notions of “quality” (*suzhi*), an expression of individual embodied cultural capital (Anagnost 2004, 2008; Kipnis 2006, 2007, 2011; Jacka 2009; Fong 2007; Hsu 2007; Yan 2008). Another important consequence of these changes is that spatial mobility – both domestic and international - is now imbued with class-based judgements of value. This is reflected in both the constrained, institutionally discouraged and socially transgressive mobility of the peasant worker and in the culturally valorised and desirable overseas travel and migration of the middle- and upper-classes (Jacka 2009; Nyíri 2010; Liu-Farrer 2016; Coates 2018). Many of these changes are directly relevant to experiences of this cohort of trade skilled migrants and their relationships with other Chinese migrants in Australia.

The rise and fall – or, to follow Walder (1984), the making and unmaking – of the Chinese (urban) working class can be traced through the socialist history of the twentieth century. Although the empirical definitions of class in Marx's writings are often imprecise and poorly defined (Giddens 1973, 27; Guo 2016a), following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, his abstract model of class domination was adapted and applied to the entire Chinese population. For the next three decades, opportunities for social mobility were largely shaped by this division of the population into a graduated system based on Marx's three big relational classes of wage-labourers, capitalists and landowners (Marx 1959 [1894], 633) In the early 1950s, all Chinese nationals were given a political class label; this in practice became a hereditary family background status that informed a new hierarchy with the newly constituted classes of “red” background workers and farmers at the top of the ideological tree (Walder 1984; Andreas 2016). However, late twentieth century political reform, market socialism and the rising inequality borne of new economic relations produced a need for a new interpretation of “class” in China.

The CCP is at root a class institution; as the vanguard of the proletariat, its position is constitutionally validated under the people's democratic dictatorship, led by a proletariat formed through the alliance of peasants and workers. "Class" in the Marxist sense is therefore an ideological impediment to market reform when that reforming process necessarily creates new groups "exploiting" others through private ownership of the means of production (Guo 2009, 2016a; Anagnost 2008). As the reforms progressed and economic inequality became ever more evident, Chinese scholars and commentators sought to develop theories of class that did not lead axiomatically to class consciousness, action and conflict. Popular writer Liang Xiaosheng (1997, cited in Anagnost 2008, 504) argued that Marxist theories of class were not appropriate in reform-era China because they necessarily entailed conflict and class struggle that impeded national productive forces; he proposed a metaphor where the market and economic growth "acts as an effective 'shampoo' (*xifaji*) that loosens up heavy ropes of dirty hair into finely individuated strands."

As part of this shift, Lu Xueyi (2002, 2004) and colleagues at the China Academy of Social Sciences developed a hierarchical categorisation of ten social strata. This is based on occupational aggregates they claim may be observed in contemporary China, with industrial workers and agricultural labours in two of the lowest three rungs, only ahead of the unemployed and underemployed. This model was initially politically criticised and suppressed as it shattered once and for all the myth of the proletariat as the leading class, before becoming accepted as the new orthodoxy of Chinese stratification (Li 2016) and highly influential for both later sociological research and the direction of central social policy. Heavily Weberian, the model identifies three types of resources – organisational, economic and cultural – that determine socio-economic status (Lu 2004, 7-8). New concepts required new vocabulary. In this same period, the term for Marxist "class" (*jiejì*) was largely replaced in with "stratum" (*jieceng*) or "(interest) group" (*qunti*). These last two may be used interchangeably to describe contemporary class categories, while the first is now largely reserved for historical and ideological studies (Guo 2008).

Yet this hollowing out of the language of class comes at a time when Chinese workers are acutely experiencing their classed positions and subaltern status in an industrialised China at the heart of global capital accumulation (Pun 2016; Pun and Chan 2008). These analytical and linguistic shifts offer barely a fig leaf for the evident declining symbolic prestige of workers and peasants. Once the political and moral core of the nation, they are now the subalterns of contemporary society, a drastic shift “from masters to medicants” (Solinger 2004, 50; Wu et al. 2010; Sun 2013). Occupying the lowest rung of *diceng* society are the *nongmingong*, the rural migrants to urban areas, consigned to a liminal social space between the city and the countryside (Yan 2008; Sun 2014). In this dissertation I prefer the translation “peasant worker”, following Guo and Liang (2017), 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”.

The trade skilled migrants and their wives who moved to Australia during the resources boom were born between the mid-1960s and early-1980s. As such, they had belonged to families of “workers”, or in some cases “peasants”, prior to and/or during the restructuring of Chinese employment and national class frames. The older among this cohort had experienced the downward shift in the social position of workers firsthand, while the younger among them finished school and entered the workforce at a time when both the symbolic and material value of their labour had already declined.

While many sociological analyses of China’s new class map have been economically deterministic (Sun and Guo 2013), this approach overlooks the extent to which the unequal distribution of cultural resources is both the result and cause of unequal economic and political resources (Sun 2013). Contemporary popular constructions of social hierarchy, and consequently the national class frames participants brought with them to Australia, can be best understood through a more culturalist lens, and particularly the forms of informational and educational capital discursively valued in China today.

### 3.2.1 Suzhi and cultural capital

Reforms reinvigorated traditional cultural norms of social mobility through education as part of national efforts to accelerate modernisation and economic growth. The revival of this cultural model in the post-Mao era aligned well with the emphasis on individual skills and credentialed cultural capital evident in the neoliberal world order with which the newly outwardly oriented China engaged (Fong 2006, 2011). As reforms progressed, official language about the need to improve the “quality of the population” (*renkou suzhi*) and introduce “education for quality” (*suzhi jiaoyu*) became co-opted into popular discussions of individual “quality” (*suzhi*) as a dimension of social class (Kipnis 2006, 2011; Anagnost 2007, 190; Fong 2006).

*Suzhi* discourse frames culturalist interpretations of class hierarchies in contemporary China. *Suzhi* is what distinguishes the middle class in China, an all-encompassing site of distinction that is ill-defined and yet ubiquitously understood as a kind of “ideal personhood associated with urban modernity” (Fong 2007, 88). It is embodied cultural capital, inscribed upon the individual; a performed and bodily marker of difference and of value. *Suzhi* is expressed through dispositions and through consumption practices, including education. It articulates social boundaries informed by class and is used to explain and justify rising inequality in contemporary China. It may be best understood as a specifically Chinese articulation of taste, as in embodied dispositions and resultant social action that are constrained or enabled by unequal access to resources, particularly cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984).

Scholars disagree over the origins of *suzhi* discourse. Some argue that it is one expression of “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics”, as Harvey (2005) has dubbed the Chinese socialist state’s enthusiastic embrace of the market since the early 1980s. Anagnost (2008, 512) argues that “the politics of *suzhi* is the local form in which neoliberal technologies of selfhood take place in the Chinese context”. *Suzhi* discourse can be seen to serve the interests of global capital, as a top-down construction of *suzhi* has valorised the retreat from redistributive functions of the state and shift towards greater individual responsibility, justifying a narrative where material success is linked to investment and attainment. Anagnost further (2004, 192) describes the Chinese middle-class family as a “theater of neoliberal subject production,” as the embodied value of the (single) child is created through intensive educational and consumption practices that confer cultural capital. The figure of the middle-class child is contrasted with that of the migrant peasant worker, the latter epitomising a lack of embodied *suzhi*.

Hsu (2007) in contrast proposes that, rather than the servant of neoliberal market reform, *suzhi* discourse is a grassroots creative response to the changing frames of value and opportunity that have accompanied the restructuring of the reform era. She argues that instead of affirming links between individual cultivation of culture and material success, *suzhi* is an expression of social contribution beyond the mere money-grubbing endeavours of the new entrepreneurs or cadre-capitalist class. Personal and collective narratives engage the concept of *suzhi* as a way to redefine (or rediscover) intellectual cultural capital in post-Cultural Revolution urban China. Kipnis (2007, 389) likewise critiques an unreflexive use of neoliberal ideology to interpret *suzhi* discourse, since an individual's *suzhi* is understood as necessarily the result of the environment in which they grow up, implying that no matter what efforts or investments are made, a child from Beijing will always be of higher quality than a child from a provincial county town. This emphasis on the structural causes of *suzhi* deficiency is very different to the individualised responsibility for failure inherent in neoliberal discourses.

What is clear however is that *suzhi* discourse does render “quality” to be an individualised attribute. It is an embodied resource or form of capital that one may or may not possess and that makes one more likely to achieve, and more deserving of, social, economic and even marital success (Kipnis 2006; Fong 2007; Sun 2019). A deficit of *suzhi* is considered grounds to denigrate or mock whole sections of society including, for example, “rural-migrants, litterbugs, short people, the near-sighted and the poorly dressed” (Kipnis 2011, 290).

Within this context, farmers and peasant workers are understood as being of the lowest quality, naturally and irrevocably less worthy than urban residents (Sun 2014, 2019). This reflects a further, unusual component to Chinese national class frames; stratification and social hierarchies in China also have a spatial dimension that is structurally embedded in institutions of public administration. Spatial hierarchies that were first established under the socialist system have become entrenched through policies originally designed to ensure geographic variance in the speed and scale of reform that resulted in unequal access to market income and, most importantly, differential mobility rights (Liu 1997; Yu 2002).

### 3.2.2 Hukou and spatial mobility

The *hukou* household registration system, a mechanism of population control and identity status administration, has been a major driver of structural inequality since it was formally established in 1958. It functions to manage domestic migration as it is the main point of interface between Chinese citizens and public administration. Hukou status is ascribed at birth, inherited by children from their parents, so that hukou has effectively been a mechanism for “social stratification based on hereditary administrative status rather than socio-economic position” (Mallee 1995,23). Under the hukou system, every Chinese citizen is registered under, firstly, their official place of residence, and secondly, their category of registration, specifically agricultural (*nong*) or non-agricultural (*feinong*). The division of the population into rural and urban residents created a “quasi-apartheid pass system” (Alexander and Chan 2004) under which access to legitimised mobility through *hukou* transfer was limited to those with particular cultural capital, in the form of educational or employment credentials, or economic capital and the ability to buy property in the destination city (Nyíri 2010, 15-8). This resulted in a “dualistic [social] structure” (*eryuan jiegou*) (Cha 2000) whereby Chinese citizens were rigidly divided into distinct “castes”, each with starkly different entitlements to urban residency rights, public services and social belonging (Chan and Zhang 1999; Cheng and Seldon 1994; Fan 2008; Wang 2005a; 2005b; 2010).

Despite attempts at hukou reform, Vortherms (2015) argues that the localised administration and budgeting of welfare and other citizenship rights means the *hukou* continues to function as an “internal citizenship institution” determining how membership and inclusion operate at a sub-national level. For those on the wrong side of the rural-urban divide, as well as those from towns and cities with tighter budget constraints (Solinger and Hu 2012), or from places where local governance norms emphasise individual responsibility over collective support (Woodman 2018), the “differential citizenship” (Wu 2010) arising from this institutional categorisation has far-reaching effects. For many Chinese citizens, quality of life, welfare entitlements, and educational and employment opportunities are to a large extent determined by *hukou*.



The *hukou* system is an expression of a 'regulatory and cultural environment that consistently favours sedentarism' (Woodman and Guo 2017) and yet this position is at odds with a society that is increasingly mobile. One response to this important social change is through the validation of some forms of mobility and the restriction of, and recurring moral panic over other forms, particularly the unregulated migration of peasant workers to the cities. *Suzhi* discourses produced by urban residents work to justify this exclusion and the differential citizenship suffered by rural migrants (Murphy 2004; Fong 2007; Yan 2008). Discursively positioned as "suzhi-deficient" (Jacka 2009), the internal migration of people with rural status to the cities, while essential for supplying low-wage labour to sectors like hospitality and construction, is deemed simultaneously a threat to a sense of urban civility. This form of class-inflected mobility is constructed as a threat that must be regulated and controlled.

Similarly, Chu's (2010) ethnography of Fujianese peasant emigrants to the United States describes the ways that meanings of spatial mobility and the moral worth of certain forms of international migration is contested within the sending province. Villagers who follow irregular migrant pathways to New York secure economic capital, expressed back "home" through the remittance wealth and consumption practices of family members. Yet urban Fujianese contend that their economic resources are morally inferior and their migrations transgressive; there is a symbolic struggle to maintain the sociospatial hierarchies of national (and regional) class frames even as the material dimensions of those hierarchies are challenged.

At the other end of the social scale, mobility is also imbued with judgements of class and "quality". For wealthy Chinese investor migrants, transnational mobility does not offer economic benefits but rather converts economic resources into symbolic capital. Securing residency rights overseas is a form of "class-based consumption", a practice that works to "erect class boundaries and signify elite class position" (Liu-Farrer 2016, 503). For many international students, education overseas has been a mechanism for elite class reproduction and capital conversion, foreign degrees validated as cultural capital and invested with symbolic worth by state and popular discourses (Xiang and Shen 2009). For others, international migration is a means to escape constrained social mobility and possibly make claims on an imagined global modernity (Nyíri 2010; Fong 2011). Coates (2018, 173) explains explicitly how mobility and culturalist dimensions of class are linked in China:

The combination of mobility as a *qualisign* of the modern subject with discourses of 'human quality' in China suggest the pivotal role migration plays in the contemporary ideas of valued personhood that feeds into the cultural and economic logics of those who move.

Here in Perth, class contestations between PRC-born migrants of different backgrounds are framed through the combination of these Chinese discourses of *suzhi* as embodied cultural capital with selective Australian migration policies that valorise some species of capital over others. This particular combination means that contestations often centre on defining who constitutes the figure of the (un)worthy migrant (Anderson 2013; Kim 2018). Homeland national class frames and the related ways that mobility is discursively imbued with judgement of class and ‘quality’ shape intra-ethnic relations in the migration context.

While social class and the resultant resources individual migrants can mobilise doubtless affects the migration trajectories of people of all national backgrounds, a study of class and migration has particular purchase when examined with reference to China precisely because of the ways that Chinese national class frames have become so deeply imbricated with spatial mobility and the framing of movement both within and beyond borders as either desirable and something to be emulated or transgressive and something to be controlled.

### 3.3 Class in studies of migration and ethnicity

Class, as previously stated, has been under-represented in recent work in the field of migration studies (Van Hear 2014, Freznosa-Flot and Shinozaki 2017; Kim 2018; Bonjour and Chauvin 2018; Cederberg 2017). However, this is not to say class has been absent from earlier theorising. Resource inequalities underpin much of the grand migration theory of the twentieth century. Material conditions of socio-economic class and individualised volumes of “human capital” are central to neoclassical economic theories explaining the initiation and perpetuation of migration; calculations of cost and benefit resulting in migration necessarily entail an assessment of economic class and relative disadvantage (e.g. Sjaastad 1962; Todaro 1969; Harris and Todaro 1970). From a structuralist perspective, world systems and segmented market theories also position inequality, that is, differentially distributed economic resources, as the starting point for cross-border migrations (Wallerstein 1974, 1980, 1984; Piore 1979).

Class analysis is present in work that addresses the outcomes for migrants in traditional receiving contexts, and particularly the social mobility of the second and later generations through “segmented assimilation” and racialised pathways towards joining the white middle class (Portes and Zhou 1993; Perlman and Waldinger 1997; Zhou 1997,2014). Measures of social capital are also evident in network theories (Massey 1990; Massey et al. 1998; Castells 1996), and in studies of ethnic enclaves and ethnic entrepreneurship (Wilson and Portes 1980; Zhou 1992; Lin and Zhou 2005; Portes, Haller and Guarnizo 2002). However, the concept of “ethnic capital“ (e.g. Zhou 1992), understood as combinations of social and economic capital that are leveraged, exchanged and converted within an identifiable ethnic group, institution or enclave, has faced critique (Gold 2005, 267; Lan 2018, 8; Kim 2019, 942) for implying ethnic communities are largely homogenous, neglecting intra-ethnic inequality and relations of power within those communities. After all, as Erel (2010, 643) succinctly states, “a migrant group does not hold homogenous cultural capital; instead, cultural capital is both the product of and productive of differentiations of gender, ethnicity and *class* within the migrant group” (emphasis added).

### 3.3.1 Social class and the migration process

Despite these attempts to theorise the relationships between migration and inequality, Van Hear (2014, S101-2) proposes that recent migration research has engaged the lens of social class only superficially. Rather than analysing class only in relation to the drivers of migration, or in the narrow light of settlement and segmented assimilation theories at point of destination, he argues that scholars should instead seek to understand how class, understood as the possession of various species of capital, influences opportunities and decisions, routes and destinations *throughout the migration process*. He argues:

...that the form of migration and its outcomes are shaped by resources – economic or network-based – that would-be migrants can muster. The capacity to mobilize those resources *is largely determined by socio-economic background or class*... Holding combinations of such capital shapes the routes would-be migrants can take, the channels they can follow, the destinations they can reach, and their life chances afterward. (emphasis added)

Bourdieuian theories of capitals are evident in empirical examples that demonstrate that the choices, decisions and outcomes of migrants depend upon how differing forms of capital are operationalised and converted in ways that are highly context specific. This occurs at different spatial and temporal scales, before, during and after the cross-border movements of people. Kim (2018) argues that a better understanding is required of the relational, political and cultural processes through which individualised resources (themselves an expression of social class) may be converted into what she terms “migration facilitating capital” and, conversely, of the ways that “differential endowment of migration-facilitating capital (including ethnic capital) produces fine-grained material and symbolic stratification” (Kim 2019, 939). Migrants themselves are active agents in relation to both of these dimensions, as they explore new ways to mobilise cultural (and other) capital to build upon and change the ways that their resources may be valued by other actors, including ethnic majorities in their destination countries and the co-ethnic migrant networks with which they must engage along the way (Erel 2010; Tabar, Noble and Poynting 2010).

For example, Paul (2011, 2015, 2017) has traced the processes through which Filipina and Indonesian domestic care workers accumulate and convert different forms of capital through international stepwise migration, moving between different cities, countries and continents positioned in a hierarchy of place. This allows them to accumulate the different forms of capital needed for the next step up the ladder of destinations. They can rarely move directly from their home country to the most desirable destination but rather must first accumulate, validate and convert varying combinations of economic, social, human, cultural and other capitals to accomplish goals that may change over time. However, despite these limitations, Paul (2015) argues it would be incorrect to classify these women as “low-capital” since they do in fact move, preferring to describe them as “capital constrained”.

Not only lower-skilled migrants like domestic care workers engage in stepwise migrations. Xiang (2007b) describes how tertiary educated Indian IT workers may similarly take less desirable jobs in Malaysia or Singapore, expecting that they may accumulate new social and cultural capital to step up a destination hierarchy towards Silicon Valley. Such stepwise migrations and iterative processes of capital accumulation and conversion, may occur both within and across national borders, linking domestic and international migrations. Chinese labour migrants, for example, may undertake work in destinations overseas in order to accumulate the forms of capital needed to move up a rung in their particular individualised hierarchies of place, which may include large cities within China from which they were previously excluded (King and Skeldon 2010; Kalir 2013).

However, Kim (2018) argues that analyses of migration-facilitating capital that focus primarily on the actions of migrants themselves, fail to appreciate the central role of the state in determining which forms and quantities of capital are legitimate and convertible at different times and under differing circumstances. She calls for a more thorough engagement with the diverse mechanisms through which the state – in concert with other actors, including intermediaries and the migrants themselves – valorises some capitals, and by extension some people, over others, producing administrative and discursive categories of (un)worthy or (il)legal migrant subjects (also Anderson 2013; Pieke and Xiang 2010; Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018). In a similar vein, Sheller (2010) proposes that unequal distributions of “mobility capital” are produced through the very practices by which states work to facilitate movement for those people whose cross-border journeys are deemed valid and desirable. By this she means that the construction of transport and communications infrastructures, encompassing new border security and surveillance technologies, make travel easier, safer and more predictable for those with the means to move, while simultaneously restricting access to the same mobility for those disadvantaged by class, nationality and/or race.

Bonjour and Chauvin (2018) go so far as to argue that social class is the analytical connector that bridges economic rationalist considerations with the cultural identity objectives evident in migration policy language of social cohesion and integration. As class, along with race, is now normatively unacceptable as an explicit reason for policy discrimination in liberal democracies, mechanisms of selection instead assess migrants’ “merit” and “contribution” that may be quantified with reference to wealth, educational credentials and linguistic competency (Walsh 2011; Shachar 2006; Hawthorne 2011). Such “class-selective policy frames” (Bonjour and Chauvin 2018, 5) not only apply to traditional forms of economic labour migration but are increasingly relevant to family and even humanitarian migration. In some EU countries, for example, the right to family reunion, particularly partner migration, is increasingly determined by social class, with language skills, employment status, and evidence of savings used as selection criteria (Kofman 2018).

Class and the capitals it affords evidently shapes processes of emigration. However, of equal note is the ways that class may profoundly affect processes of return migration and “returnee preparedness” (Cassarino 2004), that is, the capacity to marshal and operationalise resources to effect movements back to the sending region. In his study of Israelis in the US and UK, for example, Gold (2001) found that middle-class migrants were far better positioned to enjoy transnational careers than working-class compatriots, their cultural capital, institutionalised through qualifications and work experience, permitting comparative freedom of movement in both directions. Return migration or “roots tourism” for second and later generations may similarly be heavily inflected with classed positions. For example, social class conditions the experiences of British-born Vietnamese and Dominican-Americans who both encounter relative poverty and are perceived as affluent returnees in their parents’ homelands (Louie 2006; Barber 2017).

Roots tourism, educational mobilities and lifestyle migration may be understood as forms of migration as consumption, which, like labour migration, are shaped by the classed positions of migrants and would-be migrants. The routes and trajectories available to individual migrants are informed by their economic resources but also the symbolic dimensions of how they are positioned and perceived in homeland class frames. For example, Tuxen and Robertson (2019) show that nuanced and granular class statuses within the Mumbai middle-classes result in brokers servicing clients differently, channelling students to particular countries and institutions based on classed assumptions.

Similarly, although lifestyle migration can be understood as individualised projects of self-realisation that commence from positions of relative affluence (Benson and O’Reilly 2009), Benson and Osbaldiston (2016) warn against the celebration of lifestyle migrants as ideal individualised subjects. They argue that this fails to recognise the extent to which even migrations framed as personal projects in search of a “better life” remain conditioned by the structural, material and indeed imaginative constraints engendered by the positions of race, ethnicity, gender and class. Class structures the migration choices and routes available to individuals but is also reproduced and reformulated at point of destination (Benson 2018; Oliver and O’Reilly 2010), a point revisited in discussions of class and ethnicity below.

Cederberg (2017) notes that while scholars have explored social mobility through migration, usually understood in narrow economic terms, this has rarely encompassed an analysis of how this affects class positioning and migrants' own orientations within class hierarchies at home and abroad. Migration from developing contexts to migrant receiving countries has traditionally been associated with upward social mobility. However for "middling" migrants (Conradson and Latham 2005), there is a risk of deskilling (Kelly 2007; Ho 2011; C Ho 2006a; 2006b), of contradictory social mobility, where social advancement at "home" is made possible by taking so-called "3D" (dangerous, dirty or demeaning) work while "away" (Parreñas 2015; Rutten and Verstappen 2014; Prothmann 2018), or of a downward trajectory in social status in both sending and receiving countries (Cederberg 2017; Gao 2006; Choi 2018; Ho 2019, 39).

Many tertiary-educated migrants from China have experienced deskilling through migration to Australia and similar Anglophone destinations (e.g. Ho 2011a; Fung and Chen 1996; C Ho 2006a; 2006b), sometimes marginalised at "home" and abroad (Gao 2006) or suffering "chain deskilling" (Choi 2018), meaning that their downward mobility is compounded through exclusion from work commensurate to their qualifications in both sending and receiving contexts. Even among investor migrants with significant economic capital, Ley (2010) has demonstrated that frictionless migration is a fallacy. "Flat world" claims (Friedman 2005) that assume a level playing field for globally mobile professionals and business elites ignore the barriers faced by migrants who encounter discriminatory working environments and lack the linguistic and cultural competencies valorised in their new host settings. However, as a counterpoint to this view, Erel (2010) is critical of "rucksack" approaches to cultural capital which imply a migrant arrives in a given migration context with fixed competencies that may or may not help them achieve their objectives. This neglects the ways that migrants change, adapt and develop their competencies in response to the particular demands or requirements of their new settings.

This dissertation examines dimensions of class mobility through migration, among those who have been deskilled and those who have not. *Intra-ethnic class* emerges as a point of difference as national class frames in motion are negotiated and contested between Chinese nationals and former nationals living in Perth. In the next section I discuss how class has been engaged in ethnicity studies, particularly in Australia, and how the analyses of class and ethnicity between subjects of a single nationality *and* migrant generation presented in this dissertation may help to rethink class in a multicultural context.

### 3.3.2 Social class, ethnicity and intra-ethnic class

Wu and Liu (2014, 1392) link the advent of transnational theories (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999) that privilege ethnic ties as a site of analysis with the “dearth of class analysis in the growing body of literature on immigration”. A preoccupation with the activities and processes that create complex networks of social, economic and political links between homelands and destinations can, Wu and Liu claim, result in analyses that assume ethnic homogeneity or overlook the material inequalities embedded within these global frames.

The relative absence of class in Australian ethnicity literature over the last three decades may similarly have much to do with the ways that multiculturalism has been discursively constructed and multicultural policy implemented. By emphasising symbolic representations of diversity and relying on aggregated, even essentialised, ethnic groups in both the allocation of resources and common-sense understandings of new social formations within the multicultural nation, this runs the risk of obscuring or erasing intra-ethnic difference (Ang 2014, 1186; also Benton and Gomez 2014; Louie 2004, 97). Ang (2014; Brubaker 2004) has outlined the pitfalls of such groupism, particularly where the “group” attempts to conflate individuals from diverse geographic and political backgrounds, as in the case of ethnic Chinese Australians. Multicultural projects that assume or encourage such homogenising practise similarly erase or ignore intra-ethnic class differences.



Earlier Australian analyses that addressed the relationship between ethnicity and social class focused on ethnic disadvantage and issues of equity for minorities (de Lepervanche 1980; Jakubowicz, Morrissey and Palser 1984). Proceeding from the position that immigration policy is a function of Australian capitalism (Collins 1984), they focus on the fault line of class as it divides ethnic and racial minorities from the dominant “white” Anglo-Celtic majority. Writing from an American perspective but influential in Australia, Bonacich (1980) provided more elaborate models of the relationship between class and ethnicity, acknowledging intra-ethnic conflict as an example of “horizontal” class affiliations taking precedence over “vertical” ties of ethnicity, race or tribe. However, her approach suffered from limitations and oversimplification, not least in her reliance on a two-class system of analysis that neglects the existence of middle classes (Bonacich 1999). What these authors have in common (see also Wright 1985) is an emphasis on the class basis of ethnic and racial conflict. Bonacich (1980, 189) writes that “nationalist movements are, at root, the product of class forces”, while de Lepervanche (1980, 34, see also Jakubowicz 1984, 40-44) insists that the institutionalisation of ethnicity in Australia serves to manage and contain minorities’ responses to the hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon ruling class and so “masks conflicting class interests and the nature of class relations”.

Later work sought to move away from unidimensional and overly materialist analyses of the relationship between class and race or ethnicity (Bottomley, de Lepervanche and Martin 1991, viii). This acknowledged, firstly, race or ethnicity as an independent site of (dis)advantage and discrimination, one that might intersect with class but with logics that exist independent of economic causes (Omi and Winant 2015 [1986]). Secondly, they worked to show how ethnicity, gender and class do not function as unitary categories but rather are mutually constitutive and defined in relation or even opposition to one another (Vasta 1991; also Yuval Davis 2007, 2015). Although intersectionality theory insists that this analysis should apply to *all* subjects, in practice race or ethnicity, gender and class have still been primarily articulated as sites of oppression, representation and resistance between a dominant Anglo-Australian mainstream and subaltern minorities.

This dissertation, however, is less concerned with classed relations between people of different ethnicities/races, and rather seeks to understand differences of experience and perspective originating in social class between people (migrants) of the *same* ethnicity and nationality. Wu and Liu (2014) stress the importance of “bringing class back in” to analyses of co-ethnic employment and exploitation. They argue PRC Chinese migrant workers in Italy and the UK exhibit class consciousness and class solidarity in response to unfair co-ethnic bosses and working conditions they know violate local employment law. Wu and Liu acknowledge that this is but one dimension of complex intra-ethnic relations and may be situationally overlooked in favour of horizontal linkages, such as kinship, shared dialects and geographical origin within China. As in older assessments of ethnic enclaves (Zhou 1992) and in more recent work on Chinese co-ethnic employment in diverse contexts, including Australia, Sweden and Chile (Li 2017; Axelsson et al. 2014; Chan, Ramírez and Stefoni 2019), relationships between employers and employees demand a more nuanced understanding beyond antagonistic relations of labour and capital. Rather, racialised minority employers and employees negotiate “dynamics of vulnerability and reciprocity” (Chan, Ramírez and Stefoni 2019) and so their relationships cannot be reduced to overly simplistic narratives of capital, labour and oppositional class solidarities.

While Wu and Liu’s (2014) emphasis on relational economic class is refreshing, it presents only one aspect of intra-ethnic class, seen through the dynamics of production and employment. Class is also expressed, contested and negotiated in other migrant settings, such as co-ethnic rental markets, schools, and public spaces of business and consumption. These expressions involve symbolic and cultural dimensions of class. Class continues to be (re)produced and contested in migration since, following Bourdieu, classes exist not as ontological formations of people but as practices of group-making (Wacquant 2013). By considering the translocational positions of migrants (Anthias 2012a), it becomes clear that despite spatial movements across borders, habitus is stable and changes only slowly, resulting in “the reproduction of common patterns of hierarchy and conflict from one field to another” (Swartz 1997, as quoted by Oliver and O’Reilly 2010, 52). Migrants may find themselves in a new field, but opportunities for remaking their habitus or a drastically transformed position within co-ethnic class hierarchies are limited. Homeland national class frames therefore remain a site of social distance between migrants of the same nationality in the receiving country context (Robins 2019; Gold 2001; Oliver and O’Reilly 2010).

Few Australian studies have considered dimensions of intra-ethnic class and those that have (Baldassar, Pyke and Ben Moshe 2017; Colic-Peisker 2002, 2008; Khorana 2014) address class only between different migration waves, arriving in Australia at different points in time, under different political and economic conditions. In this dissertation, I go beyond these analyses by demonstrating that even among migrant “groups” identified as sharing a common nationality, language *and* migration wave (vintage or generation), national class frames transposed into transnational contexts may generate significantly different processes of migration and settlement, and other expressions of intra-ethnic class.

### 3.4 Reflections on an emerging framework for rethinking class and migration: migration literacy and national class frames in motion

In keeping with this discussion of recent literature in the field, the arguments presented in this dissertation are concerned with, firstly, the effects of social class before, during and after migration, particularly how various forms of capital shape the processes of migration, secondly, dimensions of *intra-ethnic class* in migration and settlement and the ongoing relevance of homeland national class frames for first generation migrants, and thirdly, how national class frames are impacted by mobility. In doing this I feature two new conceptualisations to emerge from my analysis that help to rethink the role of class in migration processes: migration literacy and national class frames in motion

In trying to make sense of my findings, I engage class in various ways as no single dimension or theory of class can provide all the answers. To abandon economic causes and effects in favour of overly individualised and cultural determinist analyses of class would be, as Crompton and Scott (2005) have argued, to throw out the baby with the bathwater. I am in good company, I think, when I draw on multiple different – and even competing – approaches in my analysis of this case study. Following Bourdieu and Wacquant (2013, 294), an engagement with theories of social class requires that one:

must transcend the opposition between objectivist theories which identify classes... with discrete groups, mere populations that can be numbered and separated by boundaries objectively inscribed in reality, and subjectivist theories... which reduce the ‘social order’ to a kind of collective classification by aggregating individual classifications or, more precisely, the individual strategies, classified and classifying, whereby agents classify themselves and others.

Commencing with the objectivist approaches, the core cohort featured in the ethnographic accounts that follow is defined in narrow occupational terms, and with reference primarily to the male head of household. This approach echoes the (now dated) aggregated occupational class schemes developed by Goldthorpe and colleagues (Goldthorpe et al. 1969; Goldthorpe 1987; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992), despite the limitations such an androcentric approach may entail from a feminist critique (Goldthorpe 1983; Stanworth 1984). This approach also aligns with official class schemes or standardised occupational classificational hierarchies used in Anglophone public administration from the late twentieth century (Edgell 1993, 43-4) despite the fact that occupation seems to be an ever-weaker determinant of social class (Savage et al. 2013, 222).

I chose this approach, not because this is necessarily a good way of understanding contemporary class divisions (it is not), but rather because it is directly relevant to the ways that the Australian state administers both immigration and the collection and analysis of population data. The Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) is devised and maintained by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and Statistics New Zealand (SNZ). This classification is used for national Censuses and, most importantly, for the determination of eligible “in-demand” occupations for temporary and permanent visas. Primary visa applicants (*de facto* heads of household for the purposes of migration) must demonstrate the relevant qualifications, skills and/or experience in order to meet visa application criteria. Had I encountered any Chinese families with trade skilled female primary visa applicants I would have included them – indeed perhaps devoted a chapter to them! – but I did not. In all the families I met, even those where the wife had worked in a similarly skilled trade occupation in China, the primary visa holder with accredited skills in Australia was a man. One of the aims of this dissertation is to interrogate classed experiences of migration in the light of selective migration policies, and so occupation is an appropriate point of departure.

I also retain the terms “working class” and “middle class” (as well as “blue collar” and “white collar” occupational categories), despite their lack of analytical precision, because they are labels that are commonly understood in both Chinese (Guo 2016a, 11) and Australian (McGregor 2001, 36-7; Western and Baxter 2011; Sheppard and Biddle 2017) popular discussions of social stratification and class membership. Although participants did not explicitly describe themselves in class terms, trade skilled migrants and their wives frequently said they belonged to families of “ordinary workers” (*putong gongren*), while both working- and middle-class participants used educational level (*jiaoyu shuiping*) as a proxy for these two broad/aggregate social classes.

Taking education as a proxy for class points to the importance of cultural capital in determining relational positions in class hierarchies. In Part Two (Chapters 5-7) of the dissertation, I explore the ways class conditioned the processes of migration from China to Australia and settlement in Perth for members of the core cohort of trade skilled migrants and their families. I do this with a particular emphasis on Bourdiesian theories of capital (1986, 1987), following Van Hear's (2014) call to understand how the trails of capital accumulation, validation, conversion and exchange operate throughout processes of migration in ways that are negotiated, validated and iteratively reconfigured through the actions of migrants, commercial agents and the state, that ultimate arbiter of credentialed migration-facilitating capital (Kim 2018, 2019).

I use the terms *mobility capital* and *migration-facilitating capital* interchangeably. Sheller (2010, 279) and Kim (2018) define these slightly differently; Sheller limits the term "mobility capital" to a "combination of competences, skills, equipment and social capital" whereas Kim's definition extends to any and all resources that may be instrumentally operationalised in the pursuit of migration objectives. In this dissertation, both terms reflect Kim's broader definition as the possession or lack of all species of convertible capital that may affect the (im)mobility of individuals and their families.

The story of this cohort is an exploration of how a group of people with limited mobility capital successfully (with some exceptions) navigated a densely complex regulatory environment that selects and excludes on the basis of particular forms of credentialed capital. To generalise and distil to the simplest terms, before departing China trade skilled migrants had no social capital in Australia. Their informational capital, at least in relation to understanding migration law and policy, was likewise very low indeed. These constraints of social and informational capital, critical components of their overall migration-facilitating capital, made them dependent on intermediaries, chains of brokers who could facilitate introductions to foreign employers and manage complicated Chinese emigration and Australian immigration requirements.

However, much as Paul (2017) emphasises that her subjects are not ‘low capital’ but rather ‘capital constrained’ since they can command sufficient resources – money, knowledge of migration opportunities, family support, etc. – to initiate their moves overseas, similarly trade skilled migrants to Australia were not without migration-facilitating capital. Trade skilled migrants *did* possess one form of institutionalised cultural capital highly valued by the Australian state and Australian employers: heavy trade skills that were in short supply in a national economy reliant on primary industry at the onset of a global resources boom. In the mid-2000s, their lack of other forms of cultural capital, such as tertiary qualifications, or the English language skills that over time became increasingly valorised under changing selective migration policies, was no impediment to securing a temporary work visa and even permanent residency or citizenship.

Most members of this cohort paid expensive broker fees in order to come to Australia with a temporary working visa. This is one expression of the heavy reliance on intermediaries engendered by their low informational capital, but such fees are also an example of the conversion of economic resources to other forms of migration-facilitating capital, such as skills assessment and the production of appropriate documentation. Furthermore, deploying economic resources was often yet another exercise in capital conversion; few members of this cohort had that much money at their disposal and so drew upon loans raised through their homeland social capital in order to commence debt-financed labour migrations.

Kim (2018a, 267) however argues that while the role of individual migrants in these processes are important, it is the state itself that is ultimately constitutive of migration-facilitating capital. Through “the state’s power of nomination, certification and accreditation”, that is, the mechanisms that determine what kinds and volumes of credentialled capital are needed to enter Australia – expressed in the myriad details of English language requirements, visa application fees, authorised skills assessors and the standards to which they must adhere – and the border agencies that enforce them, the state creates the circumstances of migration.

The complexity and the seemingly ceaseless revision of migration legislation forces individual migrants to rely on qualified and credentialled intermediaries to interpret, explain and determine the best course of action to achieve their goals. This is true for all migrants, even those from highly educated backgrounds, who without good advice may still make mistakes through misinterpretations of migration law. But for less-highly educated individuals from non-English speaking countries, their reliance on intermediaries is still greater.

It is this reliance that leads me to propose the term *migration literacy* as one component of mobility capital, a critically important competency, possessed to varying degrees by migrants from different national, linguistic and educational backgrounds. It comprises their capacity to read, understand and interpret the complex – and rapidly changing – body of migration legislation and policies that directly impacts how and when they may enter and remain in Australia, and the associated costs and benefits in doing so. It further entails their ability to access the right intermediaries and assess the competence and reliability of the intermediaries on whom they rely. Migration literacy, as well as mobility capital more broadly, shapes the opportunities and choices available to individual migrants. Most trade skilled Chinese who came to Australia during the resources boom have low migration literacy, a result of their poor English and lower educational attainment. Participants in this study frequently described migration, settlement and citizenship decisions that were made based on incomplete or even incorrect information.

However, while a capitals-based analysis is useful and informative to this case study, it is not quite enough to fully understand how class is articulated and experienced by members of this cohort of trade skilled migrants. Such exchanges of capitals occur in many migrant populations; Bourdieu's (1986, 1987; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) framework and more recent extensions thereof (Crompton, et al. 2000; Savage et al. 2013) are tools with demonstrable application in multiple migration contexts (e.g. Erel 2010; Paul 2017; Cederberg 2017; Kim 2019).

Part Three of the dissertation (Chapters 8-10) aims to go beyond an assessment of the classed processes of migration for this core cohort. Instead, I consider the migration experiences of first-generation Chinese migrants from different backgrounds to better understand how class informs and differentiates experiences of both migration to and settlement in Perth. I have found that this requires an expanded approach to class theories and a sensitivity to the particular meanings class may have for migrants in different contexts (Freznoza-Flot and Shinozaki 2017).

I propose *national class frames in motion* as a way of conceptualising the centrality of homeland class to first generation migrants' experiences. Transnational meanings of class need to be interpreted through the lens of nationally bounded class frames. This reevaluation of the importance of homeland class is in part a response to the critiques of methodological nationalism because while transnational approaches to migration studies alleviate the stifling paradigms of the past, to abandon nationally-framed analyses loses a central dimension of the migrant experience.

As previously stated, analyses of social class have predominantly been conducted with reference to nationally bounded populations. While a reliance on nationally bounded class as a lens of analysis could be seen as methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Shiller 2002) or potentially risk ethnocentric evaluations of cultural capital (Anthias 2012a), I believe that studies engaging class and international migration require a closer understanding of these national class frames that are naturalised both in social theory and, more importantly, migrants' own constructions of their social worlds. A focus on transnational connections and experiences does not preclude an engagement with nationally bounded social class. On the contrary, national class frames in motion are an important component of a transnational perspective.

Adult first generation migrants are socialised into class frames that are formed and forged in homeland national contexts. This entails both class as identity and group consciousness, and class as structural position and variable life chances. Indeed, the two are in fact inseparable since structural dimensions are reinforced and perpetuated in the production and policing of class boundaries determined through signifiers and practices. These class frames inform when people move, how they move, and how they construct new social meaning after and as a result of their movements.

Homeland national class frames are disrupted through migration when migrants encounter different national class frames at point of destination, This includes structural conditions and employment, but also the ways that occupations, educational and social practices may be differentially valorised. Both these dimensions are needed to accommodate the overlap between or rather the mutual constitution of cultural and structural class. In this dissertation I consider class from both perspectives, combining, like Cederberg (2017), symbolic and material dimensions of class, together with the impact of mobility. Van Hear (2014, S105) likewise demands an understanding of “the position of a given class in hierarchical society where power and wealth are distributed unevenly” in order to adequately explain classed processes of migration.



Structural dimensions are particularly relevant when considering homeland social class, and the barriers to social mobility many participants said they faced within China. Their prospects in a Chinese context are shaped by structural factors, by their *hukou* status, by constrained opportunities for well-paid employment, by the declining value of their wages in the face of rising costs, by the gulf between rich and poor that has emerged in China over the last four decades. Although the focus in this dissertation is how PRC homeland class frames have conditioned the migration experiences of these people, glimpses of Australian class frames may also be found in the data. While Australian claims of classlessness and egalitarian national myths (Western 1991; Western and Baxter 2011) do not reflect contemporary patterns of inequality and stratification (Phillips and Western 2005; Sheppard and Biddle 2017), participants in this study nonetheless suggest they have experienced a “levelling” process through migration. Some of this may be due to the small size of the China-born population in Perth and common reliance on ethnic niche economies, such as rental markets; some may indicate an engagement with Australian national class frames, refracted through a Chinese migrant lens.

This chapter has outlined how I will engage with the concept of class in this dissertation. The cohort of migrants whose experiences are at the heart of my arguments are from working class backgrounds in China and their presence in Australia is at root the result of temporary labour migration. Yet such a neat description is problematic, since “working class” encompasses a range of Chinese subjectivities (Goodman 2014, 124-6), while the binary of temporary/permanent and the categories of student / labour / visitor/ family migration used in official administration are porous, and empirical realities far more messy (Baas 2017, Robertson 2019). Furthermore, although trade skilled migrants from China to Australia are capital constrained and articulate their motivations for temporary labour migration in primarily economic terms, they are still, like more privileged co-nationals, subject to the same cultural imaginaries that valorise mobility and the figure of the overseas Chinese citizen (Sun 2002; Nyíri 2010; Fong 2011; Coates 2018). Labour migrant and lifestyle migrant are thus not so easily disambiguated; the accounts presented in this case study demonstrate how these subjectivities co-exist and overlap in ways that are inflected by social class.

Nonetheless, the members of this cohort *are* different from most other contemporary Chinese migrants to Australia. Their experiences are undoubtedly conditioned by their nationality, their ethnicity, their race and their language, and these are intersecting factors that I will address in my arguments. However, by foregrounding the classed dimensions of their migration and settlement, I both present a fresh perspective on the story of Chinese people in Australia, and progress towards rethinking theories of class and migration to account for the complex, varied and highly particular effects that social class, and particular national class frames in motion, manifests in the lives of international migrants.

## Chapter 4      Methodological notes

This chapter explains my research methodology: how I came to know the people whose stories, opinions and experiences inform the arguments made in this dissertation. I conducted fieldwork between November 2014 and February 2016 in Perth, Western Australia using ethnographic methods, including participant observation and unstructured or semi-structured interviews. This project began with loose and open-ended initial research questions. The approach adopted – qualitative ethnographic methods and an abductive analytical paradigm (Tavory and Timmermans 2014) - was ideally suited to a process of patiently and iteratively coming to understand a cohort of migrants whose presence in a particular urban environment is unusual and intriguing, but also obscured by their busy lives, their social distance from other ethnic Chinese migrants, and their typical non-involvement in community organisations.

At inception this project grew from personal observations of people I saw living in Perth. One day in autumn 2013, I was drinking bubble tea in a café window in Northbridge, Perth's traditional Chinatown, when some fabric flashing past the window caught my eye. A woman walking along James Street was wearing elasticated forearm covers (*xiutao*), tubular sheaths secured at the elbow and wrist that protect the clothes underneath from dirt and wear. These simple items of clothing drew my attention because I had not before seen them in Australia. I had previously lived in China where they were a common enough sight, frequently worn by women doing manual work. Sipping my tea, I wondered what she was doing, where she might be headed. She seemed in early middle age, perhaps 40 or 45, and her clothing was otherwise unremarkable; dark jeans, a sweatshirt and a pair of trainers. She might have been a tourist, but she was alone in the street with no one to guide her. She might have been the parent of a migrant visiting her child in Australia, but that would have made her a young mother in a Chinese context where later family formation is the norm (Raymo et al. 2015). She was too old to be an international student, too young to have retired. I will never know this woman's story; she continued down the street and blended into the milling pedestrians.

I have few fieldnotes from this period, but the memory of this incongruous sight persisted and I began to see Perth with a different gaze. Moving through places like Northbridge or Canning Vale, places with larger Chinese populations, I observed people whose habitus – though I doubt I used this language at the time – did not accord with the middle-class, educated and/or wealthy Chinese migrants I expected to see. I was then studying Australian migration law and so understood how visa application criteria worked to select migrants on the basis of youth and English-proficiency, among other factors. The people I began to notice were in their middle years, had poor English, spoke heavily accented Chinese, and often dressed in a style more common to provincial settings than the urban metropolises of China. The literature accorded with my assumptions. As shown in Chapter 2, studies of ethnic Chinese migrants to Australia tend to focus on people from more educated backgrounds, including both members of a mobile transnational middle class, and those deskilled through migration.

At the outset, I did not know whom I might find, had no knowledge of trade skilled workers having been recruited from China, and did not then appreciate how recently English language criteria had been changed to exclude less well educated people from non-English speaking countries. My goal was simply to better understand the anomalies I perceived in the light of selective migration policies. Research methods must accord with the questions posed. Exploratory ethnography is appropriate in this case, particularly where both the literature and the quantitative data from relevant agencies (in this case, the Immigration Department and ABS) fail to adequately account for a perceived a social phenomenon (Oxford 2012, 414-5).

However, “qualitative research” and even “ethnography” are broad churches, encompassing a dizzying array of methods, logics of inquiry and ontological assumptions (Blaikie 2018; Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Lincoln and Guba 2000). I assume a soft constructivist stance, sympathising with the perspective that “all claims to “the real” are traced to processes of relationship, and there is no extra-cultural means of ultimately privileging one construction of reality over another” (Gergen 2001; Lincoln and Guba 2013). I am more of a pragmatist, preferring, as Gergen also suggests, that a constructivist approach preserve and defend some space for meaningful engagement with more materialist or postpositivist paradigms. Yet I recognise that knowledge produced has been the result of particular encounters and interests of both myself and my participants as situated subjects (Haraway 1988, 1991; Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis 2002).

Willis and Trondman’s (2000, 5-6) definition of ethnography summarises my aims in both research and writing, in ethnography as process and as product (Caines 2012):

... a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms the irreducibility of human experience. Ethnography is the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events ... [which] recognizes how experience is entrained in the flow of contemporary history, large and small, partly caught up in its movement, partly itself creatively helping to maintain it...

Ethnography has a long standing in urban research at “home” in both anthropological and sociological traditions. This typically involves studying sections of society and particular sub-groups, rather than the holistic cultural endeavours of traditional anthropological ethnographies. Urban ethnographies instead usually work to relate the part to the whole, situating a specific case study within a broader context (Burgess 1983, 14-21; Vidich and Lyman 2000, 49-56). This project likewise uses “subway ethnography” where older distinctions between “home” and the “field” are eroded (Emerson et al. 2011).

Migration scholars straddle many disciplinary perspectives and use diverse methodologies. Among these, ethnography is well established as a means of presenting detailed case studies that offer theoretical contributions beyond the particular people or groups described (Fitzgerald 2006). Cederberg (2017, 161) argues that biographical approaches suit research into subjective experiences of class and migration, permitting an exploration of the class structures within which migrants are situated and the range of social, cultural and symbolic processes through which class relations are produced, negotiated and challenged.

Ethnographic methods entail slowly building trust and expanding networks. Learning of and accessing this cohort proved difficult precisely *because of* their class position. Firstly, these people work hard, limiting the time available for participating in research. Secondly, their class position sets them apart from many other ethnic Chinese migrants in Perth. Recruitment was slow, but with patience my network expanded. This was a process of trial and error; of iteratively learning more and re-defining the people I was seeking to know and the questions I might ask. Over the course of my fieldwork I experienced most powerfully “the ways in which the field influences our [my] research designs and operations, sometimes decisively” (Kalir 2006, 237). Slowly I came to appreciate, firstly, the existence of this cohort of trade skilled migrants and their families, and, secondly, the particular aspects of their migration stories which differentiate them from other migrants with different class backgrounds. This was an incremental and iterative process.

Research participants include 55 people whose lives and experiences I understand in some detail through their personal narratives, defined as “extended accounts of lives that develop in conversation over the course of interviews and other fieldwork interactions” (Riessman 2014, 6). See Appendix B for a full list of these core participants and their demographic and biographical characteristics.

Of these 55 participants, 30 were each interviewed on one pre-appointed occasion. Three more were migration agents who shared professional insights alongside personal life stories. The other 22 became key informants, people I met much more often, spending time together over many months. However, beyond these 55 participants, I also had conversations with many other people; their wives and husbands, children and parents, friends, housemates, neighbours and colleagues. These others numbered roughly another 60 individuals. They appear in my field notes, but I have not counted them as participants.

I did not have a target sample number of participants, recognising this is “impossible in research that adopts a logic of inquiry in which knowledge evolves as an outcome of an iterative process, particularly one involving researcher and participants in the co-production of that knowledge” (Blaikie 2018, 636). Rather, as the project evolved, I sought a saturation point where strong patterns and recurring themes had become apparent and new material was adding detail and nuance but few fresh insights (Strauss 1987, 21; Kvale 2007, 43-4; Seidman 2013, 58-9; Sim et al. 2018a; 2018b; Blaikie 2018).

This process of seeking and (perhaps) reaching saturation necessarily implies that analysis is occurring *throughout* data collection. Tavory and Timmermans (2014, 4-5) propose an abductive approach to qualitative research that closely accords with my experience of fieldwork. They argue:

The act of analyzing data requires that we pitch our observations in relation to other potential cases, both within and outside of our field. As these potential cases are then checked against other experiences, we amend them and generalize anew, thereby creating more potentials, ad infinitum... Theory generation requires us to move away from our preconceived notions and to create new narratives about the phenomenon we are trying to explain. Abduction occurs when we encounter observations that do not neatly fit existing theories and we find ourselves speculating about what the data plausibly could be a case of. Abduction thus refers to a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence. Abduction produces a new hypothesis for which we then need to gather more observations.

This ongoing “creative inferential process” accurately articulates the developments in my project. Research questions and subjects changed over time, a result of the “power of the field” to shape inquiry (Kalir 2006) combined with my ongoing abduction and new insights. Wilson and Trondman (2000) similarly argue that good ethnography should be theoretically informed, a “halfway house” between theory and topic that neither presents the “nitty-gritty” of unshaped raw data nor an abstracted analysis that has barely a passing acquaintance with the experiences of the field.

While I defined the parameters of this project in ethno-national terms, specifically seeking out migrants from China, this should not be mistaken for unthinking methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). As Meeus (2012) has argued, although we are now comparatively free from the ontological straight-jacket of the nation, there remain epistemic and, perhaps most pressing, methodological imperatives to “fix” studies of human movement in both time and space if we are to make sense of empirical findings. This may be a “fix” at subnational regional or city levels, as in Meeus’ own “methodological ruralism” or Fitzgerald’s (2006) “international urbanism”, but whatever the spatial-temporal scale, the fix is necessary.

There are practical, methodological reasons for choosing to delimit research subjects by country of birth. Firstly, the movements of migrants are framed by the legislative structures of nation-states. The arguments in this dissertation do not fall back on the sedentary assumptions of linear assimilation common to twentieth century theorising. Rather, my arguments reflect the transnational consciousness evident in the emic accounts of participants. Their accounts are framed by their engagement with two (rarely more) national contexts, described with reference to the specific national institutions and discourses that shape their choices and actions. When considering class and migration, restricting recruitment parameters to only people from China has delivered findings about the centrality of national class frames to first generation migrants’ experiences, findings that might have been diluted, or simply not emerged, had the “fix” been differently delineated.

Furthermore, on a practical level, any project requires scope. While endorsing multi-sited ethnography in migration studies, Fitzgerald (2006) also notes that this risks spreading the researcher too thinly, preventing the thick description necessary for a thorough engagement with the particular. By recruiting participants delineated by country of birth, I established parameters that allowed for deep understanding and thick description, and that made this research achievable within the constraints of time and funding imposed by doctoral candidature.

## 4.1 Positions of the researcher

Since the “writing culture” turn (Clifford and Marcus 1986), it is widely accepted that the figure of the distanced, disinterested and objective social researcher is neither desirable nor possible. Traditionally elevated distinctions between home and field, self and other, have been eroded, so that the work of a researcher may be understood as constructing social meaning through “the reciprocity of perspectives between insider(s) and outsider(s) entailed in any ethnographic research situation” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus and Fischer 1999[1986], 67)

Feminist scholars across disciplines argue that qualitative research requires reflexivity and awareness of the social relations and power dynamics that make any knowledge knowable (Haraway 1988). Such “embodied objectivity” demands an appreciation that situated knowledge also necessarily entails situated lack of knowledge; acknowledging uncertainties, gaps and partial understandings is not a failing, but rather a recognition of plural sources of knowledge and power, beyond those of the privileged academic voice (Rose 1996; Haraway 1988, 581). Despite Rose’s (1996) claims that attempts at a truly transparent reflexivity are doomed to fail, “the personhood of the researcher” remains “an essential and ever-present aspect of the investigation” and so merits more examination (Dwyer and Buckle 2009, 55).

Migration scholars (too) often tend to position national or ethnic belonging (though, interestingly, rarely class) as the primary identification fissure separating the insider from the outsider, as a focus on international mobility privileges the nation state’s role in shaping social relations (Amelina and Faist 2012; Voloder 2014). De Andrade (2000) further suggests that this near fetishisation of ethnic insider / outsider reflexivity is fundamentally at odds with race and ethnicity theory. Rather than a static status, ethnicity is contingent, flexible and performative, a process of selectively employing and interpreting signifiers through interactional social processes. Race is less situated since it is inscribed on the body, yet its importance still varies with context (Barth 1969; Omi and Winant 2015 [1986]; Waters 1999). So while nationality (or ethnicity or race) can be a site of difference or commonality, particularly when invested with significance by participants or researchers, that is, “naturalised within our own existence” (Kobayashi 1994), other characteristics may be equally important in negotiating field relationships, including gender, religion, class, or similar life experiences, such as international migration or family formation and parenting (Fortier 1996; Merriam et al. 2001; Bilecen 2014).



I was intrigued by how social distance was created or erased by these characteristics, particularly by shared experiences discussed with participants. However, my physical appearance doubtless framed first encounters, sometimes causing no little surprise when a meeting had been arranged by telephone in Mandarin. My spoken Chinese is fluent, though quite accented, so participants expected to find an Australian-born Chinese interviewer, or so I was told on a few occasions. Yet I am a European and a native speaker of English, and so am in many ways indistinguishable from the people described by participants as “local Australians”, that is, “white” Australians of European heritage.

The term “local Australians” (*dangdi de aozhouren*) describes this European-ancestry demographic throughout this dissertation. Before expanding further on my personal characteristics, I will first explain why I have retained this term in my writing. This follows the lead of participants who routinely used this term, positioning this group as different to, and separate from, Chinese nationals (*zhongguoren*), ethnic Chinese (*huaren*) or, less commonly used, Asians (*yazhouren*). The term “local Australians” does not usually include Aboriginal Australians (*tuzhuren*).

I am aware that the term “local Australian” in this sense is problematic. Not only does it represent an internalisation and naturalisation of the Anglo-Celtic charter group as the most Australian of Australians (Jupp 2002; 2018), it also indicates an active process of auto-Orientalising and boundary-setting, maintaining dyads of difference between East and West, or Chinese and Western, that falls short of the hybridity, complexity and cacophony that characterise cultural diversity in Australia today (Ang 2003; Noble 2011; Koleth 2015).

Chinese nationals tend to overgeneralize when considering non-Chinese, conflating diverse populations on the basis of presumed physical and cultural similarities, and rely heavily on terms of linguistic aggregation. Mao (2015) claims that this partly results from limited knowledge of other countries and cultures, but also expresses a habitual process of boundary maintenance in a networked society traditionally based on expanding concentric circles of personal relationships (Fei 1984 [1947]). For Fong (2013, 8), such elision of difference is not only caused by incomplete knowledge of other places, but also the observation of actual similarities between “developed world” countries and their peoples. She argues that these countries seem to constitute an “imagined community” or “in-group” from which China and Chinese citizens are excluded. The common cultural characteristics of this aggregated category include shared “business practices, academic canons, standards for educational credentials, interests in movies, TV shows, sports, and music, Internet communities, and a lingua franca”, while at the level of national governance this “in-group” of putatively similar countries enjoy close economic and military cooperation, as well as comparatively unrestricted movement across borders for their citizens.

Linguistic aggregation of different people is demonstrated in the terms widely used to describe “foreigners”, a category that typically does not include all foreign nationals but rather only those who look European (Mao 2015; Liu and Zhang 2010). “*Waiguoren*”, “*laowai*” and “*guilao*” are all terms used by migrants from China in Australia to describe people with the typical physical characteristics of Europeans, including most Australians. Linguistic aggregation of putatively similar people who are physically different to the dominant group is of course not a uniquely Chinese practice. Australian mainstream language frequently employs monolithic categories to describe, for example, “Africans” or “Asians”, erasing difference in diverse populations (Stevens 2018). However, all such oversimplifications risk brightening racial boundaries and limiting intercultural understanding (Stevens 2018; Mao 2015).

In retaining these emic terms throughout this dissertation, I am not ignoring these issues in the interest of simplicity. Rather, I use these terms not only to ensure accurate translation of my participants’ words but also to express the sense of social distance and processes of essentialising that they imply.

Returning to my personal characteristics, I am, as previously stated, at first glance indistinguishable from local Australians. Get to know me better, however, and you learn that I too have “come across the seas” to make Australia home. I was raised in northeast England, not northeast China, but I share many of the migrant preoccupations and experiences common among my participants: for example, experiencing frustration and anxiety at the confusing and ever-changing Australian migration legislation; worrying about how to care for parents aging thousands of miles away; and, a feeling shared by many northern-hemisphere northerners, no little bemusement that winter festivals must be celebrated in the blazing sun. Indeed, my migration journey to Australia is strikingly similar to the stories of many participants. In 2007 I was living in Beijing when, on one particularly grey and smoggy winter’s morning, my husband and I looked out of the window at the soupy haze beyond and agreed that population pressure was getting us down, the pollution was really too bad, and perhaps Australia might be interesting for a while. I told friends and family that this was an adventure, a temporary stint working somewhere new, certainly not a permanent relocation. By the end of the year I was the holder of a 457, commuting to work through the bright sunlight of a Sydney morning.

There are differences, however. For me, although Australia is clearly not Britain, arriving in an Anglophone country felt like a kind of homecoming. As important as the language, and clearly related, was the ease with which I could navigate Australian public administration and participate in the workforce. I am tertiary educated, with a degree from a prestigious British university, and readily found a job in financial services. This was not the case for many research participants, whose experiences differ from mine because of both ethnicity and class. Since those first days in Sydney, I have become a mother, an Australian citizen, and a (sessional) university teacher, all characteristics that shaped interactions with participants.

The way participants perceived me was flexible and could shift from an undisputed ethnic and racial “outsider” to varying degrees of “insider” as we discussed our lives and negotiated our differences and similarities. Insider/outsider are not dichotomous positions. Since Merton (1972) demonstrated their convergence, arguing that no group could have monopolistic access to certain kinds of knowledge, others have explored the relative merits and in-practice continuum between the emic knowledge of insiders and the etic insights of outsiders. Researchers with ostensibly insider statuses, whether because of shared ethnicity, language, or educational background, may still be constructed as outsiders as participants define boundaries based on other characteristics, challenging the power dynamics of the research process (Voloder 2014; Merriam et al. 2001; Ergun and Erdemir 2010; Bilacen 2014). Outsider researchers may meanwhile be constructed as part-insiders, particularly as no “group” is ever homogeneous and bounded (Collet 2008; Brubaker 2004). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) further argue that researchers can *only* occupy the space between insider and outsider since their researcher perspective and their specialist knowledge prevents them inhabiting either pole of the continuum. Any social interaction, including research, generates “moments of insiderness and outsidership” (Van Mol et al. 2014, 70) through dynamic dialectics between situated people who are themselves continually making and re-making frames of meaning. Shifts between insider and outsider relations may occur through the strategic or unintentional actions of researcher(s) and participant(s), yet both positions, and the fluid space between, can be conducive to meaningful exchange and the collaborative production of meaning and knowledge (Van Mol et al. 2014; Ergun and Erdemir 2010; Fozdar 2014).

Undeniably a racial outsider, I felt most participants considered me fundamentally and immutably different in both my biology and culture. As already noted, everyday language emphasises the distinction between Chinese people and an aggregated foreign Other (Mao 2015) partly the result of Chinese self-racialisation in nation-building discourses and histories (Dikotter 1992, 1996; Jenner 2001; Cheng 2011; Feng 2011). Many participants demonstrated they had internalised the racial logic of this discourse of difference. For example, when discussing childbirth and early maternity, I was often told that the reason I could leave the house and exercise so soon after giving birth, activities at odds with the Chinese cultural practice of post-partum confinement, was because my physical constitution was different (to all Chinese women) (*tizhi bu yiyang*).

Yet as a Mandarin-speaking “foreigner”, I was credited with cultural comprehension beyond that expected of local Australians. I was also a novelty for migrants whose social interaction with local Australians was largely curtailed by language barriers. When introduced as a “foreign friend” at social gatherings, I invariably attracted a lot of attention. When I demonstrated even a vague understanding of matters considered uniquely Chinese, or performed cultural scripts with any degree of competency, this was greeted with (excessive, it seemed to me) celebration of my abilities.

This status of “novelty foreigner” helped gain access, while my status as a migrant to Australia, by way of China, granted me “moments of insiderness” through our shared experience of migration and our shared “outsider” status in Australia. Many participants, correctly perhaps, perceived me to be somewhere between an outsider and an insider in relation to local Australians. My appearance and language skills give me insider access (compared to new migrants from China) while I still share some of the confusion of an outsider. My understanding of mainstream English-speaking Australia and my familiarity with Chinese practices resulted in me frequently acting as a “cultural broker” (Geertz 1960). I was often asked to explain Australian peculiarities, faced with many questions of the how and why varieties. I was asked to translate correspondence, to fill in forms, and to ring potential employers or government agencies. Through these kinds of tangible support I was able to reciprocate the help I was receiving in my research and develop deeper relationships – a key part of the bargaining and social exchange usually involved in accessing any “field” (Gray 2011).

Moving beyond ethnicity and language as a point of out/insiderness, I also emphasised (largely unthinkingly, sometimes strategically) other sites of identity with research participants. Three personal characteristics undoubtedly shaped my research, the kinds of conversations I had with participants, and the findings presented here. These are my positions as: 1) a parent of young children; 2) a foreign migrant from overseas who became a permanent resident and then an Australian citizen; and 3) a middle-class graduate student and university tutor.

When I began this project, my children were aged four and two. They sometimes joined my fieldwork and were a great help; when having lunch in a family home or attending a gathering in a public park, my children established a point of commonality with participants and perhaps made my presence less strange.

Unsurprisingly, many participants I knew best were mothers caring for young children. Passing time with them, sharing similar experiences, the lines between the field and home blurred (Fortier 1996) and their concerns and opinions increasingly informed my research. While the findings presented here are not particularly gendered, the voices of female participants feature prominently in the following six chapters.

My experiences as a migrant who held a subclass 417 “backpacker visa”, a 457 and a permanent visa before becoming a citizen was perhaps the most important site of shared identity. Rather than simply hearing participants’ tales of immigration woe, we could instead exchange views and compare scenarios. I was already a citizen during this fieldwork, however a loved relative was then trying to obtain PR. My anxiety was real and contributed to authentic conversations about navigating changing regulations and the challenges of being temporary.

Finally, my middle-class status was invoked by some participants to achieve certain effects. For example, when discussing difficult work relations with ill-spoken, racist colleagues, welders attributed the poor behaviour of their co-workers to class, rather than race or nationality, as seen in this statement: “You know what local Australians can be like. Perhaps not highly educated ones, but lower status Australians who like to have a drink”. However, working class participants rarely mentioned this beyond sometimes introducing me as a “teacher”. Of far greater significance to my findings, middle-class participants saw my educated status as a site of commonality, giving them license to share their often quite negative views about working class migrants in Perth. Although I began with the objective of understanding migrants from lower class backgrounds, it was paradoxically my own classed position, and the conversations it engendered, which led to many insights into intra-ethnic class tension and conflict.

## 4.2 Accessing the field

Power in the field is often imbalanced, but not always in the “asymmetry between the observer and the observed” (Atkinson et al. 2011, 1) of many anthropological and sociological ethnographies of colonial or subaltern subjects. This was the imbalance I articulated in my institutional ethics application, of the powerful, educated producer of knowledge engaging with participants disadvantaged by their ethnicity, language, precarious work and visa status. It is doubtless true that many participants fit this description, and that my position in Australian society may be considered more “powerful” or more secure. Yet research subjects have their own power as they possess the knowledge of which the researcher is so desirous. Kalir (2006, 243) has called this a “lack of methodological power in relation to informants” whereby interactions must be subject to strict conditions (theirs) or else refused entirely.

Access to any “field” necessarily entails exchange and processes of social bargaining. Gray (2011) uses the analogy of an “Access Ladder” to describe how a researcher may negotiate their incremental moves from suspicious outsider towards a more trusted position, climbing the “rungs” to achieve the status of active and interested insider. He builds on Homans’ (1958) observation that all social behaviour involves an exchange of material and non-material goods, which can encompass help and support, or relationships which bring public approval and regard. That the qualitative researcher has a somewhat self-interested objective of finding or co-creating the knowledge they believe to be “out there”, of learning through the processes of exchange, does not change the essentially social nature of their interactions with research participants. There must be, Gray argues, value for both researcher and research subject, some exchange where the tangible and intangible rewards outweigh the costs, for the relationship to develop and access to be initially extended and maintained over time.

Kalir (2006) writes that through a combination of one’s own interests, dispositions and habitus with the pressures, demands and expectations of one’s research subjects, a unique and individualised set of research questions and related findings emerge. A researcher may commence with defined research strategies and objectives, but it is the tactical implementation of these strategies within the constellations of power encountered in the field that results in the “data” produced.

He summarises that “there is always an element of luck and contingency in our tactical interactions with informants, and consequently in our positioning process in the field, [which] should clearly caution us about our own power strategically to design and prepare for our fieldwork” (Kalir 2006, 244). As I found my participants and accessed my “field”, I was mindful of how my personal attributes shaped interactions, although I must admit that it was only in retrospect that I came to clearly see my constantly renegotiated positions vis-à-vis participants as a “dimension of method” (Marcus 1995, 112).

An exploratory, patient and responsive approach to “recruiting”, that is, contacting, meeting and earning the trust of, new participants was essential in this project. Trade skilled migrants typically experience social distance from other, more established ethnic Chinese (although I would not fully understand this until later). They also work hard, often six days a week, and so members of this cohort rarely participate in the pan-Chinese or home province associations that operate in Perth. A few attend Mandarin churches, but most live quite private lives, concerned primarily with their own families and close friends.

This was therefore not a sited ethnographic project; I did not have any single community centre or similar organisation at which to “hang out” with participants and so establish a presence in the “field”. Unlike classical urban ethnographers such as Whyte (1943), I did not typically encounter people organising their lives, nor simply passing the time of day in public spaces. On the contrary, as Richards (1990) also found, working people living in Australian suburbia spend little time in the neighbourhood they call home. Abel (2014) similarly found that British migrants to Perth who, given their linguistic advantage, might be expected to integrate into local communities, frequently experienced social isolation in and limited interaction with neighbours in Perth suburbs, the result of the built environment of detached, gated homes and heavy reliance on cars. My participants often complained they felt isolated in their houses and didn’t usually spend time with friends in public spaces. This spatial isolation made accessing the field difficult. Participants were usually recruited one-by-one, a laborious and painfully slow process.

This was an impediment to the progress of my research, and one I, perhaps foolishly, did not fully anticipate at the outset. Harney (1998, 10) has observed that the fragmented nature of city life makes it every bit as challenging for urban ethnographers to chart the construction of communities as it is for individuals themselves to collectively construct them. Such challenges were exacerbated in this case by long days and tiresome commutes across the urban sprawl of Perth. When working families have so little time to spend together, so little time for friends and leisure activities, so little time for domestic chores, they cannot be expected to be generous with the few hours at their disposal.

I began this research project with few Chinese friends or acquaintances in Perth. Those I did know were from educated, middle-class backgrounds, either graduate students or employed in professional jobs. However, since I wanted to understand the presence in Perth of people with quite different family backgrounds, I found on the whole that my existing networks were not able to help with introductions. There were some exceptions. Two of my Chinese middle-class contacts were able to introduce me to a working-class friend or acquaintance, people whom they had met through school or church, or by engaging the services of co-ethnic tradesmen. One local Australian friend who works for a community services provider introduced me to three of her former clients who happened to be migrants from China. Generally personal contacts delivered limited results and early on in the project I determined I needed other approaches to generate initial points of contact with appropriate individuals.



I adopted a “cold calling” approach by contacting Chinese-owned businesses directly to meet owner-managers and employees. I consulted classified advertisements sections of local Chinese-language newspapers, particularly the Oriental Post (*Dongfang youbao*) and the Australian Chinese Times (*Aodaliya shibao*) (AC Times), two local newspapers that are clearly aimed at PRC Chinese readers. I particularly targeted businesses listed in these newspapers that also advertised on Western Australia Mandarin Radio (*Xi’ao huayu guangbo diantai*), Perth’s only 24-hour Mandarin broadcaster. While approaching local Chinese-owned businesses, one man gave me his copy of the “Chinese yellow pages”, the local Chinese-English Business Directory (*Huayu shangye zhinan*) published by AC Times. He circled some of the businesses that he knew or suspected were owned by Chinese from China. This 2014 edition, and the 2015 and 2016 editions that I later acquired, were also useful.

Referring to these publications and radio station, I approached Chinese-owned businesses, including car mechanics, an aged care staffing agency, painters and decorators, courier companies, an abattoir, and retailers such as butchers and grocers. I also approached many massage shops. Massage businesses do not advertise their services in the Chinese language media as their customers are predominantly local Australians. They do however use Chinese media to recruit staff and sell established businesses. I identified very early in my project that massage in Perth is a niche economy dominated by ethnic Chinese, and so I also included these businesses among my early targets.

I first tried to arrange appointments by telephone. This had limited success. Only one business-owner was willing to meet. Others responded to me like any other cold call, quickly shutting me down and expressing a clear lack of interest. As I was conscious there were a finite number of businesses I could approach in a small city like Perth, I stopped trying to make appointments by telephone. The rejection rate and risk of alienation was too high. Instead, I decided the best approach would be to visit business premises in person to talk to managers and staff about my research.

This in-person “cold call” approach was generally productive. Doubtless intrigued by the “local Australian” speaking Mandarin, business owners, managers and staff often invited me to sit down and chat; if work was slow that day and no customers arrived we might talk for one or two hours. After a happy meeting and a productive, enjoyable conversation I would ask if I might come back. I became a regular visitor to a few workshops and salons, passing the time of day in the back office or the waiting area. For people working in public-facing service jobs like car repairs or massage, my presence seemed a welcome relief from long, boring periods of waiting for clients. When customers arrived, we would curtail our conversation and I would seek consent to return another day. Sometimes when I first visited a new business “the boss” would not be there and staff would be unwilling to talk. They asked me to return another day or gave me the boss’ number so I could make direct contact. Sometimes a business owner or employee would be too busy, and instead arrange for me to meet their wife. When appropriate, I asked people I met in these workplaces if they could introduce me to friends or family. Some did, and my participants snowballed from the initial (in person) “cold call” contact.

Occasionally the business I approached was owned and staffed by ethnic Chinese from other places, such as Vietnam, Malaysia or Hong Kong. While these individuals did not fit the project scope, they sometimes had observations to make about China-born Chinese migrants, or useful advice to progress my fieldwork. One day, for example, I visited, with no prior appointment, a workshop owned by a tradesman originally from a South East Asian country. He put down his tools and came over to chat, telling me what he knew of migrants from China, and the trends and changes he had observed over his more than three decades living in Perth. As I prepared to leave, he remembered he knew of a Chinese welder working in a small factory a few lots away on the industrial estate. This factory was owned by local Australians and the welder was the only Chinese working onsite; without the tip I could not have known he was there. I walked over the road to the factory and enquired. The foreman was surprised at my request to speak with a welder on his team, but nonetheless led me into the workshop. The welder was surprised too, and although he was unable to chat during his busy shift, he was happy to exchange numbers. When I called, he suggested I meet his wife who was at home caring for their young son. She became a key informant, spending many hours with me over the months of my fieldwork and contributing much to the shape of my enquiry. Such, I suppose, is the serendipity of contemporary ethnographic practice (Rivoal and Salazar 2013; Pieke 2000; Merton 1948).

Not everyone was so willing to talk with me. I frequently encountered stonewalling from people who clearly did not want to participate. Sometimes I found a disinterested, or even hostile, reception when I arrived unannounced at workplaces. Given the accounts of poor employment conditions, low wages, and informal work in contravention of visa restrictions that I heard from some participants, it is unsurprising that many people did not want to talk. I was often told that work was too busy to answer my questions, a polite response which doubtless masked some suspicion of the nosy “foreign” stranger. Such rejections, while emotionally draining and time consuming, were to be expected when “cold calling” unfamiliar businesses.

Chinese registered migration agents were also instrumental in helping frame the research and introducing me to new participants. Unlike formal gatekeepers in other professional or institutional settings who may be barriers to accessing the field (see, for example, Reeves 2010, 317), I found migration agents in Perth were generous in sharing their expertise, ideas and contacts. A few months into my fieldwork, I met two agents who advertised in local Chinese media. Their advice was critical to helping me orient myself in the local migration landscape. Most importantly, it was these agents who alerted me to the presence of this key cohort recruited from China to work in heavy trades. Without their intervention, advice, and introductions to tradesmen whose migrations they had facilitated, this might have been a different project altogether. Several months later I met them again, as well as another agent. Over the intervening month, the research focus had changed, producing new questions, many of which they were able to help answer.

Each agent introduced me to at least one, sometimes several, former clients. Every one of these former clients agreed to an interview. Some were more enthusiastic than others. One woman was so keen to share her story that when I arrived she had already prepared a diagram outlining her key experiences and concerns. Others appeared more unsure, but I carefully explained the project and their involvement before obtaining consent to proceed with the interview.

Informed consent was of course essential, in line with codes of research ethics, respect for persons, and commitments to my institution (Israel 2015). However, I was aware that it might be best operationalised in contextually appropriate ways (Shamim and Qureshi 2013). Katyal (2010) found that working in a Confucian collectivist tradition meant Hong Kong schoolteachers agreed to consent granted at an institutional, rather than individual, level. Similarly, I was sensitive to the possibility that participants, particularly those recruited through agents' introductions or snowballing, might participate as a function of their inter-personal obligations, thus falling short of the gold-standard of individual autonomy enshrined in Australian institutional approaches to informed consent. Yet fieldwork is necessarily situated within the "webs of power relations" that shape social worlds (Israel 2015, 21). Such ambiguities are part and parcel of research methods that are more contextual, nuanced and ethically complex than culturally particular models of fetishized formal consent can accommodate (Wynn and Israel 2018).

When first meeting new participants and commencing life history interviews, I explained the project and their participation in detail, seeking verbal consent before proceeding. I always provided my UWA name card and invited participants to read a bilingual information sheet (see Appendix B). Most barely glanced at it; some read it in detail and retained it for reference later. I sought oral rather than written consent, recognising that inflexible and overly formal procedures of informed consent could erode trust and undermine developing relationships (Marzano 2012; Miller and Boulton 2007; Israel 2015; Warren 2014; Wynn and Israel 2018). When meeting new people in larger groups, I introduced myself as a university researcher, explaining the project wherever possible, but did not actively seek consent from everyone present. Excessively prescriptive ethical procedures and formulations of consent are often at odds with inductive ethnographic methods, since the comings and goings of social worlds mean that participant observation, particularly outside of institutional environments, will in most circumstances involve spontaneous and informal exchanges with actors whose formal consent cannot be readily attained (Lederman 2006; Fassin 2006; Simpson 2011).

Once contact was established, finding an appropriate time to meet was sometimes difficult. Working families are time poor. Most employees I met worked a five-day week, followed by a half or full day on a Saturday. Some also worked Sundays when there were overtime hours available. Some families I met had fathers working FIFO roles on remote mine sites. One consequence of the economic downturn was that companies adjusted working rosters to deliver more time on site and less time at home. When I conducted my research, some men had just one week at home out of every five. The self-employed were equally busy. Owners of small restaurants and other service-oriented business, such as massage shops or newsagents, usually worked seven days a week.

Nonetheless, I made progress over time. Slowly, ever so slowly, my network expanded. Establishing strong relationships with key informants was central to this process. Following the examples of classic urban ethnographers (Whyte 1944; Liebow 1967; Patrick 1973), I learned how effective, even essential, it is to gain the trust and support of one person or a group of people who can then facilitate access and vouch for the reliability of the researcher. Once I knew handful of people well enough to message regularly on WeChat, call for catch-up or a playdate, or drop by their workplace for a chat, and who, better still, would call me to invite me to lunch or a picnic with their friends, my understanding rapidly deepened and my field notes became much richer. I never achieved the quotidian proximity described by so many ethnographers living with and amongst their participants, but this in itself is an ethnographic observation. Perth, as already noted, is a sprawling, low-rise city of detached houses spaced through endless suburban streets. Families live within their own four walls; these spatial geographies do not readily invite accidental meetings or spontaneous “hanging out”. Many participants complained of social (and spatial) isolation, a point revisited in Chapter 7. Such isolation, however, also supported my access; some key informants, particularly stay-at-home mothers, welcomed regular visits that alleviated the frustrations of being alone with a small child.

Given this range of recruitment approaches, it is unsurprising that I encountered a diverse group of individuals. Participants included members of the core cohort whose stories are central to this dissertation: the trade skilled labourers, their wives, families and friends. As well as trade-skilled migrants, I spoke with other people working in a range of lower skilled occupations such as plasterers, aged care support staff, massage therapists, small restaurant owners, and agricultural production and processing workers, including those employed in meat processing, vegetable packing and peri-urban farms. I also encountered more highly educated migrants, some deskilled through migration.

Participants hold and have held visas of multiple categories, including visitor visas, temporary work visas, student visas (university, English-language and VET [vocational education and training])<sup>1</sup>, working holiday makers, temporary spouse visas. Many have permanent status, acquired through skilled or family (partner) streams. Some have become citizens of Australia, but most have not. Of the 55 total participants, some 26 belong to the cohort of trade skilled migrants and their families. As this list of jobs and visas demonstrates, the others were much more diverse. Appendix B details the key person characteristics of the 55 participants, including arrival year, visa type on arrival and at time of last conversation, occupation and place of origin.

Speaking with such a wide range of diverse people was instructive, providing multiple perspectives on what it is to be a migrant from China in Perth. Indeed, it was this diversity that focused my attention on how class interacts with the selective migration policies. While white-collar professionals, business owners and other non-trade skilled migrants are not the “key cohort” depicted in this dissertation, their contribution cannot be understated. In the course of telling their stories, they provided accounts of migration processes which in comparative perspective were both similar to and differed from those of their working-class compatriots. Through these diverse accounts, I could differentiate between experiences where language, nationality or ethnicity/race were important factors, and those where class played a more significant role.

This section has described the processes of exploration, exchange and relationship building that entering this field entailed. As Burgess (1984, 49) notes, “access is not merely granted or withheld at one particular point in time but is ongoing with the research”. Trust, the twin of consent, cannot be accomplished once-and-for-all but rather is cultivated through continuing efforts and regular demonstrations of goodwill (Kalir 2006, 242-3). Gaining and maintaining access involved repeatedly “establishing a research bargain” by explaining the project and its aims, sometimes on multiple occasions with the same people, as the objectives and research questions evolved as time progresses (Burgess 1984, 50). The processes through which access was granted and a sense of the project co-constructed affected the kinds of knowledge produced. But this occurs in ways that are ultimately unknowable, for who can say what I might have learned had others accepted me and shared their social worlds?

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<sup>1</sup> Students in Australia may study in different categories of educational institution. While all international students apply for the same subclass 500 visa, applications are handled separately according to the sector in which they applied to study. The Higher Education sector includes study for undergraduate and graduate degrees. The ELICOS sector provides English language training and certification. The VET sector includes study for vocational certificates through public TAFE colleges and private institutions (Department of Home Affairs 2019; ASQA n.d.)

## 4.3 Interviews and participant observation

The data collection methods included participant observation and interviews, the mainstays of ethnography. In practice, I found considerable overlap between these methodological tools, since both entail similar processes of remembering, performance and social action on the part of participant(s) and researcher (Atkinson and Coffey, 2002). Interviews were unstructured, proceeding in a conversational format that usually included biographical narratives, following the interests and inclinations of participants. In his appropriately titled “InterViews”, Kvale (1996) emphasises the conversational processes of ethnographic interviews, the exchange of perspectives on a common subject between interviewer and interviewee. This view is reflected in Rubin and Rubin’s (1995) typification of interviews as “a conversation between partners” and in Warren’s (2014) perspectives on the “social interaction” at play in all interviewing.

The interviews conducted may be characterised as life history interviews, since they typically commenced with questions about the respondent’s place of origin or initial outmigration, topics which prompted a focus on personal narrative. Life history interviews sit comfortably within an ethnographic tradition where they include a “particular focus on the meanings the interviewees place on their life experiences and circumstances, expressed in their own language” (Sherman Heyl 2011, 370). The role of the interviewer in co-constructing biographical narratives should not be overstated. Since personal life stories are often told and re-told by participants, they are less likely to be influenced by the circumstances of the telling; longitudinal studies have demonstrated that such accounts are well sedimented, with strong narrative stability over time (Atkinson and Sampson 2019). Yet even with life history interviews, context affects what may be said, as the interviewee’s “agendas and understandings of what the interview is for, and how it unfolds, depend on the biographical and situated context of their lives” (Warren 2014, 131). Similarly, the interviewer’s responses, the narrative threads they pursue, and the stories they emphasise in recording and analysis do affect the knowledge produced. More on this last point below.

Interviews were held at participants' homes, in the office space or waiting rooms of their workplaces, or in public spaces, such as food courts in shopping malls or chain coffee shops. When the interview was in public it was usually conducted one-on-one, although sometimes the participant brought a child with them. When we met in more private spaces like homes and workplaces the conversation was sometimes – paradoxically – more public. Colleagues, relatives or housemates were often nearby, overhearing the interview, and joining in for some or all of the time. This concurs with Herzog's (2014) claim that the location where an interview is held has social meaning and may affect the relationship between researcher and participants. The expected or unintended presence of others changes the social interactions of an interview, what is said and what is omitted (Warren 2014).

Interviews lasted between one and two hours. They were not recorded. I carried a notebook and, when permitted, took detailed notes. Sometimes, particularly when the "interview" turned out to involve more participants than expected, by dint of others being present, I did not take notes. In such situations, which were more akin to participant observation, I would talk openly and freely with participants and then, upon leaving, drive two or three blocks from the home or workplace I had just quit, park in the shade and spend the next hour or so recording the details of our conversations. All notes were typed up later the same day and digital files uploaded to NVivo for analysis.

The decision not to record interviews was considered. Because many participants talked about visa problems, difficult employers, and the "grey" economy of tax-free, underpaid work, I felt recording conversations might make them less willing to share such information. When discussing sensitive topics, the presence of recording devices may inhibit free communication and lead to mistrust as the power asymmetry between interviewer and interviewee may be amplified (Corbetta 2003, 280; Driskill and Brenton 2011, 104; Kvale and Brinkman 2009, 33; De Walt and De Walt 2011, 164). Furthermore, many of the most productive and enlightening conversations were not during an appointed interview, but rather part of long, meandering chats, passing time at someone's home or work, exchanges that could not have been captured on a recording device.



I recognise that not recording interviews had a direct impact on the knowledge produced. When note-taking during a conversation, the speed of conversation was such that some content was captured in writing and some was not. This was even more true with notes recorded only after the conversation had concluded, as the chronology of the discussion will also have been disrupted through my own processes of recollecting and reordering. Bartlett (1932) observed that remembering is in itself a process of construction, a social act through which the person doing the remembering (me) creates meaning and accords value to some actions or statements but not others. Such notes then, while representative of an ethnographic interview, are more akin to fieldnotes. Note taking in qualitative research necessarily entails two processes: the objective representation, of recording what was said, and the subjective comprehension, of interpreting meaning through the lens (or perhaps more appropriately, the fog) of one's own perspective and background knowledge (Corbetta 2003, 250). These processes of creative meaning-making, of attaching abstracted understanding and theoretically-informed interpretations to field observations, made manifest here through the example of notes taken (contrasted with those "lost"), is one dimension of abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014, 22-25). Rigorous methods, including detailed note taking and confirming key points with participants, are an essential component of qualitative research. They shore up the "resistance" of the phenomenon in question against the imposition of biased and overly deductive (mis)interpretation. However, data collection cannot be said to exist independent of theoretical insight since a pragmatic approach recognises that "this neat division is untenable, that discovery and justification are analytically and practically intertwined" (ibid., 54).

My decision to not record interviews was, I felt, vindicated through one particular experience of interviewing a woman I had grown to know well over the nine months of our acquaintance. After an initial chance encounter, we spent hours together, meeting over a dozen times in total, sometimes just for a short chat, sometimes to pass half a day in each other's company, occasionally with my children too. She was talkative – and lonely – and I came to know a great deal about her life, including sensitive details about her intimate relations with her local Australian partner and the cash-in-hand work she performed in contravention of her visa conditions. She eventually decided to return to China, and so before she left I asked her for a formal interview. She agreed and I decided to record this conversation, assuming this would not influence the interview, given our strong rapport and my detailed knowledge of her time in Perth. How wrong I was. No sooner did I press “record” than her manner changed, her language far more formal. She did relax over the course of the 76-minute recording, even crying when she recounted a difficult period of her childhood. But whenever I asked questions about sensitive issues relating to her work or relationship in Australia, she gave clearly articulated responses that I knew to be untrue while inclining her head and rolling her eyes towards my recording device. Once the recording had ceased, she said to me, “But you know much more, so you can fill in whatever you like.” This leaves me with a conundrum, the “third ethical moment” (Simpson 2011, 389), when I must decide what I may and may not write when representing this woman and all that she shared.

Analysis of findings occurred throughout the research process. As Willis and Trondman (2000) argue, a theoretically informed methodology of ethnography can establish “analytically productive relations between theory and data” by tacking between inductive and deductive logics of inquiry. This approach, they claim, neither falls prey to empiricist assumptions that raw data alone can represent social phenomenon, nor flounders in theory with little regard for empirical findings.

Tavory and Timmermans (2014; 2009; Timmermans and Tavory 2012) similarly propose *abductive analysis* as a pragmatic solution to the pitfalls of both the inductive approach, represented in its most extreme version by grounded theory, and of a theoretically deterministic deductive paradigm. The first, they argue, produces overly descriptive and particular accounts that may not adequately relate the part to the whole. The latter too often clings to set expectations of theoretically determined findings, ignoring or overlooking novel insights that might otherwise emerge. While they are by no means the first to use this term (e.g. Blaikie 1993, 162-97; 2000, 114-19; 2004; see also Taylor and Bogdan [1984, 128-9] on “ongoing analysis”), their recent work presents a compelling case for the “double story” whereby the empirical observations of a social world and the theoretical propositions that explain it are presented not as separate, even oppositional, work, but rather as activities that intertwine and work to amplify each other (Tavory and Timmermans 2014, 2). Following philosopher Charles A. Peirce (1903), they refute the distinction between discovery and justification, arguing instead that the research process is necessarily creative. Rather than separating the two, they show that the zig of empirical observation must be paired with the zag of theory production; by being open to the excitement of new and surprising data while simultaneously comparing new cases with a robust and broad body of theory, researchers iteratively generate new meanings and actively trace these processes of meaning-making as they occur.

During fieldwork recurring themes became apparent. Time and again participants would raise similar issues and recount similar experiences. I tried to initially see these as broad themes, loosely comparing them with other case studies but resisting the urge to draw fixed conclusions or develop arguments too early. These recurring issues did however work to change my research questions over time. The concerns and interests of my participants - what they deemed important, what they wanted me to know and to write – worked to develop the focus of my research (Shih 2012). Yet, as Kalir (2006, 244) notes, this “power” of participants to adapt and change the research agenda does not diminish my agency as a researcher, rather it highlights my tactical responses to experiences in the field and underscores, again, the particular, contingent and situated nature of knowledge produced through ethnographic research.

In early 2016 I used NVivo to conduct thematic analysis (Glesne 2011; Seidman 2013), going through the texts from each of my interviews and fieldnotes several times. Each time I kept two or three themes in mind, usually cognate topics or ideas. Sometimes during the coding process, new ideas and themes would emerge as I made connections that had not previously been obvious. Tavory and Timmermans (2014, 61) explain this as the creativity that accompanies theoretically informed qualitative researchers revisiting their field observations since “the complementary process of defamiliarization and revisiting increase the possibilities of abduction when these processes take place in the context of existing theories.” By paying attention to the “data clumps” (Glesne 2011, 194) that emerged through the iterative coding process I could further tack between these observations and the wider literature, permitting surprising data to generate theoretical insights that apply in this particular case and may perhaps be extended to other empirical contexts.

## 4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that a qualitative, ethnographic methodology was appropriate and effective in identifying and understanding this new cohort of trade skilled migrants and their relationships with other Chinese living in Western Australia. Indeed, I would go so far as to claim that coming to know these people could only have been accomplished through a patient process of building trust and snowballing the sample with the support of key informants.

Throughout the research process, and in the presentation of findings in this dissertation, I have followed an abductive analytical paradigm (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), recognising the co-dependency of observation with theory, of discovery with justification, refining questions and developing surprising new insights as time progresses. For example, even though I set out with research objectives that were to some extent informed by class, commencing the process with my observations (and judgements) of the habitus of some China-born people living in Perth, it was interactions in the field that highlighted the relevance of class for this cohort in relation to other Chinese migrants and helped me form the intriguing question of why and how they came to be in Australia. Answering this question required an abductive analytical approach, holding theory and comparative case studies in mind while allowing myself to be surprised to by new observations and then harnessing that surprise to develop new insights. I was repeatedly surprised by the extent to which class was evident in the data as a factor conditioning the migration and settlement stories I was told, leading to the findings presented here.

Amongst all the people I met, one cohort emerged as a focal of this dissertation: trade skilled labourers and their families. This cohort is defined by occupational class. Trade-skilled labourers may be readily identified as a group, as objective social fact, their “groupness” and commonalities delineated with reference to employment, education and income, as well as the employer-sponsored visa pathways of primary applicants. Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki (2017) argue that in migration research, scholars all too often fall into the trap of simplistically equating economic class (income and occupational categories) with social class. Although occupational categories are relevant to studies of employer-sponsored labour migration, I have not fallen into this same mistake, as other indications of class-based identity emerged through conversations with participants.

Although participants rarely identified themselves explicitly in class terms, this is not surprising since, as Bottero (2004) has noted, people generally tend to understate their own class-based identities during qualitative research. It is more common to position oneself within a class map, or implicitly claim a class identity through reference to other people’s classed practices, even while professing egalitarian and classless values (Oliver and O’Reilly 2010; Reay 1998). This accords with notions of “disidentification” (Skeggs 1997; Savage et al. 2001) whereby class identities are likely to be refused in preference of “ordinariness” while simultaneously recognised in others, thereby implicitly granting validity to class as an organising social category. I did not set out to place class at the centre of my work, and yet it emerged as the key lens of analysis through theoretical abduction from surprising conversations where judgements of distinction and discursive social distancing occurred.

A reductionist approach which simply argues that certain migrant trajectories or outcomes are the result of belonging to this cohort, the direct consequence of their being part of this group defined by occupational class, falls far short of the complexity and variety of actual experiences. The life narratives of participants demonstrate more individualised experiences of class shaped their migration stories, the processes of migration from initial emigration aspirations, through mechanisms of departure and arrival, to long-term settlement, future imaginaries, and decisions around naturalisation and citizenship.

As a social researcher there is an instinctive impulse to identify those commonalities, to find the recurring events that allow for the (at least subconscious) construction of ideal types or models, to make coherent and, most importantly, communicable sense of the untameable social realities encountered in the field. Saturation may be defined as when no new findings come from further increasing the sample (Strauss 1987, 21 Kvale 2007, 43-4). But this surely never truly occurs in qualitative social research, since individual accounts are necessarily particular, specific and contingent upon personal factors which do not fit into readily replicated patterns.

In the following six ethnographic chapters of this dissertation, I attempt to accommodate this tension between the need for coherent communication and the inherent incoherence and confusion of my findings in this particular social world. In my constructions of meaning, my making sense of the “irreducibility of human experience” (Willis and Trondman 2000), I aim to produce an ethnography that is theoretically informed and makes visible the “creative inferential process” (Timmermans and Tavory 2012) that binds together field and theory.

Viewed from this perspective, writing is as much method as is observing, interviewing or coding. In each chapter I advance an argument that aims to link the empirical to the theoretical, drawing on vignettes and quotations from field encounters which support, extend and complicate the arguments put forward. This writing reflects the ongoing and iterative analysis, theoretical abduction and refinement that occurred throughout my project and is still unfolding. Analysis begins with the first breath taken in the “field” and it does not end with the compilation of “data” but rather extends until and beyond the final full stops of this text.

## PART TWO

## Chapter 5      Coming to Australia: the roles of class and ethnicity in the initiating drivers of migration and experiences of early settlement

This first ethnographic chapter commences Part Two of this dissertation, charting the migration processes of the cohort of trade skilled migrants, with a focus on how their emigration and settlement was conditioned by their classed positions and the resources at their disposal. The chapter begins at the beginning of the migration journey and present the reasons given by trade skilled migrants for going overseas for work in the first place. A chapter of two halves, it portrays firstly the circumstances of their initial out-migrations, and secondly how they experienced their early days, weeks and months of settlement in Australia. This description serves two purposes. Firstly, it provides a clearer picture of participants' lives and how they remember their emigrations from China. But more importantly, I show how these decisions and experiences, these early processes of migration were fundamentally shaped by both social class *and* ethnicity.

Trade skilled migrants and their wives almost without exception spoke with me about their low incomes and high living costs, and the constrained social mobility they felt that they, and often also their children, faced in competitive, expensive China. As explained in Chapter 2, the declining class position of urban workers, farmers and peasant workers, and the rising inequality of reform-era China are factors which informed the emigration decisions of most of these people. Where under a socialist system, urban workers in particular had once been deemed the vanguard of the revolution, secure in lifelong employment and cradle-to-grave provision of basic welfare entitlements, by the turn of the century this had drastically changed. Urban workers and, to an even greater extent, farmers and rural-to-urban migrant workers experienced a decline in their relative social position during the reform era. These ideological and structural changes necessitated for many some kind of agential response to address the social and financial pressures that they faced.



The structural factors conditioning outmigration can be understood here in terms of “driver complexes”. In this chapter I borrow this typification of drivers from Van Hear, Bakewell and Long’s (2018) “push-pull plus” model in order to make sense of the exceptional circumstances that made these unlikely migrations possible. An analysis of the driver complexes acting upon members of this cohort shows that most factors can be clearly linked to their social class and technical manual skilled occupations.

However, their decisions to go overseas were made in the context of national normative discourses that valorise mobility and working overseas, discourses that influence the migration decisions of Chinese migrants from all class backgrounds. Although trade skilled participants typically frame their migration decisions primarily in economic terms, the other aspirations and frames they express demonstrate that the cultural and economic logics of migration are mutually constitutive and cannot be meaningfully separated (Coates 2018; Carling and Collins 2018; Ho 2014a).

This chapter further argues that participants’ impressions of arriving in Australia, particularly those who came at a time when the China-born population of Perth was still comparatively small, were shaped by their working class and regional backgrounds, their limited English skills and their constrained mobility capital. Although some aspects of their early settlement are shaped by ethnicity and so are common to those of co-nationals from middle class families, there are key differences. By exploring these similarities and differences, this chapter presents some of the ways that *intra-ethnic class* is manifested through the migration experiences of this cohort.

## 5.1 Drivers and aspirations: beyond simple financial narratives of working class labour migration

For working class migrants leaving China during the 2000s to take up fixed-term employment in Australia, this move was a leap into the unknown. Very few had any friends or family in Australia. Most had at best a rudimentary grasp of English. Like the subjects of Fong’s (2006; 2011) ethnographies of ordinary Dalian schoolchildren, the offspring of poor urban workers who unexpectedly were able to study overseas, members of this cohort of trade skilled migrants are from non-traditional sending areas in north China, and usually the first in their families to go abroad. Most of this cohort were born in the 1960s or 70s, at a time when China was largely closed off from the outside world, when emigration and even domestic migration were tightly restricted. Growing up under such circumstances, moving to Australia was quite unimaginable, so what prompted such a drastic and daring decision later in life?

### 5.1.1 “If you could make as much money in China, really why would anyone come?”

Trade skilled migrants explained, almost without exception, that their first motivation in coming to Australia was to make more money for themselves and their families. They told of how the low and stagnating wages in Chinese factories, coupled with the rising costs of housing and education for children, have driven both urban workers and rural migrant workers alike to seek greener pastures within China and overseas. Jack, a tradesman from a large city in north China working in Perth on a 457-employer sponsored visa, explained this perspective to me. At the time of our conversation in late 2015, his family was still living in their hometown, his teenage son just commencing senior high school, with all the costly extra tuition fees that entailed. Alan acknowledged the psychological pressure he felt spending months at a time away from home but felt his earnings in Australia justified the separation. In articulating this view, he spoke like the rational *homo economicus* of classical migration theory, motivated by his knowledge of geographical income differentials:

I'm here because I can make more money here. In China doing this work [now, meaning in 2015] I could make a few thousand yuan, a *wan* [RMB 10,000] would be really exceptionally good. Plus, here if you work more you can make more. There's overtime, and while you do get paid more for overtime in China these days, still... If you could make as much money in China, really why would anyone come?

Jack was not alone. Particularly for those earlier migrants who had first moved to Australia in the mid-2000s when Chinese salaries were lower, and Australian wages higher, the financial logics of the move were paramount. For most, it was a costly undertaking. Securing a job overseas through a recruitment agent in China required a significant initial investment; almost all of the trade skilled migrants I interviewed paid fees of between RMB 150,000 and RMB 220,000 (AUD 31,500 – 46,500)<sup>1</sup> to a migration broker based in China.

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike other conversions in this dissertation, this is 2019 exchange rates. The value in Australian dollars of agents' fees changed over time. See Chapter 6 for an expansion of this point and its significance for migrants servicing loans taken out in China with wages earned overseas.

Despite the high costs and the weight of such loans, however, for those migrants arriving early in the resources supercycle, such debt-financed migration was seen as a good “investment”. At the peak of the Western Australian boom trade skilled labourers could expect to earn good wages and work as much overtime as they liked. Living frugally, they could typically pay back loans within the first year or two of employment and so accrue significant savings over the course of a four-year contract. At that time, Chinese wages for manual labourers, even skilled tradespeople, were very low, typically around RMB 2,000 per month (AUD 325) for an urban worker, and still less for a rural domestic migrant worker. One welder reported that when he applied for his first Australian visa in 2007, he was only earning RMB 1,000 per month, spending months at a time working away from his family while barely able to cover their basic expenses. This was also a period when house prices and the cost of living in China were rising dramatically, and thus a few years working in Australia represented a real opportunity to improve the financial position of the family.

Migration was framed as a hardship willingly undertaken to improve the family’s fortunes and make a better life for the next generation. Sam, who had first arrived in Perth in 2007, clearly explained this perspective:

I came over for money. You see as a welder in China, in Shenyang, I was making about 2000 yuan a month, not a lot. So I wanted to come to Australia to make money. It wasn’t a long-term plan, I came over temporarily on a 457. ... I’m proud of what I have done. Even though things are hard for first generation migrants I think that it will be better for future generations. In China we have a tradition where we say that 80 per cent of what we do, we do for our descendants.

Several of the men I interviewed had already spent many years away from the family home as sojourning migrant workers. Some, particularly those from rural backgrounds, had been part of the great wave of Chinese domestic migration, living as *nongmingong*, the peasant workers, in booming cities on the eastern seaboard like Shenzhen, Guangzhou or Dalian. Others, like Yang, had already experimented with international labour migration, working fixed-term contracts in regional industrial centres like Singapore, Japan and Korea. A four-year job in Western Australia, then, was not a leap towards a promised land, nor a strategic move towards permanent emigration; rather it was just another way to make some money for the family and get ahead of the pack in China, where they felt life was increasingly expensive and competitive. Chen, a welder from a provincial capital in north China, engaged in serial international labour migrations in the region to cover the rising costs of supporting his family. He explained his financial concerns and migration strategy:

I didn't come here [Australia] with the intention of migrating. I had already worked for four years in Singapore as a welder in a ship repair yard. It was good, I found I could make more money there than I could at home. You know what it's like in China, it's hard to make enough to live. And so when I finished in Singapore I went back home and we used the money I had made to buy a house. But before long that was all used up and while there was work for me in my home town, my daughter was about to start senior high school, and then there would be university after that. There were expensive years coming up – university fees in China are RMB 10,000 a year – so my wife said, “Why don't you go overseas to work again?”

Very few of these men preparing to leave China for a four-year stint had any idea that this might eventually become a longer-term move. They were advised by their brokers that this was a temporary engagement, and that they would need to return to China at the end of their contracts. It was only after arriving in Australia that they learned from their employers that they might possibly be sponsored for permanent residency. At the outset, participants rarely thought they might settle overseas.

### 5.1.2 “I suppose it was half to earn some money and half to open my eyes, that kind of thinking.”

Although financial reasons featured prominently among participants' explanations of their initial journeys overseas, for most of them, the decision to move, and certainly the decision to stay, was more far complicated than simply chasing the highest wage.

Kevin is another welder who, like Chen and Yang, had already been working away from his home city for several years before deciding to take a job in Australia. Money was an important factor in his decision to go abroad, but desire for a better lifestyle and simpler interpersonal relations informed his decision to stay:

I didn't come here from [my home province]; before I came here, I'd been working in [a South Chinese city] for ten years. It was a US-invested joint venture company, an American boiler maker with over 100 years of company history. It was a good company, tended to adhere to Chinese employment law, more than most. We got to take rest days.

[Researcher: So if it was a good job why did you come to Australia?]

You could make more money here! And back then the exchange rate was really good. I'm not sure now I would think it was worth it but then it was a big difference. ...

Plus, the air is better here. And people are not doing it so tough (*xinku*). Relationships between people are better here. You've been to China, you know what it's like. Here if you want to do something then you do it, if you don't want to then you don't. The boss won't worry or give you any pressure. It's a bit simpler here.

The sentiments expressed in this last paragraph were echoed by many other participants, complicating narratives beyond purely economic motivations. Members of this cohort were influenced by popular imaginaries which increased the appeal of working overseas. Just like Miriam, who recalled how everyone in her hometown in the mid-2000s was talking about the “paradise” that was life in Australia or Canada, many participants told how they were caught up in the frenzy for leaving the country (*chuguore*) that was common at the time. John, a welder from a large industrial city in the northeast is quoted in the title of this section; his desire to “open his eyes” and see the world beyond China was a typical feature of migration narratives for this cohort. Going overseas for work was universally and unequivocally constructed as a positive endeavour, in keeping with depictions of overseas Chinese in the Chinese media and popular culture (Sun 2002; Nyíri 2010).

However, unlike Fong’s (2004; 2011) participants whose aspirations to go overseas focussed on the “backwardness” they perceived in China, and their desire to join the “developed world”, my participants proposed a different worldview. China was widely considered the more developed country of the two. When discussing broadband speeds, for example, participants often jokingly noted that Australia was now in a different era to modern Chinese cities with really fast fibre, such as Shenzhen or Shanghai. Since I conducted my fieldwork in 2014-16, when many participants had already lived in Australia for almost a decade, I have no way of really knowing how participants viewed the differences between the two countries at the time of their emigration. It seems likely that, just as Fong’s (2011) participants were pressed to adjust or redefine their impressions of a foreign “paradise” in response to challenging experiences overseas, so time spent in Australia led to balanced perspectives for my participants. I was certainly routinely told about how quickly China had developed. Natasha, a woman in her mid-thirties working in a massage shop, was outraged by how little some Australians knew of contemporary China:

People [in Perth] will often say that China is poor and in dire straits (*luopo*). Not educated people or people who travel. People who have been to China on business know that it’s not like that – they’ve been to Beijing or Shanghai and see that it’s more developed than here! But people who don’t know say things like that.

Despite being aware, and proud, of the speed of China’s development, participants recognised that it came with a cost. The life that could be enjoyed in Australia was routinely contrasted with the three big problems identified with life in China: pollution and health; children’s safety and education; and the pressures of work and social relations.

Concern about China's high levels of pollution and contaminated food supply featured highly among the reasons given. This is unsurprising; public concern regarding the increasingly severe state of air and water pollution has risen in recent years. To indicate the scale of the problems, air pollution was reported to have caused about 1.2 million premature deaths in 2010 (Chen et al. 2013), up to seventy per cent of China's river water is unfit for human contact, let alone consumption (Tomba 2016b, 45), while vegetables grown in wastewater-irrigated soils, a common practice in drought-ridden north China, may be contaminated with heavy metals at levels far exceeding WHO recommended limits (Khan et al. 2008). Awareness of these problems has also been increasing, as media debates about the human costs of toxic water and contaminated air draw public attention (Golley 2016). Lin, the wife of a mechanic, highlighted this concern:

I didn't like the environment in China. At that time especially the food was unsafe too, very polluted. I worried about that and for my child. I wanted to be somewhere healthier. So, we thought about going to Canada because I have relatives there, but I don't like the Canadian climate, it's just too cold. Yes, it's hot here but it's ok. And it's a dry heat, not like the wet, muggy Shandong summer where you sweat all the time.

Participants also spoke of the pressures their children faced when struggling to succeed in a highly competitive educational system characterised by frequent assessments and long hours of homework and supplementary classes. Parents told me that they worried about children having to study so hard with no time for relaxation, no time for friends, no time to learn other life skills like cooking or basic self-care. In Chapter 7 I will return to this point and the ways that participants contrasted education in China and Australia.

Many adults also wanted to reduce their own sources of stress, particularly the burden of having to invest a lot of effort and time into the networked relationships that are so often necessary to secure advancement at work, to maintain social status, and even to access some aspects of public administration. Jasmine is the wife of a welder who first arrived in Australia with her husband in 2007 on a 457 sponsored work visa. While he worked in manual employment, before migrating she had been employed in an office-based customer service role with a very large national company. She explained that the lack of work-life balance in China was a major factor influencing their decision to go overseas:

I was working at [big company name] at that time and it was a lot of pressure. I worked long hours, had to do overtime; there was no time for my family. We wanted to change our lives. The only way to do that in China would be to take a less good job, earn less money and lose my [social] position... So that's why we came and life is definitely easier, it's more laid back here. You don't have to

work so hard at work, don't have to do overtime. And the rest of life is less exhausting – maintaining *guanxi*, going to all those gatherings (*yingchou*) you are obliged to attend to sustain your position, and the weddings, and the birth celebrations and all the gifts (*hongbao*).

In China your family is not important, your kids are not important, only your job is important! The thing is there are so many people and it's so competitive. So, like at [my former employer], if you don't want to do overtime or you're not very good then the boss says they can find someone else. So you don't dare, you just work, work, work!

This section has shown the complex combinations of factors initiating the emigrations of members of this cohort. Some of these factors can be attributed to social class, while others are not class specific.

This cohort could be simply understood as a case study of migration emerging in response to wage differentials in different places resulting from the uneven allocation of capital and labour (Harris and Todaro 1970). The Western Australian resources sector needed and was willing to pay for specialised technical labour to support the development of new resource extraction facilities under the exceptional conditions of the supercycle; China's reform-era restructuring of heavy industry produced a surplus of unemployed and under-employed people who had been trained in these skills. Under these conditions, many participants cited the opportunity to earn more money for their families as the main reason for leaving China and coming to Australia.

Yet this story is not so simple, as the same participants also revealed other factors that informed their migration aspirations. Aspirations is the term most commonly used in migration studies to describe to state of intending or desiring, wanting or wishing to migrate (Carling 2002; Carling and Schewel 2018; Carling and Collins 2018). However, aspirations are hard to qualify and define in particular empirical cases as they are necessary personal, simultaneously the product of individual circumstances and dispositions with culturally specific normative perspectives on migration. They are also not fixed and rarely finished, but rather fluctuate and evolve with shifting circumstances and changing social norms.

In discussing their migration aspirations, participants spoke of the attraction of the imagined world outside China, their fears of pollution and related health risks, work-life balance, and a loving concern for their children's wellbeing as the central issues that informed the decision to move. Their narratives cannot be reduced to simplistic economic objectives as these other factors balance, complement or even underpin their seemingly more straightforward financial justifications. As Coates (2018) has compellingly argued, the economic and cultural logics of migration cannot be meaningfully separated. Similarly, an overly mechanistic analysis of an individual's forms of capital and the way they may be strategically deployed runs the risk of ignoring or underplaying the importance of aspirations and imaginaries in initiating and directing the trajectories of migrants and would-be migrants (Paul 2017, 46-7). Aspirations, although highly individualised, are embedded in social and cultural frames and imaginaries. The trade skilled migrants among my participants made decisions which were informed by their personal financial circumstances, but also by broader cultural imaginaries within China that validated overseas travel and the figure of the globally mobile Chinese citizen (Nyíri 2010; Fong 2011; Sun 2002).

## 5.2 Empty suburbs and busy workplaces: new labour migrants arrive in Australia

For members of this cohort, particularly those who arrived towards the start of the resources boom in the mid-2000s, Australia had seemed at first an unfamiliar place which they felt in many ways ill-equipped to navigate. Most participants were keen to relive their early days, reflecting back on a time that they remember as confusing, exhausting, depleting, but also sometimes exciting. As with the factors that prompted emigration decisions, the early settlement experiences of members of this cohort are conditioned by both class and ethnicity. While some aspects of their stories may be common to many or most Chinese nationals coming to Perth, there are other dimensions that can be clearly attributed to their classed positions, offering new insights into the ways that class and ethnicity intersect for international migrants.



## 5.2.1 New pioneers in strange suburbs

Male primary visa applicants typically came first, leaving their wives and children behind in China until they were more established in Australia. Although family members were also granted secondary applicant visas with the right to enter Australia from the same date as the primary applicant, the men I spoke with were glad they came out first because, as one welder said, “Things were difficult at the start. No house, no car - better to get things settled first”. This family migration pattern is reminiscent of the working-class Southern European male labour migrants who came to Australia in the decades following the Second World War and the families who later followed them (Price 1963).

Welders and other tradesmen who had been sponsored by Australian employers usually had their travel arranged by the agent who had managed their recruitment in China. They often arrived in a small group with two or three other Chinese employees destined for the same factory, men whom they had rarely met before getting on the aeroplane. The next chapter will return to a discussion of the commercial infrastructure supporting their migrations. For now, it suffices to note that this unfamiliarity with their Chinese colleagues was likely by design. Intermediaries arranging international labour migration in China sometimes set criteria for the recruitment of workers, specifying, for example, that they should not be from a family with overseas connections, and should not be sent to work a contract in a country where that individual has been before. (Xiang 2017, 183) These restrictions are intended to curtail social networks in the destination city and reduce the risk of absconding, particularly when dealing with regional labour destinations with mandatory return policies, common in Japan, Korea and Singapore (Xiang 2013c; Chok 2013).

Although they did not know each other, these men usually spent the first few months living together in shared accommodation arranged by the factory manager. Chen reflected that although they did sometimes clash, since they were strangers with no real connection thrown together by circumstance, on the whole living with his new workmates was a good thing “because we needed each other, we didn’t know anything, so we helped each other out.”

For new arrivals, even the simplest day-to-day tasks like shopping and commuting were a challenge. Most had arrived in Australia with no savings and with significant debts in China that needed to be repaid. Few could afford a car, and they instead had to rely on public transport or cycling to get to work and to go to the shops. Perth suburbs are sprawling, very different to densely populated urban spaces in China. Empty Australian suburbs lined with fenced, detached housing can lead to social distance and isolation from neighbours, even for English-speaking residents (Richards 1990; Abel 2014); this experience was amplified for migrants newly arrived from busy Chinese cities.

Participants also found their suburban homes were typically a significant distance away from their factories, located in peri-urban industrial parks. In those early days, some migrants needed to cycle up to an hour each way on top of an eleven or even twelve-hour working day. Many more complained about Perth's poor public transport. With bus routes often running only once every half hour, and less frequently at weekends, these services are very different from, and far inferior to, the public transport systems they were accustomed to using in urban China.

Paul, a welder from the north east of China, first came to Perth in 2007. When his wife, Linda, and preschool-age son came to join him six months later, they initially lived in Hamilton Hill, an old white working-class suburb in the south of Perth, reasonably close to his workplace in the large industrial zone at Henderson but a long way from the City and the Chinatown shops in Northbridge. Reflecting back on those early days, they remember feeling isolated. More importantly, they did not even know how or where they could buy food near their home:

We lived in Hamilton Hill at first. You didn't see any Chinese there. It was lonely, especially as we were used to China which is noisy and lively with lots of people. In Perth back then even the big shopping centres were closed at the weekend... Even buying basics like vegetables and meat was difficult at first. We depended sometimes on friends going shopping and bringing us stuff. Or we'd go to Northbridge, but then we'd have to buy stuff with a long shelf life like potatoes. We didn't have much meat or green vegetables, mostly because we didn't know where to buy it.

Prior to August 2012, Sunday trading was restricted in Western Australia, with supermarkets and shopping malls not permitted to open on Sundays (DoC 2012). For families like Paul and Linda, these restrictions made weekly shopping very difficult, as Paul worked Monday to Saturday and Linda initially lacked the confidence to go shopping on public transport on her own in a strange city with limited English and a toddler in tow.

The Chinese-born population of Perth grew quickly during this period, and so those people who arrived towards the start of the mining boom recall a city that was ill-equipped to meet the needs of new arrivals from Asia. Zhang first moved to Perth in 2008 as a welder on a 457 visa. He and his wife rented an apartment in Victoria Park, a central-eastern suburb south of the river, and later bought a house in neighbouring Belmont. These are both now popular places to live for migrants from China; the Census-count of the China-born population in the Town of Victoria Park<sup>2</sup> has increased from 421 in 2006 to 901 in 2016, while in the City of Belmont the population has increased from 291 to 1,083 in the same ten year period (ABS 2006, 2016). Zhang is now friends with thirteen or fourteen families in the neighbourhood, most of whom are also “north-easterners” (*Dongbeiren*) from his home region in China, while he also knows of many other Chinese living nearby with whom he is less familiar. Although he and his friends work long hours six days a week, and so can usually only find time to meet up on public holidays or when celebrating significant life course events like weddings, he is happy to now have so many friends. It was not always so. Zhang, like many other migrants from this cohort who were early arrivals in Perth, described himself and his wife as pioneers, and feels that life is in many ways much simpler for people who migrated to Perth more recently:

We were the first ones to move to this area, and then over the last ten years the numbers have increased. It was harder at the start for us than it is for the newcomers now. When we came there weren't any Chinese people, this was ten years ago. Even in Chinatown there weren't many Chinese! So we had to do everything ourselves (*kao ziji*). People come now and there are people like us to help them find a house, buy a car, translate things. If you use an ANZ ATM<sup>3</sup> now then there is a Chinese option. If you go into McDonalds or KFC or somewhere, when we went in, we had to point at the picture to get what we wanted. Now there's usually someone Chinese working there. You can spot an Asian person and ask them if they speak Chinese and get them to help you order what you want. Back then it was all local Australians.

Given the long history of Chinese migration to Australia, it is initially surprising that my participants saw themselves as pioneers, with little reference to the decades of Chinese and Asian settlement in Perth that came before them. And yet, beyond occasional passing references to the old Chinatown in Northbridge and the shops found there, other Asian migrants rarely feature in the narratives I was told.

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<sup>2</sup> The Town of Victoria Park and the City of Belmont are local government areas (LGA) within the Perth metropolitan area.

<sup>3</sup> ANZ (Australia and New Zealand Banking Group) is one of Australia's 'big four' banks. Automatic teller machines supplied by this bank can be found in all commercial districts and shopping centres.

I account for this in three ways. Firstly, not only the China-born but also the broader overseas-born ethnic Chinese population of Western Australia grew dramatically during this period. As a rough indication of the scale of this change, the total number of overseas-born people who identified as having Chinese or Taiwanese ancestry increased from 98,833 in 2006 to 185,819 in 2016 (ABS 2006; 2016). The number of Perth residents of other Asian ethnicities has likewise increased dramatically during this period. Moving through the Perth metropolitan area in the mid-2000s, migrants from China would have had good reason to feel they were racially different to most people they encountered. Western Australia has become much more visibly diverse since they first arrived.

Secondly, new migrants from north China typically experience social distance from ethnic Chinese migrants from other places in Asia, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong or Taiwan. They are separated by nationality, and sometimes by the different perspectives on regional history and politics that can entail. They are separated by language, since most north Chinese only speak Mandarin without the ability to understand the Cantonese, Hokkien and other dialects common in Hong Kong and South East Asia. Even among PRC-born migrants, the earliest generations of student migrants were predominantly from Shanghai, with most others from the southern provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, or the capital Beijing (Gao and Liu 1998). Despite a shared sense of national belonging to China, migrants from, for example, Shanghai and Shandong will commonly experience social distance based on region of origin. Members of this cohort of trade skilled migrants are also separated from earlier generations of ethnic Chinese migrants by their class background and occupations.

This last point brings me to my third explanation of such intra-ethnic social distance: Perth geography and residential patterns. Because these new trade skilled migrants were usually employed in the workshops of Henderson to the south and Welshpool to the east, many participants live in suburbs which as little as a decade ago were predominantly inhabited by working-class European-Australians. Places like Belmont and Parkwood, Canning Vale and Atwell, have emerged since the turn of the century as new suburbs to have large, visibly Chinese populations. And while the Chinese living in these suburbs are not exclusively from working-class backgrounds, nor only from China, these demographic groups are more heavily represented here than in the typically more expensive suburbs settled by other Chinese groups in earlier decades.

## 5.2.2 Working challenges and discrimination

It was not only life outside of work which proved challenging for these new migrants from China. Inside the factory too, many new arrivals found their first months in Australia quite difficult. Although the new migrants were experienced tradesmen with strong technical skills, having gone through a rigorous and competitive selection process in China, the work they were expected to do was sometimes different to that which they had performed in China. Welders who had previously worked in large SOEs were typically accustomed to performing a highly specialised set of tasks and were sometimes surprised when they needed to do different tasks or a broader range of generalist work in a smaller Australian workshop. Language was also a problem, particularly for those who were among the earliest to arrive in Perth. Sometimes the migration agent arranged for a translator to attend the factory for the first few days, while a few larger companies provided training and important documents like occupational health and safety guidelines in Chinese. However, very often trade skilled migrants found language a significant communication barrier with their new employers, as John recalled:

Three of us came out together, we were the first Chinese to work at the factory... The first time we came it was hard. When I got to the factory there was no interpreter, the boss had never hired Chinese before. So communicating was difficult; it was not easy to understand the work and to say if you could do it or not.

Women who came to Australia to join their husbands also found starting work in a new environment challenging. Sarah, who had come out to Australia just two months after her husband to care for him following a workplace injury, struggled initially with life overseas. As already described in the introduction to this dissertation, she clearly remembers the difficulties she faced when job seeking for the first time after spending the first years of her working life in just one large, secure state-owned enterprise:

Looking for a job was hard. In China we live close to work, so we can carry our things to work and go home at lunch time. In Australia it was hard, I didn't know where to go. [Before leaving China] we wanted to come out to improve things for the next generation, but I had never really thought about what it would be like, about how hard it would be. The Australian sun is so hot in the summer and I didn't know where I was going, and I didn't understand the language. When I was looking for a job I stood at the side of the road and cried.

In China, we live our lives in the one place. From nursery through primary school and high school and college, and then after that our jobs are assigned (*fenpei gongzuo*) and it is all in the same place. Plus, I worked in an office; I had never done physical work....

Once I had found a job I went to school, to an English school. I paid the fees myself. It was a 40-minute cycle ride from our home. The school was in the town centre and we lived quite far away so I rode 40 minutes, in the heat.

But it was good to learn English. When you first come you feel like a small child. You need people to help you to explain things to you. The law is different in China, everything is different. After a while you start to feel like you can do things and then you feel better and say, "Come on, let's get on with it!"...

Yet, even once she found work, Sarah found the expectations of Australian employers to be quite different, and more demanding, than the comfortable work unit she had known in her hometown:

Work in Australia is done by the hour. No matter what kind of work you do it's usually paid by the hour. That concept doesn't exist in China. So even though you are at work for a while, you can drink tea, have a chat. It's not like that here.

Sarah was not alone in complaining that it was hard to adapt to the different pace of work expected in Australia. Carolyn Hsu (2007) has observed that while conducting research in Chinese workplaces in the late 1990s, particularly in state-owned work units, her access to participants was greatly helped by the widespread underemployment common at the time. Employees and supervisors, she found, had plenty of free time for conversations and interviews while they were at work. Although Australian workplaces do provide legislated breaks for "smoko", meals and recuperation, there is an expectation that shift time is "on the clock", with related expectations regarding consistent productivity. Several participants told me that this was quite unlike the slow-paced work rhythms they had previously known in China. However others, like Jasmine, preferred their new Australian workplaces to the relentless pressures of their jobs prior to migration; no one single narrative captures all the experiences of this cohort, and their perceptions of Australia and migration are inevitably shaped by their work and lives before the move.

Many participants also reported conflict with their co-workers, which they perceived as stemming from racist discrimination, a fear of workplace competition, or a combination of the two. This echoes the racism of the Australian nativist labour movement and left-wing press during the colonial period and the first half of the twentieth century (Ryan 1995a; Watters 2012). When asked about his local Australian colleagues, Feng, a welder's, first and emphatic response was a single word: "discrimination" (*qishi*). He expanded on the reasons he thought his former co-workers were unhappy to have Chinese welders join the workforce:

I had trouble with my colleagues, which was why I left there. They were discriminatory. You know what local Australians can be like. Perhaps not highly educated ones, but lower status Australians who like to have a drink. They were angry that we had come here and taken their jobs. [Here I observed that it

would be hard to take their jobs if they did them better.] Yes, well that's what we Chinese think! Chinese are very capable and we are obedient (*tinghua*). If the boss tells a Chinese to do something then they go and do it. Australians will argue instead! Anyway, discrimination is something you'll find. Most Australians are great, but there are always a few.

They discriminate but this is partly because they are envious, because we are better at working. I haven't experienced anyone say anything to me, but my friends say at work they have had local co-workers swear at them – [they say] “fucking”. When we work faster this means they have to work faster. Like at the trailer factory, it used to take them a week to do a trailer but then when we started we were doing one in two or three days. So they had to go faster too. Of course they are unhappy.

Sarah likewise told me about the racism her welder husband faced when they first arrived in Australia to work in a smaller, regional town:

We experienced discrimination in [the regional town]. There were problems at the start with our English, particularly in his workplace, things he was unable to understand at the start. Then people would say “Go back to China”. This gave him a lot of psychological pressure (*xinli yali*). Because it was the only factory in the town, and a big factory, there was nothing he could do. Even if colleagues were saying bad things to you (*ma ni*), there was no where you could go. Here [in Perth] you can find a job in a different factory if people are rude to you.

These experiences reported by trade skilled migrants to some extent result from their classed position and occupations. This does not mean that middle-class and professional migrants from China do not face racial discrimination or difficulties in transitioning to an Australian working environment. Large scale surveys of migrants from East Asian countries demonstrate that regardless of class, people frequently report discrimination based on skin colour, ethnic origin or religion (Markus 2016), while Australian Race Discrimination Commissioner, Tim Soutphommasane (2014) has highlighted the “bamboo ceiling” blocking access to senior roles in both government and industry for Asian Australians. Chapter 8 will address the challenges faced by many middle-class participants in finding both employment commensurate with their qualifications and a secure sponsored visa status, and further consider how this affects intra-ethnic class relations in Perth. However, the particular kinds of discrimination and abuse described by working class participants, the protectionist narratives of “stealing our jobs” and demanding Chinese “go back to where you came from” are perhaps more common in manufacturing and trades working environments than in Australian offices.

Some participants told me they had also encountered discrimination outside of the workplace. Leasing houses was particularly difficult for Chinese migrants of all backgrounds, and several people reported that they had to rent from Chinese landlords because they felt local Australian landlords and letting agents preferred to not rent properties to Chinese tenants. Mandy told me of the challenges she faced when house hunting for herself and her teenage son:

It's not easy renting a place here. You know most Chinese rent from other Chinese. It's easier, not easy to rent from foreigners (*guilao*), and they don't like to rent to Chinese. I don't know why, we're pretty clean.

Since the mid-2000s, a thriving Chinese co-ethnic rental market has developed in Perth, where migrants can rent entire dwellings or, more commonly, separate bedrooms within shared houses. Chapters 8 and 9 consider the significance of this growing co-ethnic rental market in relation to class differences and intra-ethnic relationships.

Xu has similarly experienced discrimination since arriving in Australia. In his workshop he employs Chinese staff as both mechanics and in administrative roles; his clients are almost exclusively other ethnic Chinese. He told me he thinks racism is an ongoing problem, particularly for people running retail businesses. He cited the example of a family friend whose bakery failed, he claimed, because local Australians want to buy bread from a “white” person. “You can't change your appearance,” he told me, “you will always have yellow skin and black hair.”

Balancing these negative experiences reported by some migrants, many others talked about their positive first impressions and explained what they saw as the good things about Australia. Sam provided a wonderful summary of the benefits of migrating for him and his family:

To understand Chinese migrants, you have to understand the difference between the countries. Why do so many Chinese want to go to live in Australia or Canada or Europe or the US? Why do no foreigners want to live in China – or if there are some, they are very few? Different countries, different environments. [This includes] the working environment, the physical environment, like clean air, [and] the welfare environment. Here the government really cares for my child, all the way from the start. Healthcare, immunisations, schooling, looking after her all the way up to the point she is 18.

Many participants also spoke favourably about their initial impressions of local Australians, usually typifying them as honest, open and friendly. Liu Jing, the wife of a welder, told me a story about a positive experience she had during her early days in Perth:



When I first got here, I opened a bank account and got a bank card. I wanted to get my money out, so I went to an ATM in a shopping centre. I put my card in and I requested the money, but the money didn't come out, just my card. I couldn't work out what I'd done wrong, so I just took my card and walked away.

Then two local Australians, with hair like yours [meaning the researcher's; like many North Europeans, I have brown, wavy hair], called me over and showed me that my money had come out. I didn't realise that in Australia the card comes out and then the cash comes out [in China it is the other way around]. It was a lot of money, \$400. That would never happen in China. If you walked away, the next person would take your money for sure.

The early settlement experiences of this cohort are like, their emigration aspirations and decisions, shaped by ethnicity, race and nationality, and by social class. Liu Jing's chance encounter with two trustworthy local Australians and Sam's enthusiasm for free vaccines are not situated in their class positions, but rather contrast national contexts. Australian racism and discrimination likewise do not necessarily differentiate on the basis of class but rather may be understood to affect all people with East Asian faces in similar ways. However, for this cohort of trade skilled migrants many aspects of early settlement were shaped by their social class. This is evident in the particular kinds of workplace relations and conflict some experienced with their local Australian trade skilled co-workers, in the spatial geographies of their homes and commutes, and in the social distance they experienced from earlier generations of ethnic Chinese migrants.

### 5.3 Analysis and Conclusion

The early migration experiences of members of this cohort, including their pre-departure circumstances and deliberations, the process of finding employers through paid intermediaries and the events of travelling to Perth, finding their bearings, a home and, for trailing wives, suitable employment, are informed and shaped by their personal characteristics. This includes their nationality, as some dimensions are particular to PRC citizens. It includes their ethnicity, language and race, as they saw Perth through a Chinese lens. It includes their social class, and it is these dimensions that most interest me as they are factors which distinguish this cohort's processes of emigration and early settlement from those of many other China-born migrants to Western Australia.

On first inspection, participants' financially framed explanations of why they initially decided to come to Australia to take up temporary work reflect neoclassical push-pull theories that privilege economic drivers of migration, based on geographical inequalities in demand and market supply of labour. Ravenstein's (1885; 1889, 286) theories on the causes of migration posited that while unfavourable conditions might "push" migrants to leave their home regions, the preeminent reasons for migration are economic as people will move to find "undeveloped resources which hold out greater promise for remunerative labour." In a similar vein, Harris and Todaro (1970, see also Todaro 1969, 1976) influentially argued that rational actors, in order to maximise the utility of their labour, may be reliably expected to migrate to destinations where they anticipate higher incomes. Sjaastad (1962, 83) likewise framed migration as an "investment increasing the productivity of human resources", the costs and returns of which may be calculated with reference to the individual migrant in order to better understand these processes of "resource allocation". Such understandings of the "push and pull forces" (Passaris 1989, 526) which act upon rational, atomised actors (or households, following the logic of NELM, see Stark and Bloom [1985]) have arguably become the most influential way of conceptualising international migration. These approaches continue to inform much migration policy making, as an informed and rational migrant remains the assumed subject of state-led efforts to attract or repel those people deemed (un)desirable through policies of selection and restriction (Arango 2000; Castles 2004, 2017; Carling and Collins 2018).

Many of the structural initiating drivers that framed the migrations of members of this cohort were directly related to stages of development and economic cycles in particular industries. Van Hear, Bakewell and Long's (2017) "push-pull plus" is a useful model to help interrogate the circumstances under which members of this cohort have moved from China to Australia. Van Hear and colleagues recognise that traditional push-pull approaches that reduced migrants' movements to simplistic comparisons of low-income home regions with high-income destinations (e.g. Harris and Todaro 1970) failed to account for structural inequality within and between national labour markets (Castles and Kosack 1973). Instead, they point to the merit of a model that seeks to analyse the evident ways that structure enables or constrains the movements of individual migrants without resorting to over-simplification. They propose a more sophisticated development of "push and pull" whereby combinations or "complexes" of multiple drivers, defined as structural factors that influence migration decisions and processes, can be seen to interact in ways that are particular and contingent but still have application in explaining and predicting aggregate population movements in similar circumstances.

I do not intend to make any such grand predictions here, but rather borrow this model to make sense of the combinations of structural factors that apply in this case study. “Push-pull plus” categorises drivers into four types that may sometimes overlap and which I have applied here to this particular cohort of trade skilled labour migrants; these are termed predisposing drivers, proximate drivers, precipitating drivers and mediating drivers.

In this case, predisposing drivers, factors that create a context where migration is more likely, include: wage discrepancies for skilled manual work in Australia and in China; Western Australia’s reliance on primary industry and the cyclical economic patterns associated with resource extraction; and China’s “opening up” and reorientation to world markets. Proximate drivers, deep-seated structural features directly affecting migration, include: Australia’s established history of driving new economic activity and growth through targeted migration programs; new employment patterns in PRC following reform era retreat from command economy and full state employment; the declining class position of urban and peasant workers; the marketisation of welfare, education, housing and healthcare in China, and related devolution of responsibility from the state to the family.

Turning now to the events triggering departure, what Van Hear, Bakewell and Long term precipitating drivers, these include: the WA resources boom, and the sudden increase in demand for technical workers in Australian extraction facilities and their suppliers, particularly steel fabrication; changes in Chinese migration law permitting individuals to independently seek overseas employment; changes in Australian migration law permitting demand-driven employer-sponsored temporary labour visas; and rapidly increasing living pressures in China; including urban pollution, competitive education and employment. Finally, the mediating drivers, factors facilitating migration, include: established migration pathways between China and Australia commencing from 1980s; networks of commercial migration brokers in both Australia and China recruiting skilled labourers; and an established culture of migration in China with international mobility highly valorised in Chinese national discourses.

It should be emphasised that a driver complex approach does not negate the role of agency; structural factors are not all-determining. A useful empirical analysis of the causes of migrations should not entail oppositional, dualistic theories, nor veer too far towards either structural determinist or functionalist explanations (Bakewell 2010). Rather, a push-pull plus analysis of driver complexes encompasses an explanation of the individual or collective capabilities of the agents involved. However, migration drivers do shape the opportunities for movement that are available and include those structural factors that determine individual resources that may be deployed to act upon these opportunities (Van Hear, Bakewell and Long 2017, 933). These factors include gender, generation, ethnicity, nationality and, of course, social class.

Reviewing the drivers laid out above, it becomes clear that the majority of these overlapping factors are linked to social class and to occupation. The declining class position of workers and farmers in post-reform China, combined with the resources boom and global recruitment for specialist labour in Western Australia, produced the exceptional conditions under which these migrations occurred. Networks of recruitment agents and migration brokers exist in China, Australia and other labour destination countries across the region to mediate the movements of people from their backgrounds with their occupational skills.

However, predisposing and mediating drivers may also include deeply embedded and intractable cultural dimensions (Van Hear et al. 2018, 934), for example, where mobility is normatively valorised and where a pattern of emigration has emerged or is emerging, and so becomes self-perpetuating. These cultural norms, which are not necessarily related to classed positions, in turn inform individual aspirations to move and/or stay. By considering the economic dimensions of participants' narratives alongside the other factors they raise it becomes clear that their processes of emigration are framed by cultural imaginaries and emotional calculations. This follows Carling and Collins (2017, 3-5) who argue:

Migration theory needs to account for the multiplex componentry of migration, the way it is situated in imaginative geographies, emotional valences, social relations and obligations and politics and power relations, as well as in economic imperatives and the brute realities of displacement. [...]

Rethinking the drivers of migration [...] means recognising that even economic narratives of movement are socially constructed and can only be read in relation to the subjectivities of migrants, their states of feeling and circulation of affect within and across borders.

While most of this cohort claim that economic factors were paramount in decisions to move, these other aspirational and affective reasons behind their previously unimagined and unimaginable relocations constitute what Ho (2014, 2212) has called “the emotional logics, circulations and calculations that structure and prop up the political economy of migration regimes.” In Chapters 7 and 9 I will continue to engage with aspirations and imaginaries, and further explore the tensions between sojourner and settler paradigms in a migration context that entails both simultaneous transnational engagement *and* the insecurities of temporary visa regimes.

When considering the emigration and early settlement of this cohort, it is clear that class and ethnicity (as well as race, language and nationality) intersect to frame the ways that these processes are experienced. This chapter demonstrates that many, even most, of the initiating drivers for this cohort of migrants are directly related to their occupational class as tradesmen with skills in demand, and to the pressures arising from their declining class position in China. However, their aspirational and affective frames are not specific to working class migrants. On the contrary, cultural scripts about experiencing a globally mobile life, and escaping from pollution and social or educational pressures reflect broader contemporary Chinese normative models. They inform the emigration aspirations of Chinese migrants from all walks of life; similar logics of valorised mobility and individualised becoming through migration may be found among diverse migrant subjects (Nyíri 2010; Chu 2010; Fong 2011; Liu-Farrer 2016).

In the next chapter I expand upon one dimension of the migration process for trade skilled migrants that was directly affected by their classed positions and their constrained migration-facilitating capital. This chapter identified a key mediating driver for this cohort: networks of migration agents in Australia and China who facilitated the placement of trade skilled workers with their employers in Perth. Trade skilled migrants are heavily reliant on these brokers because of their class background, in particular their constrained social capital in Australia and their constrained informational capital in relation to complex regulatory environments, what I term their *migration literacy*. The following chapter explores this dimension of their migrations in more detail, with a particular focus on the effects such intensively mediated migration has had in the lives of individual trade skilled workers living in Perth.

## Chapter 6 Migration literacy and commercial infrastructures: the logics and risks of debt-financed labour migration

Labour migration in the Asian region is now intensively mediated (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). This chapter shows this has three main effects for trade skilled migrants to Australia. Firstly, it increases the cost of labour migration for individual migrants. Substantial broker fees must be paid in advance, a costly endeavour, particularly when, as has often happened, migrants find that the promised job is not there for them upon arrival in Australia. Secondly, and clearly related, these migrations are debt-financed; fees are usually covered through homeland borrowing and must of course be repaid. Migrants rely on securing long hours of paid overtime to cover these costs, increasing the risks for those who arrived later in the economic cycle. Finally, it creates a situation where migrants are potentially at risk of exploitation, or exposure to poor working conditions through the actions and misinformation of employers and/or agents. These risks are exacerbated by the debt trap typically experienced in the first months and years following departure from China.

These three factors are helpfully explained by the concept of *migration infrastructure*. Xiang and Lindquist (2014) propose this term as a way of engaging with the complex socio-technical mechanisms of migration that encompass transport and communications, social networks, state governance and legislative contexts, and the intermediaries and other commercial agents whose services work to channel and direct migrants between particular places of departure and destination. It is this last category, what Xiang and Lindquist call the commercial dimensions of migration infrastructures, which is most relevant to this chapter.

Both Australia and China have complex migration industries, comprising recruiters and intermediaries, as well as other individual and institutional actors like education providers or skills assessors. Trade skilled migrants coming to Australia during the resources boom paid very high fees, often the equivalent of many years' wages in China, to the teams of recruitment agents who introduced them to their Australian employers and provided the skills assessment, documentation, and administrative support necessary to leave China and enter Australia. In both contexts too, intermediaries are a site of "infrastructural governance" (Xiang 2017, 175; see also Khan 2019 on "network governance" in Australia) whereby the state manages migration, at least in part, by "influencing the sociotechnical conditions of mobility". This chapter includes an outline of how the migration industry is organised and regulated in both Australia and China.

It is this complexity of the migration process, in particular the interplay between regulatory regimes and the commercial actors that inhabit them, that led me to develop the concept of *migration literacy*. Migration literacy is a key component of mobility capital and a critically important competency for would-be migrants coming to Australia, one that is shaped to a great extent by educational background and therefore social class.

The case studies presented here show that the dependencies and risks engendered by heavily intermediated, debt financed labour migration are particularly pronounced because of the constrained mobility capital of this cohort, and specifically, their limited informational capital in relation to international migration regimes and Australian migration law. Trade skilled migrants from China with low migration literacy are highly dependent on other actors to interpret complex migration regulations, to negotiate their conditions of employment overseas, and to facilitate the acquisition of travel documents.

## 6.1 Migration intermediaries: the commercial dimensions of migration infrastructure

Xiang and Lindquist (2014, S124) propose the term *migration infrastructure* as a new way of understanding those constellations of “technologies, institutions and actors that facilitate and condition mobility”. They define five dimensions of migration infrastructure which variously collide and contradict each other, while mutually constituting the complex entanglement which underpins contemporary migration, and especially labour migration, in the Asian region. The five dimensions are: the commercial (recruitment agents and other intermediaries), the regulatory (state apparatus and the procedures for documentation, licensing, training and accreditation), the technological (communication and transport), the humanitarian (NGOs and international organisations), and the social (migrant networks). These dimensions have become increasingly complex and entangled, paradoxically working to make international migration simultaneously more accessible and more restricted.

They term this ever increasing, expanding and entangled complexity an “infrastructural involution”, building on Geertz's (1963) concept of “agricultural involution” whereby increased investment of labour into agriculture does not result in increasing per capita yield. In contemporary Asian migration, as in 20th century Javanese farming, the rapid intensification of activity and inputs has not resulted in a commensurate increase in the volume and frequency of people moving across borders, still less in the capacity of individual migrants to make independent choices about when and how they move.

Commercial dimensions of migration infrastructures, encompassing brokers, training and accreditation providers, and other similar actors, have (re)emerged in response to the increasing dense regulatory infrastructures employed by states to monitor and manage populations within and across borders. These migration industries operate in the context of a globalised labour market where both migrants themselves and the right to migrate have become valuable, marketized commodities (Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh 2012; Xiang and Lindquist 2014; Lindquist and Xiang 2018; Pieke and Xiang 2010; Castles 2017; Fassin 2011).



While the technologies of transport and communication have made movement cheaper, faster and more direct, the regulatory environments within which people move demand more documentation, training and other bureaucratic processes to render movements lawful and legitimate. Meanwhile, “enhanced” transport infrastructures have eased the movement of more privileged travellers, particularly tourists, but those same systems of airports and surveillance, credit card bookings, online check-ins and biometric identification, concurrently work to police and restrict the movements of the less privileged. Unequal access to mobility is evident as individuals with constrained mobility capital struggle to engage with new administrative processes and transport technologies (Sheller 2010; Lin et al. 2017, 170; Cresswell 2010).

Brokers, skills assessors, and other intermediaries emerge to occupy a key space within these infrastructural constellations. Labour migration, particularly within Asia and between Asian and Middle Eastern countries, has become intensively mediated (Lindquist 2010, 2017; Xiang and Lindquist 2014; Lindquist and Xiang 2018; Xiang 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2017), and individual migrants may expect to pay high fees for their placements with overseas employers (Axelsson et al. 2014; Baey and Yeoh 2015; Goh, Wee and Yeoh 2016; Kalir 2013). This trend is not limited to labour migration; other forms of mobility, such as educational and marriage migration, have also seen the development of complex supporting industries of mediation (see, for example, Chee, Yeoh and Vu 2012; Collins 2012; Thieme 2017; Yeoh, Chee and Baey 2017).

Migration brokerage has a long history in East and South East Asia, where the nineteenth century transport of coolie labour to and between European colonies was largely managed through intermediaries. However, the development in the twentieth century of more complex procedures and mechanisms to regularise international movement through passports, visas and border controls created a new narrative of migration governance whereby the space between the migrant and the state, once filled with layers of mediation and social networks, was erased. Under this new norm of direct interface between the individual and the state, the figure of the broker was discursively demonised, consigned to a similar status in the history of pre-modern labour controls to that of the slave trader (McKeown 2008, 2012).

Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh (2012) have argued that it is this modern preoccupation with directly transacted migration, discursively framed as an exchange or contract between the nation state and the individual, that has obscured the ongoing roles played by brokers, particularly in Asia where mediated migration has increased in line with the increased economic engagement between new growth economies (see also Lin et al. 2017). They call for a new evaluation of the “black box” of migration infrastructure, and particularly a nuanced understanding of diversity among intermediaries, avoiding dichotomies like victim-perpetrator / licensed-unlicensed / formal-informal / professional-amateur, and other stereotypes and caricatures which typify “bad” and “good” agents.

There are two seemingly contradictory trends to be observed in this process of rising mediation. Firstly, as migration legislation and governance in many destination countries has become increasingly complex, this has resulted in a “regulatory arms race” as migrants, and particularly their intermediaries, play an active role in determining who may enter and remain within borders, often resulting in outcomes that do not align with original policy objectives (Pieke and Xiang 2010; Castles 2004, 2017). Meanwhile, individual migrants’ movements, options and choices may be constrained by those same structures of mediation as their labour is “transplanted” directly from home to the foreign workplace, and then back again at the end of their contract. This tightly controlled process of recruitment, work placement and mandatory return is a response to the conflicting demands of globalised capital’s hunt for cheap, flexible labour and sovereign states’ desires to manage discrete populations within borders (Xiang 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c).

International labour migration, once facilitated primarily through social networks, as evidenced in the literature on chain and network migration (Gold 2005), has paradoxically become more atomised just as the technological dimensions of migration infrastructures become seemingly more accessible. Migrants may now be recruited where one assessment criteria considered is their lack of social capital at destination (Xiang 2017, 183) as intermediaries work with employers to produce compliant labour that may be inserted at point of destination and cleanly removed once their job is done through what Xiang (2012b) has termed “point-to-point” migration.

This project does not engage the full methodological and epistemological potential of an infrastructural approach (Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh 2012, 9-10; Lin et al. 2017) given that the data are drawn from the emic accounts of people living in Perth and so the focus of enquiry and analysis still rests with the individual migrant. However, migration infrastructure is nonetheless a useful frame for this chapter, one that supports an explanation of how regulatory and commercial dimensions of these infrastructures have affected this working-class cohort. Trade skilled migrants to Australia must engage with a complex legislative environment; in doing so they must navigate and depend upon dense migration industries established in both Australia and China.

### 6.1.1 Migration intermediaries in Australia

Migration intermediaries are heavily regulated in Australia. Only registered migration agents (RMAs) may lawfully provide immigration advice; giving advice when not licensed to do so is a criminal offence with penalties of up to 10 years imprisonment. RMAs carry a heavy responsibility. Bad advice may cause migrants to violate visa conditions, even risk deportation. The registration of agents and professionalization of the migration industry aims to support migrants navigating a complex regulatory environment, to reduce time spent processing spurious, inaccurate or incomplete visa applications, and to protect migrants from exploitation by unscrupulous agents. RMAs must register with the Office of the Migration Agents Registration Authority (OMARA), an agency of the Federal Department of Home Affairs, must have postgraduate qualifications in migration law, must participate in accredited professional development for annual revalidation, and must adhere to a Code of Conduct. The OMARA has powers to discipline RMAs and former RMAs whose practice falls short of the standards expected.

Despite barriers to entry, the migration industry attracts new practitioners every day; in June 2019, for example, 18 people applied for registration as a migration agent, while no agents were suspended or barred from practice (OMARA, 2019a). New agents are prompted to qualify and register because they perceive a large market of dependent customers willing to pay for help. This ongoing increase in registered agents bears a marked similarity to the “infrastructural involution” which Xiang and Lindquist (2014) have observed in other contexts. While the ranks of RMAs swell each month, the number of migrants requiring their services has not increased in step; RMAs I spoke with over the course of this project noted that competition was growing ever fiercer and profit margins ever slimmer.

In spite of all this heavy regulation and official management of the migration industry, the measures still sometimes fail to meet the stated policy aims ensuring migrants understand their rights and agents conduct their business with integrity and provide quality immigration assistance (OMARA, 2019b). As the case studies below demonstrate, the regulation of agents does not always prevent labour migrants in Australia from experiencing poor service and exploitation, including high brokerage fees, poor working conditions, or fraudulent assurances of employment.

### 6.1.2 Migration intermediaries in China

In China, as in Australia, migration brokerage is an expanding business. It is also subject to complex infrastructural governance. This means that “state interventions, market mechanisms and social networks” interact in complex and entangled ways to determine what constitutes “legitimate” overseas employment and produce the forms the migration that may be consequently seen to materialise (Xiang 2017).

Since the liberalisation of labour migration in 2002, private registered migration agents in China have been heavily regulated, with significant barriers to entry for new firms. Formally registered agents must have a high degree of legal literacy and technical skill to lodge mandatory paperwork, must have ISO9000 certification and must lodge significant cash deposits to demonstrate credibility and ensure liquidity in the event of dissatisfied clients (Xiang 2012a). As in Australia, despite regulation and barriers to entry, this has become a fast-growing sector. In regions with high levels of new labour migration, such as the northeast of China, a thriving industry of intermediaries developed. By 2007, there were sixty registered migration agents and a further one hundred unregistered agents operating in Liaoning, the home province of many Chinese welders now living in Western Australia. This is a remarkable number given that in the same year they sent just six thousand workers overseas (Xiang 2012a, 52).

Xiang (2012a) has observed that one unintended result of placing such high professional and financial demands upon registered agents is the ongoing existence of “agent chains”. Large licenced “window” companies based in major cities partner with ever-proliferating numbers of unregistered actors, “base” clusters of intermediaries and institutions that function at the coal face of recruitment and negotiation (Xiang 2017). Matching a would-be labour migrant with an employer overseas may still involve many agents, each earning their cut from the would-be migrants who pass through their hands, resulting in elevated broker fees (Xiang 2012a).

While this chapter does not focus on the ways in which participants engaged with brokers in China, this background information helps explain the fees that trade skilled labour migrants to Australia reported paying. As Xiang's (2013a, 3) extensive fieldwork in the region led him to succinctly conclude:

Migration was expensive because intermediaries – commercial labour recruiters – made it so. There were so many intermediaries and they charged so much simply because they were there and they could do so.

That they could do so may be explained not only with reference to the governance interventions of the Chinese state that granted them these roles and the complex administrative systems of both emigration and immigration, but also by considering the people they recruit from whom they demand these fees. Workers going overseas for temporary labour migration typically have limited education and hence low migration literacy and must therefore enact strategies of capital conversion to achieve migration objectives from positions of constrained informational capital.

## 6.2 Migration literacy: informational capital in relation to the regulatory dimensions of migration infrastructures

Trade skilled migrants who came to Perth as holders of 457 visas paid fees to migration agents based in China that were far more expensive than the cost of similar services performed within Australia. This inflated expense can be understood through reference to their social class. Van Hear (2014, S111) explains the link between social class and complex regimes of migration governance:

Navigating what can be termed in aggregate the international migration regime requires different amounts, forms and combinations of capital. ... The capacity of a would-be migrant to navigate the international migration order will be largely shaped by his or her endowments of economic and social capital.

I would add to this explanation the importance of his or her endowments of cultural (informational) capital as well. In the context of ever more complex and confusing regulatory regimes, *migration literacy* emerges as a new skill, closely tied to educational background and hence social class, which migrants possess to varying degrees. Migration literacy is an extension of the term “legal literacy” (see, for example, Freudenberg [2017]) that expresses the capacity of non-specialists to operate in complex environments of regulation and compliance.

Migration literacy can be defined as a person's capacity to read and interpret migration legislation and related documentation, and to autonomously execute administrative processes, such as completing forms correctly and securing accreditation and other supporting documentation. It may also entail seeking and evaluating appropriate advice in the execution of those processes. The migration literacy of individuals (and aggregate population groups) is a key factor in deciding when, where and how to move overseas, and in producing the capacity to effectively secure and maintain a legal visa status, and to negotiate fair employment conditions at point of destination.

Migrants with lower educational attainment from non-English speaking backgrounds are naturally comparatively disadvantaged with a typically lower level of migration literacy than migrants from English speaking backgrounds, or those who have received more education. They are consequently more reliant on others to interpret and apply the law on their behalf, whether paid intermediaries, friends and acquaintances or community organisations.

Australian immigration law is transparent and available to all, but it is also complex and subject to frequent changes. Immigration falls under Federal jurisdiction and is codified in the *Migration Act 1958* and the *Migration Regulations 1994*, together with a great number of related legislative instruments. The Act lays out the broad legislative framework of immigration law, including the requirements for non-citizens to hold valid visas and the powers of the Immigration Minister and his executive delegates to grant, refuse and cancel visas. The myriad details relating to specific classes and subclasses of visas, the procedures and costs for making valid applications and the conditions and criteria for lawful stays in Australia are found in the regulations and related gazette notices and legal instruments. These regulations are frequently amended as policy shifts or administrative changes demand. For example, in 2005 alone, the Migration Regulations were changed 1,100 times (Jockel 2009, 10).

In addition to this body of legislation, immigration officers refer to departmental policy guidelines when interpreting and implementing immigration law. These guidelines are extensive and include commentary, background and procedural instructions on all aspects of the regulations. Policy is not legally binding, but it does significantly influence the decisions made by individual officers.

Australian immigration legislation is publicly available and may be accessed anywhere by anyone with an Internet connection. Internal policy is made available outside of the department through a web-based database that may be accessed free of charge through certain public libraries. However, although all this information is readily accessible, the complexity of this body of legislation and related policy makes it very difficult for the non-specialist reader to interpret. The immigration department website ([www.border.gov.au](http://www.border.gov.au)) is expansive and seeks to provide information in plain English to explain the key points of immigration law that non-citizens need to know in order to comply with and successfully navigate this labyrinthine body of legislation. Yet given the many different and frequently changing visa classes and subclasses, application criteria, forms and fees, visa conditions and sponsor requirements, the practical details of which merely scratch the surface of this field of law, the information provided through the Immigration website all too often falls short of ensuring all users are adequately informed.

Even for highly educated native English speakers, Australian migration law is confusing. For migrants with poor English and low educational attainment, it can be impenetrable. Migrants' understanding of the legislation that so significantly impacts their lives is therefore often patchy. When discussing migration law and visa options with participants, I found they demonstrated always incomplete, frequently incorrect, understandings of how the law might be applied in their circumstances and what choices or actions were available to them. Such patchy understandings were developed through a combination of formal advice, hearsay from friends and family, and Chinese language media reports.

This chapter explores this low migration literacy in relation to their reliance on intermediaries. In later chapters I will return to this concept of migration literacy with reference to migrant imaginaries and return migration, temporary and permanent statuses, and naturalisation decisions.

## 6.3 Debt-financed migration amidst changing economic conditions

Labour migration from China is increasingly atomised as many processes of migration are managed “point-to-point” through the migrant-broker relationship (Xiang 2012b). Under these conditions, migrants are heavily reliant on brokers to manage their legal rights to travel, work and remain in destination countries, have less access to information and support from wider networks, and are at risk of exploitation. A further factor that has impacted my participants is the rising cost of facilitated labour migration in the region.

Members of this cohort are disadvantaged by their constrained mobility capital, particularly their low migration literacy. However, although their mobility capital is constrained, they do have sufficient (particularly in the forms of economic resources and/or the social resources needed to access loans) to choose to go overseas for work, *but* they must do so in ways that are expensive and risky. The costs of debt-financed migration are undertaken because trade skilled migrants believe, based on the information provided by brokers, that the “investment” will pay off. For some it does. Yet the risks are great, and many trade skilled migrants, particularly those arriving later, struggle to repay the debts they have incurred.

### 6.3.1 A good “investment”? High fees, agents and incorrect information

Most of the trade skilled labour migrants I interviewed told me they paid between RMB 150,000 and RMB 220,000 to agents in China for facilitating the relationship with the sponsor and managing the documents required for migration to Australia. For workers who typically reported annual earnings in China as low as RMB 12,000 - 24,000, this is a substantial sum. This upfront cost was usually borrowed through personal networks and paid back through remittances sent from Australia once work had commenced. At the time of writing in early 2019, these reported fees equated to approximately AUD 31,500 – 46,500. However, the value in Australian currency of their migration fees varied over time as exchange rates fluctuated; in mid-2006, for example, when the first of this cohort were planning to come to Australia, the same fees were the equivalent of AUD 25,200 – 36,960. The falling value of the Australian dollar to the Chinese yuan significantly impacted some participants’ capacity to repay their loans.



Such high fees were standard among this cohort. Of all the trade-skilled 457-sponsored labour migrants that I spoke with, only two paid far less. One found employment through a friend and so “didn’t need to spend much”, while the other was introduced to his sponsor company by his uncle and paid fees of around AUD 10,000 to just one migration agent based in Australia. Rather than borrowing money up front, this man had an arrangement with the agent whereby he could pay by instalments with the agent taking a cut out of each week’s wages. These two examples were unusual among a cohort of migrants where significant expenses were typically incurred.

These fees are far more expensive than those levied by migration agents within Australia for processing the same visas<sup>1</sup>. Paul and Linda are well aware of this discrepancy. They came to Perth not once, but twice as holders of employer-sponsored 457s. The first time they applied, in 2006, they borrowed money to pay fees of RMB 220,000, but did not enjoy being in Australia. They felt socially isolated in suburban Perth and missed their hometown, a northern provincial capital, and so decided to return to China in 2009 in time for their son starting primary school. By 2012 they had changed their minds and determined they in fact preferred life in Australia. The second time, Paul contacted his former boss directly. His boss agreed to take him back doing the same welding job and sponsor him for another 457 visa. Paul and Linda told me that this time they “had to pay very little, plus the normal government fees”. The second time, because they had social capital in Australia, combined with higher migration literacy, they were not reliant on brokers in China to handle introductions and administration processes and so not subject to the same fees.

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<sup>1</sup> Each year RMAs submit information to OMARA about the average fees they have charged for processing applications for various classes of visa. While there is no statutory scale of fees that may be charged, RMAs are limited under the Code of Conduct to charging ‘a fee that is reasonable in the circumstances of the case’ (Migration Agents Regulations 1998, Schedule 2, subsection 5.1). For example, agent fees charged in the financial year 2016-17 ranged from \$2,000-5,000 for a 457 visa and from \$2,500-5,500 for a permanent visa under the Employer Nomination Scheme (OMARA, 2018). Even allowing for the fact that these figures do not include the visa fees and charges payable to the Immigration Department, they are still just a fraction of the costs most trade skilled migrants reported paying in China.

The Australian migration agents who recruited Chinese workers during the boom were usually themselves originally migrants from China, typically partnered with overseas labour recruitment brokers based in China. Australian migration agents went on recruitment trips to China, where they interviewed prospective applicants and performed skills and English-language assessments. The applicants were usually sourced by a colleague in China. One migration agent told me that he usually took a representative from an Australian skills assessment agency with him on these trips, however sometimes Australian employers and workshop managers also participated in the selection process.

For prospective migrants, recruitment often involved traveling to a city far from home. Travel was not required for those already living or working in recruitment hot spots like Shenyang, Shanghai or the Pearl River Delta, however many others needed to travel long distances, adding to the uncertainty of the process. Sarah remembered that when Alan responded to an advert he had seen for overseas workers, he was told he needed to get the train to a city in south China some 1,500 kilometres away from their hometown, the first time he had ever travelled so far:

We got the job through an agent, there was a Chinese agent and an Australian agent. My husband went to be tested in Jiangmen. ... The factory boss came to Jiangmen. There was a skills test and an English test, and he was asked why he wanted to come to Australia. The boss said he could sponsor the applicants and their families, but we didn't believe him because he was in a strange place. You know, in China when you're in another city it's like another country!

Some migrants thought the fees they paid were reasonable. Chen found his job in Australia through an advertisement in his hometown. He had already worked overseas in another Asian country. This first temporary labour migration had also involved paying fees to an agent but had ultimately resulted in him accruing sufficient savings to buy a family apartment. In 2007, he paid RMB 160,000 to another agent who arranged his four-year work visa in Australia. He sees this as an acceptable price. Reflecting the rational and primarily economic calculations of Sjaastad's (1962) neoclassical theory, he likened this transaction to any other business expense, saying, "That's quite okay. If you want to start a new venture (*zuo shengyi*), then you need to first make an investment."

Alan and Sarah likewise paid “about RMB 200,000” to an agent who arranged a four-year contract and 457 visa to work as a welder in an Australian factory. They both came to Australia to work and for the first two years all their disposable income was spent paying back the money they had borrowed. Nonetheless, she thought it was a reasonable sum, because, as Sarah told me, “The agent said it was to pay both of them - one in China, one in Australia. Two people needed to be paid. That’s why it cost so much.”

Others, however, were less satisfied with the migration agents they had encountered. Migrants frequently expressed anger and resentment towards migration agents. Agents were variously described as “very bad” (*tai huai le*), “making a lot of money”, and “having no morals” (*bu jiang daoli*). It seems migration agents have gained this bad reputation in recent years as increasingly some migrants have found on arrival in Australia that despite paying high fees, they have not been provided with the employment they expected.

Liu Jing is the wife of a welder who, when I met her, had been living in Australia for nearly four years. She and her husband borrowed a lot of money to come to Australia, having heard from people in their home county personal networks that Perth offered great opportunities to make money and perhaps even secure a permanent visa. However, to their great disappointment, they were told on arrival that his sponsor could not provide the expected job, and he should seek work elsewhere. In addition to this shock, they found that the falling value of the Australian dollar also meant that the actual cost of their loan increased by nearly 30 per cent during their time in Perth. When they first came to Australia in 2012, the exchange rate was around 6.7 Chinese yuan to the Australian dollar, while by mid-2015 it had fallen to below 4.5. When I spoke with her in late 2015, Liu Jing told me they had borrowed the equivalent of AUD 60,000, that they were struggling because their debt in China needed to be repaid out of their increasingly devalued Australian wages. This would be a heavy enough burden with regular employment, but Liu Jing’s husband has in fact not enjoyed secure work at any point during their time in Perth. She explained:

As soon as we got here, we were told there was no job and we should look for work... We still have to return the money, but the exchange rate makes it even harder. I keep an eye on it all the time. Sometimes it gets a little better, maybe goes to 4.7, but then it goes down again.

457 visa conditions stipulate that visa holders risk cancellation if they work for an employer other than the sponsor company. The sponsor likewise commits to employing the visa applicant throughout that period, and if unforeseen financial difficulties result in the visa holder being made redundant then the sponsor should pay all repatriation costs. This has not happened in all instances, as Liu Jing's unfortunate story illustrates.

Since arriving in Australia, her husband has been forced to find cash-in-hand work with employers willing to ignore his semi-irregular status. This puts both him and Liu Jing at risk of visa cancellation and deportation, but she feels they have no other option given the substantial debt they have incurred. Their situation is not uncommon. Several participants told me this was a familiar story amongst their acquaintances, that despite agent fees being so expensive, "they can't guarantee you will find work." Back in the mid-2000s, Paul managed to pay off the cost of his first 457 visa within the space of two years, but he observed that debt-financed labour migration now carries far more risk that when he arrived:

Now it is more difficult for people who come on 457s. If you lose the job, then you have just 28 days to get out of the country. After you've spent all that money – \$40,000 – really, it's too great a loss! You borrow all that money and then don't work for very long.

Agents, they are making a lot of money in China. An agent in Australia doesn't charge that much, maybe \$5000. But when we left [China] we didn't know. We didn't spend so much the second time we came! ...

It's no wonder lots of 457 workers are overstaying (*heilü*). They work for three months or six months and then lose their jobs after paying so much. They are still using Australian resources, but they have no visa. It makes us angry. They get lots more hours [of employment] and they don't pay tax.

When I asked RMAs about the complaints I had heard from dissatisfied migrants, they were quick to emphasise that they and other RMAs were not at fault. One well-established agent with a flourishing practice and good reputation around Perth, responded:

The agencies in China are registered and they are acting lawfully. They have people here that are looking for employers. The employers then travelled to China to interview applicants and check their skills... Even though it is a lot of money, they [the labour migrants] are happy to do it. The agents are legally charging that much money. There is no threshold set by the Chinese government.

You know the bad thing about these workers? They achieve their own purpose and then they come back and bite... Once there was a worker who came to me and said that I charged a lot of money. But I checked the records, we keep it all on file, and I told him that actually it was AUD 8,800 that I charged. That was what I charged for a PR application then. So when they say RMB 200,000 I

think they are exaggerating a little. And the Chinese recruitment company are legally charging their fees.

When pressed to comment on the more recent labour migrants who have been paying high fees to agents and then finding there is no real job once they arrive, he agreed that “They should not come. They are being sent the wrong information.” He went on to stress that he had never processed these kinds of 457 visas himself, having only worked permanent residency applications for trade skilled temporary migrants who were already in Australia. He further suggested that the agents that are now processing such fraudulent visa applications are in fact not registered agents and are practicing unlawfully. He went on to share at length industry gossip about infamous unregistered agents who operate in Perth but do all their billing in China, brazenly appropriate the names of honest registered agents, and even secretly report to Immigration Department on corrupt HR managers with whom they themselves have been in cahoots. He finished his lengthy and animated account of such dreadful wrongdoings with the bitter reflection, “This is where the Immigration Department should focus their energy - looking for unregistered operators rather than always investigating us registered agents.”

### 6.3.2 Overtime, wages and the tight margins of debt-financed labour migration

Holders of 457 temporary visas, even those with reliable jobs, sometimes risk earning very little money during the period of their visa's validity, possibly even struggling to pay back their initial investment with the migration agents. The risks of debt-financed migration were exacerbated for those who arrived later in the economic cycle.

Because their low migration literacy and reliance on intermediaries prevented them negotiating better contracts, 457 holders were routinely employed under conditions which were, at the time, worse than those usually expected by permanent residents. David, a welder from north China, spoke with me at length about the difficult circumstances faced by 457 migrants. He summarised the different employment conditions that were normal for permanent and temporary visa holders:

With PR you can make \$40 an hour for welding, plus there's double pay for overtime, plus annual leave and sick leave and public holidays. If you arrange your 457 work through an agent you get \$20 an hour, maybe up to \$26 or \$27 but no benefits.

These basic hourly rates are not so low as to be unlawful. Businesses subject to WA award rates in 2015 were required to pay first class welders \$21.08 per hour (DoC, 2015). However, such rates are much lower than the wages that were common during the resources boom. Furthermore, some migrant welders were paid still less, wages well below the legal national minimum, a point I will revisit below. Some participants also reported not receiving statutory leave or penalty rates for overtime hours.

David is all too familiar with the tight budget of a migrant welder newly arrived in Perth. He himself originally came to Perth on a 457 and was initially paid just \$20 per hour, while having to pay out \$500 each week for his migration agent fees. Despite working long hours six days a week, he remembers that "after rent and everything else I didn't have a cent left". But David was one of the earliest trade skilled migrants to arrive in Perth and so was employed during the peak of the mining boom, when there was plenty of work available and, most importantly, when it was still easy to be sponsored for PR. He and his wife became permanent residents in 2008, after which he could earn the far higher rates paid to local welders during the boom years.

He is now a settled migrant, with plans to remain in Perth long-term and two children born as Australian citizens. Originally from a rural background, he has found opportunities in Australia beyond anything he might have expected in China. Indeed, he is now moderately wealthy; he owns three houses that he rents out by the room to more recent and less fortunate migrants. He sees in sharp focus the daily struggles of the other migrants around him. Each time we met he told me most forcefully that “you must write in your report about how hard it is for 457s, that they come, and they can’t find work”.

David is well connected in his community; as a landlord he meets a lot of tenants, while he knows dozens of families from his home region who have come to Perth as trade-skilled labour migrants. Those who came early in the economic cycle have fared far better than more recent arrivals. He knows of other migrants who, like Liu Jing and her husband, face severe financial hardship as a result of debt-financed migration. He explained how their low migration literacy makes them vulnerable:

457 visa holders have a terrible time. They pay \$30,000, maybe \$50,000 depending on the agent, and when they get here there’s no job for them. The boss just says to them, sorry no work, go report to the Immigration Department...

Now the factories are facing serious problems. There aren’t jobs like before. So the people coming over, they pay \$30,000 in agent fees and then find there’s already no job, and no visa. The visa fee is only a few hundred, the agents are making a lot of money. The agents are really too bad. They [the would-be migrants] can’t read the regulations and so they get ripped off.

David became animated, even angry, as he expanded on this injustice and the struggles faced by recent arrivals with large debts to repay. Seizing my notebook and pen, he jotted down numbers to illustrate how poorly stacked the odds are for debt-financed labour migrants who cannot secure well-paid work and have no hope of being sponsored for PR. David estimated that, even living frugally, weekly fixed expenses in Perth will come to at least \$550. This includes rent of \$150 per week for a room in a shared house, plus another \$400 to cover all other living costs, including food, transport, clothes, and mandatory insurances. He further highlighted other incidental life expenses. Temporary visa holders from China may not access Australia’s Medicare public health system and so must pay fees of around \$50 to see a doctor. Many migrants, particularly those from rural parts of China, must send money to support their parents, while most also have dependent children who require financial support.

This situation is further exacerbated for those migrants who carry a heavy tax burden because they declared a higher income in their visa application than they in fact were going to earn. When a sponsoring company nominates a position that is to be filled by a temporary migrant worker on a subclass 457 visa, the nomination must include the salary that will be paid to the employee who works in that position. The salary must be equivalent to that which would be paid to an Australian citizen or permanent resident, and the sponsor is required to provide evidence to show that the salary has been benchmarked against average salaries in the same occupation.

Participants reported situations where the agent, the employee and employer privately agreed to a lower salary than that officially declared in the nomination process. Artificially high salaries were also frequently listed on nominations in order to circumvent the English language application criterion. The average IELTS score of 4.5 required for 457 applications after 1 July 2007 was far beyond the abilities of many of those older, trade skilled migrants who had studied little or no English when at school. However, applicants could be exempted from this visa criterion if the position they were filling paid a sufficiently high salary; for example, in 2007 the annual salary threshold was AUD 75,000, and by 2016 this had risen to AUD 96,400.

Declaring an inflated salary might make the initial application for a visa possible, but it leaves the visa holder with a significant and ongoing tax liability. Paul explained why this is a problem for some migrants:

With a 457, when you apply you need to set a salary and this might be \$70,000 or \$80,000 but the boss can only pay this if you are doing overtime, and if there is not enough work then there won't be much overtime. So you can't really make this much money but you still need to pay that much tax [based on the income declared to the Immigration Department]. You need to make up the difference [to the Australian Tax Office] (*bu shui*). You've declared that your annual salary is \$75,000 so your tax is set. Even though you earn much less, you still have to pay the tax for four years - unless you abscond (*pao*). But if you stay and work in contravention of visa conditions (*heilui*) you will have to go back [to China] after earning some money, and then you can never return [to Australia].

For trade skilled workers on temporary visas who are paid by the hour, the key to earning enough money to pay back the cost of debt-financed migration and start to accumulate savings is being able to work long hours each week. Table 2 shows an elaboration of David's scribbled figures in the back of my notebook. It demonstrates that a welder earning \$21 an hour may only expect earn enough to pay back a significant debt if they can be sure of lots of overtime.



**Table 2 Indicative income for trade skilled migrant (welder) with subclass 457 temporary work visa in financial year 2014-15.**

Hours worked each week	Weekly taxable income (AUD)*	Weekly income after taxes and levies (AUD)**	Weekly disposable income (AUD)***	Annual disposable income (AUD)****
40	840	736	186	9,300
50	1,050	878	328	16,400
60	1,260	1,020	470	23,500
70	1,470	1,161	611	30,550

\* Based on \$21 hourly rate. Estimates are not adjusted for higher overtime penalty rates since participants frequently reported overtime paid at basic rates.

\*\*Indicative only. Based on 2014-5 income year and calculated using the Australian Taxation Office simple tax calculator tool, available at: <https://www.ato.gov.au/calculators-and-tools/simple-tax-calculator/> If a higher annual income was declared during the subclass 457 visa application then the weekly income after taxes and levies would be commensurately lower.

\*\*\* Assuming \$550 fixed costs (including rent, transport, food and mandatory health insurance).

\*\*\*\* Assuming 52 weeks of work each year.

During the mid- to late-2000s, the steel fabrication yards and similar workshops employing trade skilled migrants in Perth were able to offer most employees overtime work, including extra hours on both Saturday and Sunday. However, after the decline in mining construction from 2012 (CCF 2016), such opportunities became less common. David speculated that in 2015 a welder on a 457 would only work between 40 and 50 hours per week, leaving as little as AUD 1,000 each month after fixed expenses. Assuming there are also other incidental costs and family responsibilities in China, this makes repaying migration fees very difficult, as David explained:

After all your costs maybe in 4 years you can have \$40,000. If your agent fees were \$30,000 then you've only made \$10,000 in all that time. In China a welder can [now] make RMB 12,000 a month [if they are working for a big company], so really coming to Australia is not worth it... If you can get PR then that's fine, if you can find a sponsor. But that's getting more and more difficult.

I asked David why new temporary migrants keep coming if life in Australia is so difficult, the risks so great and the return on investment so low. He laughed:

They are slapping their own face so that it swells up and makes them look fat and attractive! (*da zhong lian chong pangzi*). It gives them face. Let's say a man's got a girlfriend (*duxiang*) but she doesn't want to get married – it's not

easy for men in the countryside to find a wife. Then he can go to Australia and tell everyone how he's doing – “Yeah, I'm making lots of money” – so she'll marry him and then she'll get pregnant and once she's got his kid then she can't leave! Hahahahaha!

David is perhaps flippant in his response, but this points to the complex factors that both initiate individual migrations and perpetuate broad patterns of migration even once some of the original drivers have in fact changed. Other participants concurred that any new labour migrants paying high fees to come to Perth after the end of the mining boom were misguided and probably intentionally ill-advised by migration agents. This is an example of migration having its own internal dynamics (Castles 2004) as mediating drivers, like the commercial infrastructures established in both China and Australia may continue to act upon individuals, encouraging decisions to undertake debt-financed migration long after the point when it is likely to prove a good “investment”.

### 6.3.3 Unfair employers and legal redress

Intensively mediated migration (Xiang and Lindquist 2014), low migration literacy, and the conditions that may arise when people become “captive labour” through employer sponsored migration (Birrell and Healy 2012) combine to create circumstances where migrants are at risk of exploitation.

Some participants had positive experiences of reliable employment and fair working conditions while sponsored on 457s. Tradesmen I spoke with talked warmly about the owners and supervisors of their workshops using phrases like “gentlemanly”, “a good boss”, and “always very polite”. Others did not have such happy encounters with employers in Australia.

Many temporary visa holders, like David, started out on low wages, or had their salaries withheld to pay for housing or other living expenses provided by their employers. Kevin, another welder who also arrived on a 457 in the mid-2000s, recalls that his first two years in Perth were tough despite working long hours because his wages were so low, “My boss paid my rent, but I only got about \$600 a week on top of that.”

David told me of the corruption and culture of bribery he saw while working at one of Perth's largest construction and engineering service providers. This large firm employed hundreds of welders and metal machinists at the height of the mining construction boom. This workshop employed large numbers of foreign workers; "Every Chinese welder has worked there!" he laughed. David told me that this firm was renowned for its poor workshop management and unpleasant, aggressive culture, adding that among local Australian welders it is generally known as "Crap Corp", a rude play on words with the company name.<sup>1</sup> While working there, David found that weekly hours and overtime were allocated to welders on the basis of each individual's relationship with the workshop boss and welding supervisors. The company paid higher hourly rates than many others, yet despite the good wages, some employees could not work enough hours to make a decent income. Some welders were given seventy hours of work a week, while others struggled to get forty. Seven days of ten-hour shifts may seem a gruelling schedule but, as David explained, "the more hours you work, the more money you make!" For migrants with families to support and debts to pay back, getting enough hours work each week was important, but there were also costs involved in maintaining a good relationship with the workshop supervisors:

You know there's an old tradition that you need to give gifts (*songli*). You know, watches, money, good XO, something nice for the boss. If there's no gift then the boss says, "I don't want you, fuck off." If you want a job you need to buy some beers for the supervisor...

My current employer is not like that. It's a very happy place. Every boss there is good. Every workmate there is good. You come in in the morning and everyone says "Hi" and "How are you?" Not like some places where you come in and it's just "Fuck, fuck you."<sup>2</sup>

David and some of his co-workers considered lodging a formal complaint (*tousu*) but found there was little that could be done because they had no evidence to prove that overtime was being allocated on the basis of personal relations and gift-giving. He and his colleagues could only claim that this was what they had been told. Complaining proved to be "a waste of time".

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<sup>1</sup> As with participants, the name of this company is a pseudonym. There is a similar nickname for the company in wide circulation.

<sup>2</sup> This interview was conducted in Mandarin; only the reported speech of co-workers and expletives were delivered in English by David.

Others had more success in dealing with employers who were behaving unlawfully. Sun was originally sponsored on a 457 by a medium sized enterprise that manufactures and services transport and haulage equipment. When he joined the company in 2007, there were ten Chinese employees out of a workshop team of thirty. Rendered vulnerable by their low migration literacy, Sun and his Chinese co-workers were routinely underpaid and threatened with the loss of their visa status if they did not comply with their employer's demands:

We did it a bit tough at the start. We didn't understand employment law so the boss took advantage of us. For example, we were meant to be paid \$39000 which worked out as \$21 an hour, but then he only paid us \$13 an hour. He also said that we had to work lots of overtime. I didn't want that much overtime, but he said we had to otherwise he would no longer sponsor us... We were making so little, even the cleaner was making more money than us!

Eventually, Sun and his colleagues realised they were being unlawfully mistreated. Because the company had so many Chinese employees, the Fair Work Commission distributed Chinese language information leaflets at the factory. After reading these leaflets, the Chinese welders and mechanics together wrote a joint letter, made an appointment, and sent a representative from among them to take the signed letter to the office in the City. About a month later the Department of Immigration sent inspectors to the factory. After the inspection their employer paid the Chinese employees all the money he owed, and they were clearly told about their rights:

So we got the information from "Workplace" and learned there are lots of things that a boss cannot do. For example, if you are living in their accommodation, they can't take the rent directly out of your salary unless you specifically agree to it. If you haven't agreed, then they have to pay you your salary and then you pay the rent to them... I'm sure the boss knew the law, knew what he was doing. He hasn't been allowed to sponsor anyone anymore. He was also working with the migration agent to make extra money on the side.

Despite such horror stories, the highly regulated Australian workplace was appreciated by many participants. Although exploitation and abuses clearly do continue, as David and Sun's unfortunate experiences illustrate, regulatory agencies have executive powers to investigate and discipline employers that break the rules. This stands in contrast to China, and to other regional migration destinations for Chinese labourers, where there are regular reports of exploitative employers. Sam, working his lucrative FIFO role with a reputable resources firm, is certainly satisfied with workplace regulation in his adopted country:

Do you know what the best thing about Australia is? The government and the system. Even though we are foreign labour (*wailao*) there is no discrimination and no taking advantage of us. There are regulations saying when we can earn, how many hours we can work. It's not like in China where you get employers

not paying enough or demanding you work long hours and so on. So yes, the government is the best thing here.

## 6.4 Analysis and Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated some of the insecurities borne of the systems of recruitment at play in both China and Australia. Despite the mechanisms in place that, as Sun found, can operate effectively to protect foreign workers, temporary demand-driven employer-sponsored visa regimes produce vulnerabilities among “captive labour” (Birrell and Healy 2012). When combined with the “point to point” techniques of Chinese labour export recruiters (Xiang 2012b), this can be understood as a kind of vulnerability by design.

New infrastructures create atomised migration, they erode the mutual support formerly seen in many migration networks, producing migrants with constrained social capital at point of destination. Brokers operating in north China intentionally send labour migrants into working environments where they do not have the support of colleagues with whom they have established homeland relationships (Xiang 2017). This is a technique that works to produce compliant and predictable migrant subjects, particularly within destination regimes with policies of mandatory return. Protections arising through social capital are eroded and migrants are at risk of exploitation when employers and intermediaries adopt unethical practices.

While many types of migration are now mediated, including educational, marriage and lifestyle mobilities, the intensive mediation of semi-skilled and low-skilled migration within Asia is particularly relevant to the case studies in this dissertation. The recent shift towards densely regulated migration in Australia and other regional source and destination countries has in turn led to the intensive mediation of many forms of mobility, including temporary labour migration. Since both migrants and migration have become commodified, just as the legal mechanisms of migration became more complex, new commercial practices have emerged to facilitate the movement of people across borders. Xiang and Lindquist (2014, S126) have led the opening of a new field of literature that examines “the internal dynamics of migration infrastructure and the practices of multiple actors in the actual *process* of migration in order to explain why migration has become both freer and harder”.

I bring social class into this discussion through a focus on how the possession (or rather, lack) of certain forms of capital, and particularly constrained informational and social capital make individual migrants dependent upon commercial intermediaries. I propose migration literacy as a new term to articulate the particular dependencies that are engendered as a direct result of the regulatory regimes of the immigration state.

Low levels of migration literacy mean trade skilled migrants from China have no option but to pay high fees to recruitment brokers in China. They are dependent upon the commercial dimensions of migration infrastructures to navigate the regulatory dimension of migration infrastructures. However, as the case of Paul and Linda demonstrates, labour migrants coming to Australia may develop their migration literacy. They may have been forced to engage with the risks of expensive debt-financed migration in their first move overseas, but the second time they engaged an agent in Australia.

An infrastructural lens makes it clear that these intermediaries are not beyond the state. They are commercial actors, yet their presence in the migration landscape, their functions within Australian migration infrastructures are tightly regulated and directly supervised by the OMARA. They act in concert with the agencies of border control and visa administration to determine and produce the forms of migration that occur as “states and migration brokers coparticipate in the governance of cross-border mobility” (Kim 2018, 204). “Skilled” migrants are not intrinsically so, rather these are “bureaucratic statuses manufactured and commercially supplied in the process of migration” (Pieke and Xiang 2010, 17). State agencies, in consultation with employers and industry bodies, determine the characteristics of people “in demand” and how their personal attributes may be credentialled and measured.

Migrants themselves are not passive in these processes. Rather, they are “strategic actors who competitively accumulate and mobilize migration-facilitating capital over the course of their migration careers” (Kim 2018, 275). Their strategies and choices are shaped by their particular individualised distributions of capitals, their (usually imperfect) understanding of how these capitals may be operationalised and other capitals accumulated, and the locally- or nationally-particular ways in which their own mobility is constructed as desirable, itself a form of symbolic capital or gateway to imagined economic, social or cultural capital.

The case studies detailed here illustrate the processes of capital accumulation, validation, conversion and exchange engaged by these capital-constrained trade skilled workers to achieve their personal objectives. For example, while they may have possessed the cultural or 'human' capital so desired by Australian steel manufacturers, that is, the credentialled work skills validated through visa application criteria, most applying after July 2007 lacked the educational capital needed to meet English language application criteria. Unable to convert this specific kind of educational capital into the symbolic capital of an IELTS certificate, some instead used latent economic capital, specifically their future income after the grant of a visa, to demonstrate they belonged to a category of high-earner whose presence in Australia is deemed desirable and so credentialled under the same regulations that would otherwise serve to exclude. Workaround solutions devised in concert with agents and employers allowed trade skilled migrants earning far below the legislated minimum salary to activate the English language waiver by declaring a falsified income. This solution may have secured the much-coveted visa, but it also delivered a significant tax liability to be borne by the low-earning tradesman throughout the duration of the visa.

David further implied that some later migrants may even have known that their lives and employment conditions in Australia would be challenging but they came anyway – slapping their own faces, knowing full well it would hurt. For country boys from David's part of China, migration overseas, even if only temporary, may deliver social, and, he implies, sexual capital that may secure a wife and family reproduction. Again, the conversion of economic capital, in the form of hometown loans and devalued future labour in Australia, may be deemed worth the risks. They may not secure the substantial returns on "investment" enjoyed by the earlier trade skilled migrants, but they may possibly achieve some of their objectives.

For most of this cohort, however, the consensus seems to be that agents occupy a powerful position as the mediators of employment in Australia and guides through the complex webs of legislation that must be navigated. However, at least among earlier migrants, their role is often appreciated and welcomed. They are a critical and necessary site of capital exchange, as without their intervention, there would be no mechanism for capital constrained tradesmen with low migration literacy to have operationalised what resources they did possess to undertake migrations to Australia. However, this significance of their role as gatekeepers also creates the circumstance where the ill-informed may risk poor outcomes from debt-financed migrations.

The next chapter continues this discussion through an exploration of how low migration literacy and constrained migration-facilitating capital affects longer-term settlement and belonging in Australia, and imaginaries of return migration in later life.

## Chapter 7      Thwarted returns: mobility capital, returnee preparedness and the accidental settlement of labouring “sojourners”<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I argue that class background and low mobility capital can have just as significant an influence on settlement, return and life course retirement migration as they do on initial labour emigration. I also critique the dichotomisation of “sojourners” and “settlers” so established in Australian national myths as a “nation of immigrants”. In both this chapter and Chapter 9, I deconstruct this dyad, exploring the ways in which both permanence and temporariness are imagined, expected, confused, and contingently interchangeable states.

Australian migration policy and Australian popular understandings of migration have historically predicated a binary of temporary workers and permanent settlers, with the latter lauded as the basis of the (post-)settler nation. This mindset is founded in the mid-twentieth century tradition of “populate or perish”, a term made popular by Australia’s first Immigration Minister, Arthur Calwell, in a 1945 speech designed to persuade an electorate still reeling from the Pacific War of the need to rapidly increase the migration of permanent settlers from not only the established source countries like the United Kingdom and Ireland, but also new, and sometimes resisted, sending areas from Southern and Eastern Europe. Such a binary was never an accurate reflection of migrants’ actual trajectories. It is, however, increasingly incongruous in the face of a new national and global migration paradigm where multiple complex flows of temporary workers and visitors supplant the central role of the settler migrant (Hugo 2004; Pezzullo 2015).

Members of this cohort of trade skilled migrants mostly came to Australia with fixed term, temporary plans, intending to return to their homes and families after a few short years. They describe themselves as self-imagined sojourners, rarely suggesting they had any long-term anticipation of remaining in Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter has been published as: Stevens, Catriona. 2017. “Now I can never go back’: the thwarted returns of temporary labour migrants from China in Perth, Western Australia.” *Transitions: Journal of Transient Migration* 1 (1): 65-83.



Yet, often to their great surprise, many have been thwarted in their plans to return and have instead experienced an unexpected transition to become permanent residents, and even citizens, of Australia. They describe this experiences in terms that closely resemble accounts of European labour migrations to Australia in colonial and postcolonial eras, similarities presented in more detail below.

Chapter 5 has shown how participants described their planned stints as overseas labour migrants as primarily motivated by family strategies for economic advancement and social reproduction, taking advantage of income disparities between home and host settings and the great demand for technical skills among employers in Western Australia during the last mining boom. Once living in Perth, however, they found their plans to return to China were thwarted as they encountered compelling reasons to remain in Australia. These migrants followed the same path as earlier cohorts of post-war European labour migrants in Australia, who often experienced a similar shift to permanent settlement, and for much the same reasons.

This chapter demonstrates that just as initial emigration may be frictioned, expensive and entail serious risks for migrants from subaltern class backgrounds with constrained mobility capital, similarly access to return migration may also be unevenly distributed. Return and discourses of return must be understood within contemporary migration models that emphasise circular, transient and open-ended mobility. Yet individual migrants still articulate migration trajectories and return plans that are grounded in simpler conceptions of “here” and “there”, “home” and “away”. While recognising the contemporary shift towards mobile and transnational lives for people of all class backgrounds, it is important not to overlook the very real and material barriers to return that some temporary migrants claim to experience.

## 7.1 Return migration and mobility capital

Homeland imaginaries and “myths of return” have long been central to creating and sustaining migrant and diasporic identities, perhaps especially so when economic or geopolitical conditions render such returns unlikely (Anwar 1979; Safran 1991). The collective practices of exclusion entailed in sustaining homeland fantasies work to produce and police the boundaries of overseas communities, which provide a space for migrants to negotiate new identities across two social worlds (Cohen and Gold 1997). Yet such analyses rest on old notions of international migration as simple journeys from one place to another, and sometimes back again.

In recent decades scholars have been required to rethink the notion of return in response to more nuanced and complex patterns of migration. Simplistic models of return that focus on the (expectedly) permanent, unidirectional movement and settlement of first generation migrants and rely on such binaries as home/abroad and migration/return have been supplanted by complex, diverse, intergenerational, polychronic and multidirectional understandings of global mobility (King and Christou 2011; Conway and Potter 2009). New paradigms are required in order to analyse various forms of return, as people from all backgrounds find their working and personal lives transformed in an increasingly mobile world that is characterised by enhanced access to technologies of transport and communication (Elliott and Urry 2010; Castles and Miller 2009). Migrants are now simultaneously embedded in networks and social fields that connect them personally, financially and politically to contexts which are geographically situated within two or more nation states (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton 1994; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Unidirectional models of migration, settlement and assimilation are now uncommon, and neither departures nor returns need be permanent or difficult to reverse. Instead, circular, temporary and open-ended mobility is now the dominant global model (Castles 2002). Temporary return visits form part of this landscape, functioning for both first- and second-generation migrants as a kind of “secular pilgrimage” which strengthens family links or affirms ethnic identities (Baldassar 2001; Louie 2004; Christou 2009), and yet regular return visits do not make permanent relocation more likely (Conway, Potter and St. Bernard 2009). Rather, as migrants maintain relationships across borders and produce discourses of flexible returns, they develop new hybrid identities (Teo 2011).

In a time of ever increasing human mobility, however, it would be a mistake to equate this with increased or evenly-distributed freedom of movement. Flows are doubtless increasing, but individuals move within power structures that privilege the mobility of some groups over others (Kalir 2013). Mobility capital conditions the processes of migration before, during and after departure from “home” as migrants from different backgrounds have access to differing resources, knowledge and networks that support or inhibit their movement across borders.

Migrants disadvantaged by class, gender or ethnicity also engage in transnational practices and negotiate new identities between homeland and host society, but their returns, the imagined ends of their journeys, may prove elusive or illusionary as changes occur that they cannot control (Yeoh and Huang 2000). The practical realities of permanent return and reintegration can be every bit as difficult as the original migration, since “here” and “there” are often very different contexts, and migrants usually find they have changed over the course of their time lived in the host setting (King 2000). Returnees from diverse backgrounds, including, for example, both Australian young professionals and Iraqi Kurdish refugees, encounter barriers to economic reintegration in the “home” society. In these examples this may result from employers’ unwillingness to value overseas experience, or a changed normative response to patronage relationships and endemic corruption (Hugo 2009; Paasche 2016). I will show in this chapter that my participants expressed concerns about both these kinds of obstacles.

Decisions to return, therefore, are complex, and informed by both personal concerns as well as social, economic and political contextual factors in both host and home countries. Cassarino’s (2004) framework of “returnees’ preparedness” captures all of these factors, as it entails both the individual’s willingness to return, as well as their readiness, defined as their capacity for mobilising financial, social and knowledge resources that facilitate relocation and reintegration. Social class and the capitals it affords once again emerges as a key determinant of how and when people may move.

Given this history, how new then are the experiences of these trade skilled labour migrants from China? While they came to Australia during an era of new and evolving approaches to managing migration, the ways in which they describe their initial sojourning plans and their transition to permanence are in fact not uncommon in the history of Australian migration. There are strong parallels between the stories I heard and the traditional labour migrations of early Australian settlement. However, while there are similarities between colonial and twentieth-century migrants from Europe and this new cohort of China-born trade skilled labour migrants, the people central to this dissertation have come to Australia under very different structural and legislative conditions to those earlier migrants.

As explained in the last chapter, migration infrastructures, in particular the rapid expansion and complication of regulatory state apparatus seen in recent decades, also works to condition and shape return migration as migrants also possess unequal abilities to enter, leave and work in different places and jurisdictions. Circulatory, back-and-forth models of mobility now prevail throughout Asia, and in many ways resemble the regular movements of traders and labourers that characterised the “sojourning” Asian labour migration of the nineteenth century (Wang 2000; McKeown 2008; Xiang 2013b). However, Xiang notes a key difference: while early regional labour migrations occurred in a context that placed relatively few restrictions on movement beyond individual economic constraints, whereas today’s migrants navigate evolving structures of migration governance as nation-states develop increasingly complex mechanisms for managing the movement of bodies across borders (Fassin 2011; Hollifield, Martin and Orrenius 2014).

Australian immigration policy now facilitates and encourages temporary migration, and by extension, multiple returns, in order to meet the shifting demands of labour market shortages. Moreover, flexible temporary and open-ended movements both within and across borders now characterise human mobility in the Asian region, and more broadly throughout the world. This stands in contrast to the settler paradigms of nation states which informed migration discourse and policy for much of the twentieth century. What is most remarkable about this contemporary cohort is that in spite of their own temporary plans, and despite acting within discursive and legislative frameworks that encourage temporary migration, they have nonetheless experienced an unexpected transition towards long-term permanent residency in Australia.

## 7.2 Sojourners or settlers?

Migrants rarely set off for lands unknown without some intention or hope of returning to the familiar places of their earlier life (King 1978, 2000). The old typification of the “sojourning” Chinese contrasted with that of the “settling” European is an overly simplified and indeed fallacious binary that has been corrected in more recent histories of both Australian and North American immigration (Fitzgerald 2007; Reeves and Mountford 2011; Ng 1998).

Wang Gungwu (1992, 1998, 2000) has written influentially about the sojourner pattern that typified Chinese labour migration of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, whereby working overseas contributes to family strategies for social reproduction, is temporary and goal-oriented, and is primarily a male endeavour. Western studies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “age of mass migration” tended to focus on Atlantic migration and the contemporaneous movements of Europeans to other colonial territories like Australia and New Zealand and assumed or emphasised the permanent settlement of people in these places (Hatton and Williamson 1998). Recent scholarship demonstrates that people moved across and between Asian territories during this period on a scale equal to that seen in the “new worlds” of the Europeans. Yet Asian migrations in this period, even those covering long distances, were predominantly temporary and transient in nature; of the 30 million Indians and 19 million Chinese who travelled to South East Asia between 1850 and 1930, only 6 million and 7 million settled permanently (Amrith 2011, 18-9).

However, the dyad of the European settler contrasted with the Chinese sojourner, together with popular depictions of the Chinese as culturally distinct to the point of being unassimilable, requires critique. Fitzgerald’s (2007) attack on the logics of exclusion in the era of White Australia demonstrates, firstly, that many Chinese living in colonial and early post-Federation Australia were just as committed to “Australian values” of liberty, equality and mateship as their racially European contemporaries. Secondly, he shows that the mistaken assumption is not that Chinese labourers emigrated as sojourners with plans to return “home”, but rather that Europeans departing for New World territories did not. China’s relative proximity to Australia, when compared with Europe, made return- and on-migration easier for Chinese, while restrictive immigration policies made settlement much more difficult.

Furthermore, Europeans were not always the settlers of national myth. They too commonly planned to return after their “sojourns”, returns thwarted by distance, cost and time spent overseas. Early- and mid-twentieth century migrants from all parts of Europe typically went to Australia as fortune hunters, necessary out-migrants playing their assigned role in family strategies for economic survival and social reproduction. Whether Tuscans or Irish, Macedonians, Sicilians or Dalmatians, these were primarily men from poor rural backgrounds, often originating from areas with an established tradition of seasonal labour migration within Europe, or of international migration. Some may have held permanent plans, but the majority arrived as temporary workers with eventual repatriation a clear part of their future imaginaries. However, the practicalities of life lived in a new location, such as jobs, debts, families, and children, meant that a great number ended up remaining in Australia as permanent settlers (O’Farrell 2001, Price 1963, Huber 1970). Even among the British, return migration was very common; during the depression of the interwar years, Australia saw a net outflow of British migrants, and many more might have returned had they been able to afford the passage back to Europe (Roe 2001).

For each European who was successful in returning “home” however, many more experienced a transition to Australian life. That Chinese migrants in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries found the same path more difficult indicates not so much a different set of migration objectives, or different relationships towards family and native place, but instead reflects the different social and legislative barriers to long term settlement they faced, and the comparative geographic proximity of China to Australia (Jupp 1998; Fitzgerald 2007, 47-52).

What outlook then for the sojourner as migrant subject? Paul Siu is celebrated for his seminal contributions to Asian American studies (1987 [1953]) but has nonetheless been the subject of cautious critique for “The Sojourner” ideal type he proposed in his paper of the same name (1952). Although debated, critics argue that the figure of the “sojourner” has been appropriated as an Orientalist construct that blames Chinese cultural models for the migrants’ failure to assimilate, absolving the racist white majority of blame (Chan 1981; c.f. Woon 1983).

McKeown (2002) rehabilitates Siu in the light of the transnational lens, showing that the figure of the sojourner is only seen as wanting from within theoretical assumptions that accept the dominant narrative of US history as a nation of assimilated migrants and reify claims of American universality. Siu rejected the binary of settlers and sojourners, attempting to position mobile, transnational people not as a deviant form but as an analytic centre. However, his inability to escape the normative monodirectional and assimilationist theories of his time meant he could not fully explain their position in a world that transcended the standard boundaries of America and China.

Seen from this perspective, settlers and sojourners – and their contemporary lexical equivalents of permanent and temporary migration – are not dichotomous positions but rather concurrently exist as contradictory trajectories, impulses and imaginaries. This is illustrated through the case studies presented here and in Chapter 9.

## 7.3 Temporary plans and thwarted returns

This section presents the emic perspectives of participants, the challenging and often surprising paths some describe taking in their journeys from short term sojourners to unexpected settlers. The stories presented illustrate the evident tensions between “sojourning” and “settling”.

### 7.3.1 Temporary plans and fixed-term contracts

Trade skilled migrants overwhelmingly saw this stint overseas as a fixed-term expediency during the early months and even years of their employment; almost all left China with the primary objective of making as much money as possible before returning “home”. Many were also influenced by the national enthusiasm for learning about foreign countries and the enthusiasm for going abroad (*chuguore*) that was sweeping China at the time, fanned by popular media depictions of Chinese nationals’ lives overseas (Sun 2002), an illustration of the intertwined, co-constitutive economic and cultural logics of migration (Coates 2018). Participants spoke of wanting to see the world in order to “open their eyes”, however this was generally positioned as a secondary motivation after providing for their families when they had heard that a few years working in Australia represented a real opportunity to improve their finances and social position within China’s competitive hierarchies.

However, despite the potential prosperity to be found in Australia, at the time of arrival, remaining in Australia was “unimaginable” and, for many, frankly undesirable. As, Feng, a welder in his 50s, explained:

When we came here Australia needed technical workers. We came here to make money. A visa only lasted so long, maybe we expected to get another [temporary work] visa but we never thought about getting PR and staying. It was only when the visa was due to expire that the boss said we could apply for PR.

The constrained mobility capital and low migration literacy of this cohort also influenced their outlook and short-term plans in Australia. Prior to departure migrants typically had very incomplete information, one result of the intensively mediated outmigration of trade skilled labour from China to regional destinations including Australia. Heavily reliant on agents to translate and explain Australian migration law, many migrants did not even know that they might qualify for a permanent visa until it was suggested to them by their employer when their first temporary work visa was due to expire. This is perhaps not surprising: among regional destinations for Chinese temporary labour migrants, Australia is unusual in offering pathways to permanent residency. By contrast, other major destinations in Asia operate highly restrictive programs that demand the repatriation of labour migrants at the end their contracts (Chok 2013; Xiang 2013c).

Like most colonial and twentieth century labour migrants to Australia, trade skilled labourers in this cohort initially came to Australia as single men, leaving wives and families in China. Where women did accompany their husbands so they could collectively earn two Australian salaries and so make more money for the duration of the visa, most left their children behind in China with grandparents. This practice of intergenerational care across borders is common among Chinese migrant families as a strategy for maximising family workforce participation (Da 2003b). Because the wives of trade skilled labourers are typically unskilled, or were deskilled through migration because of their poor command of English and uncredentialed Chinese work experience, they tend to find only low-paid and insecure employment. Bringing children to Australia would limit the hours they could work and further reduce this already low secondary income, particularly as temporary visa holders in Australian may not access government subsidised childcare. This would then undermine the primary reason behind accompanying spouse migration, which was to save as much as possible while the temporary work visa permitted. However, the family separation inherent to transnational care strategies often meant that parents and children did not see one other for up to four years, a situation particularly regretted by the mothers I interviewed. Those who did bring their children with them to Australia found this led to other problems, which I will discuss below.



For many men in this cohort, a sojourn in Perth was by no means the first time that they had worked away from home. Men originally from rural areas, as well as some from “rust belt” northern cities severely impacted by the restructuring of the 1990s, had already engaged in domestic labour migration to booming coastal manufacturing zones. Many participants also had experience working overseas, having served contracts in Japan, Korea or Singapore, some moving stepwise between destinations over the course of several years.

Yang explained his pattern of stepwise migration through various domestic and international destinations:

I went to work in Dalian as a welder... After a few years there I went to Korea for two years, to a small coastal city. The money was good. Where in China I could make about RMB1000 a month, in Korea I was making RMB10,000 a month. When I finished in Korea I came back to work in Dalian. Then I got divorced from my first wife and I had two kids to look after, so then I came to Australia...

The agent fees were expensive. I paid the agent RMB 150,000, plus I also had to pay for exams to test my technical skills, for airfares and for health checks. In total I spent about RMB 200,000. But I had been working in Korea, so I had saved up some money...

I didn't come for PR when I first came over, to be honest back then it was unimaginable. We all came to make money and then to go back to China. When I decided to come to Australia, I was also thinking about going to Japan. In Japan you could earn RMB 10,000 a month. Australia seemed to be comparable money, but no one really knew anything about Australia.

While some trade skilled workers did originally intend to migrate permanently, they were very much in the minority. Most saw overseas labour only as a family strategy for social replication or advancement. Alan and Sarah even initially declined an offer of sponsorship for PR, telling Alan's employer that he just wanted to work out his contract then go home. They were so certain of their fixed plans to return to their hometown to raise a family near their parents and siblings. Like so many of this cohort, however, after a few years in Australia they found their circumstances had changed.

### 7.3.2 Thwarted returns

Despite departing China with short-term plans, the people I met and interviewed are clearly still in Perth, most living established local lives. Although this is a sampling bias, the result of my single-sited project, their experiences point to the ways that return migration is frictioned and resource-dependent. Why, I asked them, did they not go back when their initial contracts expired? Their responses indicated the processes of social transformation at work in post-reform China, and the ways in which China has changed over the course of their decade or so overseas. But alongside such exceptional and particular reasons there are also in their accounts some ahistorical experiences that echo earlier cohorts of labour migrants, the localising force of a life lived in place.

The pace of Chinese development is a key reasons cited for remaining rather than returning. No one going overseas for work in the early 2000s could have quite anticipated the ways in which China would change over the following decade. Rising house prices in the large cities meant that despite working overseas for years, the savings accumulated still weren't necessarily enough to get ahead. Missed contributions to Chinese employee insurance schemes might also need to be made up, an unwelcome potential cost of repatriation.

More importantly, time spent overseas meant that participants were no longer familiar with Chinese work practices and that they had missed the opportunity to foster the networked relationships needed to secure positions and promotions. Accepting the necessary demotion and loss of status among their peers that would accompany going back was hard to accept, particularly for men already in their middle years. Sun, a welder in his fifties who has worked overseas for over ten years, reflected on this problem:

The returning overseas students find it hard to find a job now, much harder than in the past. Because it's a different work environment, and they can't use what they learned overseas. It's the same for us. I've been overseas these last years and if I go back then I won't find a job easily because my thinking is different. Things have changed very quickly [in China], and we have not changed in the same way. They [employers] would say, "What can you do here?"

Many participants also found that they themselves had changed during the years away, changed in different ways to their friends and colleagues who had remained in China, both in relation to their work practices but also in their ways of thinking (*sixiang*). While China had sped up, they had slowed down and on return visits discovered they no longer felt at home amidst the hustle and bustle of a Chinese city or a fast-moving, tightly-networked Chinese workplace. Recalling her first visit back to her hometown after more than three years in Australia, Sarah described the shift in her outlook that had occurred:

Time and environment can change people. Before the holiday we really wanted to go back [to China], but once we got back we discovered we really had joined the village and followed local customs (*ru xiang sui su*, meaning “become accustomed to Australian ways”) and we found we were comparing things and finding Australia was better... After our holiday, my husband still had his job so we went back [to Australia]. There is a process of integration (*rongru*); cultural integration and integration into working practices.

Sarah and Alan had been so certain that their futures were in China near their extended families, but, in keeping with the experiences of migrants throughout history, time lived away wrought changes in their outlooks that made return more difficult (King 2000).

As explained in the last chapter, members of this cohort typically have low levels of migration literacy and must rely on intermediaries to explain what can or cannot be done. This is in stark contrast to some other categories of temporary migrants, such as students, who often have an extensive understanding of Australian migration law and respond quickly to legislative changes, such as new skilled occupations lists, in their efforts to achieve their holy grail of permanent status (Baas 2006; Robertson 2013). Chen, the serial labour migrant introduced in Chapter 5 who decided to work another stint overseas in order to pay for the expensive education of his teenage daughter, claimed that he had in fact become an unintentional permanent resident as a result of Australia’s regulatory infrastructure, rather than in spite of it:

I worked there for four years on a [457] work visa but then when they asked me to re-sign the contract for another four years the agent said it wasn’t that easy. This was in 2011 and if I wanted to apply for another 457 then I needed to get four scores of 4.5 in the IELTS. There was no way I could get that. But if I applied for PR then I didn’t need to take an IELTS test. Instead, I could do a course at TAFE. It cost over \$5000 [for the visa application and other costs] and I had to do 520 hours [of English classes] – a lot of time. But that way I could stay and keep working. So I became a migrant (*yimin*) – but that wasn’t the original plan.

Chapter 9 further explores how the class backgrounds and low educational attainment of migrants from this cohort have sometimes interacted with ever-changing selective visa criteria to create prolonged and precarious temporariness in Australia. For others like Chen, however, the convergence of a personal trajectory with changing migration policy worked to produce permanent status and settled migration where none was expected before.

For those who first came with their families, or who brought their children across once they were better established, the educational needs of their children have become a compelling reason for remaining in Australia. The Chinese and Australian school systems are very different, and the differing language of instruction is a major point of concern for migrants whose children missed the years of primary education while their peers were mastering Chinese characters. Chinese schools are also more competitive, with regular intense testing and streaming. School children, both primary and secondary, are expected to study for much longer hours and usually attend extra classes in the evenings and at weekends. Liu, a former welder, owns a massage shop which he manages together with his wife. Life isn't easy for them in Perth, but Liu says they cannot consider returning to China because of the impact it would have on their child's education:

My son is now in Year 4 and can't write Chinese. He couldn't cope in China. Plus, if you leave the Chinese school system, when you go back you can't get back into the school without connections or money... They [children who are taken back without the skills needed for Chinese school] can only hope to be a worker. Lots of people do go back, and their children's futures are ruined.

Parents like Liu who might otherwise have been tempted to return to China, whether because of homesickness and frustration with their work prospects or social life in Australia, or because of concern about their inability to take responsibility for the care of aging parents, now feel unable to do so because of the difficulties their children might face. Schooling is the primary concern, but parents also voiced other worries, such as children becoming ill or suffering other health problems because they cannot become accustomed to their new environment (*shuitubufu de wenti*).

For many parents, their children completing high school or university is an event horizon after which they feel they might be freer to travel back to China as their personal inclinations or family responsibilities dictate. Others complained that now they are raising an Australian child they will always need to stay with them, however much they themselves might prefer the idea of a life in China.

### 7.3.3 Reluctant settlers

The minute you go out into the garden after dinner, with a bag of rubbish to put in the bin, you remember you had meant to bring a chair out on the grass and sit there for a smoko while doing some reading. Then you realise what you are missing. In your mind's eye, there is a group of people sitting around a table in the garden, drinking tea, playing poker, chatting about nothing or everything, joking until it is totally dark. They look up at the sky for stars unknown to them, not to search for anything but to convince themselves that another day has gone by without much happening. You realise that this is what you are missing, years ago in China, seconds ago in your imagination. Life that way was good.

Excerpt from *The English Class*, a novel by Ouyang Yu (2010).

How then do these seemingly accidental settlers feel about their now permanent statuses and established lives in Australia? Many participants expressed great satisfaction with the unexpected paths their lives had taken. Participants with school-age children without exception said that their families are enjoying a higher standard of living in Australia. Reasons include better air quality, more space and a higher quality of built environment. Australia's less competitive educational environment is also seen to contribute to a better quality of life because children are happier, with less homework and fewer classes outside of school. Speaking of friends and classmates still in China with whom they kept contact, even parents from more modest and rural backgrounds talked about the "pressure" to support children's academic achievement and pay for expensive schooling that their friends suffered, evidently relieved they do not face the same challenges in Perth. Some participants also expressed an appreciation for a simpler, more laid-back adult lifestyle with less need to expend time and energy maintaining interpersonal relationships, while others valued better-regulated workplaces with more protection of employee rights. Sam explained this perspective:

So why do we all stay? We have become integrated (*rongru le*). Everyone is equal here, and there aren't the same hierarchical levels that you have in China. And perhaps before we didn't like that in China. But here you can get a job and it can be hard to do it at first, but then it is your job and no one will try to take it from you or give you pressure and you can become good at it. The working environment does not involve complicated relationships like in China.

Many participants, however, have more ambivalent feelings. Some are unhappy with the work opportunities available to them in an Australian context. For trade skilled migrants employed in Australian workshops, most feel there is little to distinguish their working environment from that which they knew in China. Some complain that the equipment and facilities in Australia are older and less hi-tech, but the general feeling is that labouring on the tools all day long in a metal fabrication workshop is much the same experience, no matter whether they are in China or Australia.

For secondary visa applicants this is a different story. These people, the wives and some mature age children, are frequently employed in low paid and often physically demanding roles which prove less satisfying than the job options they enjoyed before migrating. The same is true for those primary applicants who can no longer find skilled employment following the recent economic downturn in Western Australia, and so are also working as construction labourers or running small restaurants, massage shops and the like. When Chen found that changing English language criteria meant he could no longer renew his temporary 457 visa and he instead needed to apply for permanent residency in order to keep his welding job, he determined that his daughter should continue her education in Australia. She is now happily settled and completing an undergraduate degree, but Zhang feels the move has been much more difficult for his wife:

My wife and daughter came over after I got PR. To be honest, my wife didn't want to come. She had a good job in China; she was a crane operator. It was an easy job, not a lot of work to do. Now she works in a factory, so she's always very tired.

Deskilling is usually associated with highly-educated migrant groups. International students are caught in a “middling experience” between conflicting roles of global knowledge professionals and low-paid, unskilled service workers. White collar migrants who expect frictionless migration within their profession may be disappointed to find their lack of language and cultural soft skills are insurmountable barriers to finding employment commensurate with their qualifications (Gao 2006; Ho 2006b; Ho and Ley 2014; Liu 2004; Robertson, 2014; Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2014; Yeoh, Chee and Baey 2003). However, low-end deskilling can be an equally painful psychological process for those that experience it, with consequent impacts on life satisfaction and settlement processes in the new county of residence. Chen's wife, a skilled crane driver, now makes packaging all day long; a woman who had worked in a modern factory in China on a hi-tech production line making a globally-recognised brand of sports gear found herself picking lettuces in an Australian field; a former shoe maker today works cash-in-hand providing massages in a shopping mall, while an experienced welder boils dumplings at his hole-in-the-wall eatery. For the men and women who feel devalued in an Australian job market, this experience can leave them discontented with the migration process and feeling little sense of belonging in the new context.

Many participants also complained of loneliness and isolation in the bleak, empty, sun-baked Perth suburbs. This isolation has both temporal and spatial dimensions. Accustomed to a lively social life in a more densely populated Chinese environment where colleagues frequently eat together and neighbours come out of their homes to chat, play chess, dance and pass the time of day, many migrants feel their lives in Perth are very boring and lonely. One mechanic who described his house on a wide street beside a public reserve as “a paradise” went on to lament that he almost never saw another person outside their home enjoying this space in the evening, and rarely shared a conversation with a neighbour, despite several of them being ethnically Chinese.

Participants complained they now have less time available for socialising because they work longer hours, spend time commuting across Perth and must cook all their meals at home every day, rather than getting food from a work canteen. Many work six days a week, sometimes with the option to do additional overtime on Sundays. Owners and staff of small service-oriented businesses like cafes and massage shops usually work seven days a week. A few attend a weekly Mandarin church service and reported finding a sense of shared community with the congregation. Far more, however, spend their limited time at the weekend with their nuclear family, or shopping and doing other domestic chores. Gathering with friends to eat is often only enjoyed on public holidays or when celebrating a life event such as a birth or a wedding.

Space is another factor: the shortage of communally-used public space and the spread-out, dispersed nature of the built environment in Australian suburbs full of fenced-off, detached houses restricts opportunities for social interaction. In urban China, chatting each evening with a neighbour in the outdoor space between apartment buildings is easy and so can happen every day; in suburban Perth, inviting friends into your home, cleaning and catering for them, is more difficult and so happens only infrequently.

John, a welder from a northern Chinese city, summarised how Perth geography and lifestyle contributed to loneliness and isolation:

It's lonely here too. There's nowhere to go. I don't go to the casino, I might go to look around but it's not the place for someone like me. I go fishing with friends, but you can't be fishing all the time... Here you don't go out for dinner with friends like you do in China, everyone is too busy. At holidays you might have a BBQ with friends at home or go to the seaside if there are lots of friends, maybe if there are a couple of days off go north or south to go fishing...

It might be different in Melbourne or Sydney, in big cities that are like Beijing, where there are lots of people. Here it is very quiet, it suits people with a calm temperament. I prefer noise and excitement, but it's ok.

I had a friend came over here as a migrant, but they were only in Perth for a bit over 3 months, then they went to Melbourne. In Sydney you don't need a car, everything is close. You can just go out to get things. Here if you want to buy so

much as an ice cream you need to get in the car. Everyone needs a car here, it doesn't matter where you live, whether you're rich or poor, you've got to have a car. Perth is so spread out... People prefer to live near each other. Look at Russia. They've got all that space and yet everyone chooses to cluster together in Moscow.

Poor English and a consequent inability to competently navigate day-to-day situations is another major source of dissatisfaction with life in Australia. The anxiety of engaging with unfamiliar systems and situations while being unable to communicate effectively makes daily life quite stressful, as Liu, the massage shop owner explained:

It's really hard not speaking English. It's fine if you just sit still but if you do anything then there are problems. If you crash your car what do you do? If there is a medical emergency you can't call anyone. At the hospital you might die because the doctors need to communicate with you quickly and you can't understand them.

A great many participants spoke of the frustration of feeling stuck in Australia, caught in a life they did not plan by the strictures of mortgages, work and children. Some relieved this frustration by dreaming about a retirement in China or mitigated their homesickness with regular long return visits. Zhang, a welder in his late forties, told me that his wife spends three months each year in north China because she dislikes her job in a laundry and misses her family and friends. When I asked if she will go back for the long term however, he was taken aback. "No," he told me emphatically, "she can't do that. We have a house [and mortgage] here." Liu meanwhile had a warning for other would-be migrants from working class backgrounds:

People need to think carefully before they migrate about whether they can handle it. It's not much better for rich people... [but] at least if they don't like it they can move to another country. It's really tough for poor people with less money.



## 7.4 Analysis and Conclusion

The experiences of this cohort of trade skilled migrants from China constitute in many ways a contemporary example of a classical Australian labour migration narrative. Although they initially saw their departure from their homes as a temporary expediency, they have since become permanent settlers in Australia, describing this as an unexpected outcome. Holders of other categories of temporary visas, such as students or working holiday makers, may frequently entertain multiple and sometimes conflicting migration objectives that entail obtaining legal citizenship or residency alongside gaining an international tertiary qualification, having an overseas travelling experience, or making money to pay back debts and support family at home (Robertson 2013, 2014; Fong 2011; Baas 2010). For most of the trade skilled migrants described here, however, as has been the case for Chinese labour migrants in other global contexts, there was initially one primary objective: money, and the imagined life possibilities that money affords (Kalir 2012; Chu 2010; Pieke et al. 2004).

Yet in an experience shared by other migrants in diverse settings (King 2000), my participants found that their circumstances, their priorities and their outlooks were changed as a result of time spent in the host setting, rendering return more difficult than they first imagined. Changing conditions in rapidly developing China, the educational needs of Australian-raised children and financial commitments in Perth were the main factors that hindered return. Borrowing Cassarino's framework (2004) of returnee preparedness, many may have the willingness to return but lack the tangible resources, like wealth, and the intangible resources, like reliable networks and other forms of social capital, which would ensure their readiness to effect a successful return migration. Just as their capacity to operationalise various forms of capital conditioned the process of migration *to* Australia, so too their opportunities to return are shaped and constrained by social class and the capitals it affords.

Participants often feel ambivalent about what they perceive as thwarted returns and unexpected shifts to permanent settlement. Most recognise that both China and Australia have their advantages and disadvantages, and some expressed a strong preference for life in Australia, but there are also many who are deeply frustrated by their current circumstances. They maintain close relationships with friends and family back in China through communication technologies and frequent visits, but for the medium term at least feel they have no choice but to stay in Australia. Times and technologies change at a rapid rate, but the everyday concerns of migrants do so more slowly. Although these migrants are living in a time of accelerated mobility and simultaneous transnational connections, they nonetheless describe their personal experiences in terms that closely resemble traditional slow and territorialised models of migration.

For this reason, Manying Ip's (2011) comparison of Chinese migrants to hydroponic plants, flourishing without soil, is not really appropriate in relation to this cohort of labour migrants. The highly qualified professionals of her study are ultimately flexible, at once grounded and deterritorialized. They are part of transnational family networks that move across borders with ease as employment, education or other lifecycle needs demand. However, unlike her subjects and those of other similar studies conducted among various groups of more educated ethnic Chinese migrants to Australia, New Zealand and Canada (L Liu 2011; Mak 2006; Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Teo 2011; Pe-pua et al. 1998), trade skilled and unskilled workers are unlikely to find better paid opportunities in booming Chinese cities. Unlike more "desirable" professionals, they are certainly not the subjects of state-sponsored repatriation programs (Xiang 2011) and their overseas experience does not make them more attractive to potential employers in China (Teo 2011). Indeed, given the further mass layoffs that accompany the ongoing restructuring of north Chinese state-owned heavy industry (Tiezzi 2016), it seems unlikely returning welders and other such semi-skilled labourers would now find any suitable work at all. Instead, their circumstances more closely resemble those of the "middling" Chinese who migrated as students or white-collar professionals and have since experienced occupational deskilling (Ho and Ley 2014), must overcome "dual-track" marginalisation in both national contexts, and so consequently feel some dissatisfaction with their lives in Australia (Gao 2006; Fung and Chen 1996). The narratives of some members of this cohort illustrate that, even as we acknowledge the contemporary shift towards mobile and transnational lives among elites and non-elites alike, we should not overlook the very real and material barriers to return some individuals feel they experience.

But it is perhaps too soon to declare the returns of all my participants decisively thwarted. Many complain they are unable to repatriate, tied forever to a strange land by Australian-raised children who could not, they say, cope with a life in China. These dissatisfied individuals concur with the sentiments of one father, a 457 holder turned naturalised citizen, who regretfully told me, “Now I can never go back. What would be the sense in going back old and alone if my child is here?”

Others however do recognise the possibility of future lifestyle mobility and have plans for a return that may be more than just a myth. Return, after all, does not need to be fixed or final. Contemporary labour migrants may not have the access to resources and the flexible mobility of their more privileged compatriots, but neither do they face the same restrictions as their post-war antecedents. Life cycle and retirement migrations are no longer the preserve of the wealthy. Moreover, retirement is not necessarily located either “here” or “there”, and lower-income older migrants increasingly can choose the “third option”, that is, a “bi-residence strategy” that permits a circularity of movement in old age between place of origin and place of long-term residence (Hunter 2015; Bolzman, Fibbi and Vial 2006; de Silva 2016). Even the oldest of this Australian cohort are now still a decade from retirement. Time will tell how many grow old in Australia, in China, or across borders. Chapters 9 and 10 return to these future mobile imaginaries and explore what this means for local belonging and citizenship decisions.

## PART THREE

## Chapter 8      Maintaining and subverting class boundaries: *suzhi* discourse meets the neoliberal logic of selective migration policies<sup>1</sup>

This chapter is the first in part three of the dissertation, drawing on the contributions of participants beyond the core cohort of trade-skilled migrants and their families. It argues that migration can work to perpetuate, as well as to subvert, homeland class boundaries. Social class is a key lens throughout this dissertation, but in this chapter, I reverse the direction of my enquiry. Instead of asking how class affects migration, I will here explore how migration affects expressions of class.

The previous three chapters have considered, following van Hear (2014), how processes of migration and settlement are influenced by social class, how the migration facilitating capital possessed and deployed by members of this cohort has shaped their experiences at every stage in their migration stories. This chapter considers the ways national class frames originating in China have been both replicated and challenged in the Australian context and under the exceptional economic conditions of Western Australia's resources boom.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter has been published as:  
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Migration to Australia has created opportunities for Chinese from different class backgrounds to interact in their daily lives in ways that would not be readily available in China. These encounters arise because of a shared language in a strange land, ethnic concentrations in some suburbs, and ethnic rental markets and other niche economies. This new cohort of trade skilled migrants are from working class backgrounds, with lower academic attainment than the majority of migrants from China to Australia. They are also often from non-traditional sending areas, including some rural areas disadvantaged in China's socio-spatial hierarchies. As such, their presence in Australia and their success (for some) in gaining permanent residency status is unusual in a migration landscape characterised by selective migration policies that favour educated and professionally skilled migrants. More importantly, the exceptional economic conditions of the boom created particular circumstances that serve to subvert occupational hierarchies established in China. Welders, metal machinists and mechanics who in China had been self-proclaimed "ordinary workers" (*putong gongren*) with very ordinary incomes found that in Perth they are respected tradesmen and moderately high earners. In contrast, middle class Chinese in Australia are often deskilled; opportunities for employment commensurate to their qualifications are tightly constrained.

During this period, challenges to established discourses that validate social mobility through education and the superiority of professional workers were not only experienced by migrants from China. Forsey (2015, 359) has written about how the concentration of "blue collar affluence" created through high-income technical employment in a Western Australian mining town disrupted the "modernist myth of education-based meritocracy". He found young people were influenced by the cultural imperatives of a "Karratha<sup>2</sup> mentality" that privileged apprenticeships over degrees, to the great concern of middle-class parents who remained invested in the principle of social mobility through education. The disruptive effects of the emergence of a new working class possessed of significant economic capital can be vividly observed through the heightened Australian public and media interest in this phenomenon. This included the deployment of a new colloquial term for the wealthy working class, "cashed-up bogan", often shortened to the acronym "cub". "Bogan" is a long-established pejorative Australian term for a member the white working-class poor, similar to the British "chav" or American "trash". This new slang and related discourses served to brighten class boundaries and to defend middle class authority and spaces of middle-class consumption from upstart interlopers (Pini, McDonald and Mayes 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> Karratha is a city in the Pilbara region in the far north of Western Australia. It was built to service the expanding mining industry in the region, and its economy is primarily based on resource extraction including iron ore and natural gas.

However, for migrants, the value attached to technical and trade-skilled labour comprises a further dimension beyond employment opportunities and earning potential. Because the Australian migration program treats in-demand occupations equally, and does not differentiate between professional skills and technical skills, many trade skilled migrants, particularly those who arrived in the early years of the resources boom before the introduction of more stringent English-language testing, found they could change their status from temporary labour to permanent resident under employer-sponsored visa streams with relative ease. During the same period, this transition was often not so straightforward for middle class migrants, particularly international students who aimed to achieve permanent status in Australia through the “education-migration nexus” (Robertson 2013) but were frustrated in these goals by changing legislation and constrained employment opportunities. Their tenuous legal status may be observed in the “visa churning” practices and “staggered” migration of international students and recent graduates, whereby individuals may apply for and be granted a series of temporary visas before possibly finding a pathway to permanent status (Birrell and Healy 2012, 23-5; Robertson 2013, 2019). As the case studies in both this chapter and the next will show, migrants with Australian tertiary qualifications can experience protracted temporariness characterised by insecurity, precarity and difficult interactions with changing structures of migration governance.

As outlined in Chapter 3, studies of intra-ethnic class in Australian migration have tended to focus on class differences between migrants who arrived in Australia at different times, so in these cases class is one expression of migrant vintage, alongside other points of difference such as sub-national region of origin or political orientation (Colic-Peisker 2002; Baldassar, Pyke and Ben Moshe 2017; Khorana 2014). This chapter differs from these earlier studies by considering interactions between people from different class backgrounds who arrived in Australia at approximately the same time.

There are two broad points of difference where class-based categories or identities are regularly recognised and invoked by migrants living in Perth. The first point of difference is between blue-collar working-class migrants and white-collar tertiary educated migrants, including professional skilled migrants and foreign students. The second is between trade skilled working-class migrants who are originally from large urban centres in China, and those with rural *hukou* status. This chapter considers each of these points of difference, relating them back to *suzhi* discourse and the ways that homeland national class frames may be disrupted and reinterpreted in the new transnational context.

## 8.1 Intra-ethnic class differences in Australia

Class and migration interact to generate new ways of engaging with and interpreting social hierarchies, yet Australian migration literature is strangely quiet on the subject of class and intra-ethnic class differences. Those few Australian studies that do analyse intra-ethnic class, where social class serves as a point of conflict or social distance between migrants from one country of origin or ethno-national group, have tended to focus on class differences between vintages of migrants arriving at different points in history. Temporally layered cohorts of migrants arriving under different political and economic circumstances in both their countries of origin and destination experience distance based on social class that usually intersects with other characteristics, such as regional background and political alignment.

For example, Croatian migrants who arrived in the 1960s or the 1980s, while sharing a non-English speaking background, experienced migration in qualitatively different ways because earlier migrants were predominantly from working-class backgrounds, while the more recent arrivals are typically middle-class and better educated (Colic-Peisker 2002, 2008). Foundational generation Vietnamese migrants who arrived in Australia as refugees in the aftermath of the Vietnam War came from diverse class backgrounds but formed a common diasporic class identity in Australia based on a shared experience of exile and similarly constrained occupational opportunities after arriving. Their class position may be in conflict with recent migrants who typically belong to a new Vietnamese transnational middle class and are moreover perceived by established Vietnamese Australians to be aligned to the ruling Communist regime that precipitated their own exile (Baldassar, Pyke and Ben Moshe 2017). Among Indian migrants to Australia, Khorana (2014) has shown that earlier vintages of predominantly middle-class professionals from India may choose to present themselves as socially distant from more recent migrants whom they perceive as lower class. Khorana argues that this is predicated not only on social class but also on region of origin and different perspectives on local Australian politics, including those that arise from the earlier migrants' internalisation of mainstream Australian discourses of assimilation.



In contrast, this chapter provides insights into how class can be constructed and contested *within* an ethno-national “group” of migrants who are all of one vintage, arriving during roughly the same period of time. Three factors contribute to these new perspectives on intra-ethnic class. Firstly, the comparative newness of the PRC-born population in Western Australia and the rapid recent expansion of this national-origin group has brought large numbers of recently migrated co-nationals together in Perth; their engagement through new sites of interaction, like emerging co-ethnic rental markets form a kind of social laboratory within which intra-ethnic class contestations may occur. Secondly, the exceptional economic conditions of boomtown Perth have both permitted the migration of trade skilled workers and created the “blue collar affluence” (Forsey 2015) that subverts traditional occupational hierarchies. Finally, social class both interacts with and (importantly) is discussed with reference to the changing structures of migration governance. This last point is particularly interesting, as it points to the ways that migrants from China internalise, interpret and reproduce the neoliberal logics of Australian selective migration policy with reference to Chinese national class frames.

## 8.2 Sites of class contestation in Perth

Chinese class relations are reproduced in the Australian context but are also challenged and subverted under the different economic and social circumstances that recent migrants have encountered in Perth. I found that there are two key points of difference where social class or its proxies, including education and *suzhi*, were invoked by Chinese migrants living in Perth. The first is between tertiary educated, middle-class migrants and working-class trade skilled migrants with less education. The second is *within* the occupational category of trade skilled migrants; participants invoked difference and social distance between people from rural backgrounds and urban backgrounds. The following sections address each of these two points of difference in turn.

## 8.2.1 Sites of contestation (I): Working class vs middle class migrants

Luanchan is a middle-class migrant in her late twenties from a first-tier city in eastern China. She first came to Perth as a graduate student, but after getting her master's degree she has been unable to find appropriate employment with an employer in Australia because she does not have PR. Despite the challenges she faces, Luanchan is determined to remain in Australia. She and a friend set up a small business, primarily in order to have a sponsorship vehicle for their own 457s. This is a way of remaining in Australia for now, but they are vulnerable to changing regulations, and this will never be a pathway to permanent status. It's a precarious way of living, especially as she is adamant that returning to China is not an option. She fears what Choi (2018) has termed "chain deskilling" whereby employment opportunities decline both in the destination country and then again upon return. Like many other Chinese international students, Luanchuan's time spent overseas and her lack of appropriate work experience have made her less competitive in the Chinese job market and unlikely to find stable employment if she goes back (Fong 2011).

Unsurprisingly, Luanchan finds her precarious status stressful. I felt that some of this stress was expressed in the somewhat resentful way she described other migrants who have found it easier to get PR, describing many of them as "low *suzhi*" and "newly rich trash" or "cashed-up bogans" (*tuhao*). *Tuhao* is a play on words, substituting the character *fu* from *fuhao* meaning rich and powerful person, for the character *tu*, meaning earthy, rustic and crude. *Tuhao* is a derogatory term used to describe those perceived to have more money than taste, similar in the Western Australian context to "cashed-up bogan". Much as "cub" is a boundary-maintaining discursive response to the disruption to class hegemony posed by the intrusion of new social groups into middle class spaces of consumption (Pini, McDonald and Mayes 2012), so the widespread deployment of "tuhao" is one manifestation of the hardening of class boundaries among Chinese youth (Ao 2014).

Luanchan told me that the kind of person moving to Australia has changed "because before you had to have a certain educational level in order to go abroad." Her workplace is in Northbridge, Perth's Chinatown, where she sees Chinese people behaving in ways she thinks reflect their background and lower socioeconomic status:

I see low quality people behaving badly, especially older people of thirty to fifty years old. For example, they behave badly because they say they can't read the road signs. I have a parking space behind the shop, and I have to use it to get to work on time but often people park in it, even though there's a sign. So I park behind them [blocking them in] and I leave my business card on the windscreen

so they can call me when they come back. One day I blocked in a car and when the driver came back he didn't see my card and started kicking my car! Fortunately, my neighbour saw him and called me, and we went out and asked him to stop. But it's this kind of behaviour that I mean.

Her friend Eric, also a graduate student from a first-tier Chinese city, agrees that the Australian migration program is poorly managed, as he perceives limited opportunities for qualified white-collar professionals while at the same time trade-skilled migrants with no English skills have been able to access permanent status. Eric is another serial visa holder. After completing an Australian BA in under two years because his university gave him credit for prior learning in China, Eric learned upon graduating that his study credit meant he had not been in Australia long enough to meet the residency requirements for a graduate visa. He then enrolled in a second degree, an expensive master's which he did not originally plan to study, in order to keep a valid visa and remain in Australia. In addition to the frustrations of his own experience, he cited other instances where he perceived the migration program is failing more educated migrants: he knows a friend with a Masters of Accounting who works as a server in an Asian fast food shop; another friend advertised to fill an entry-level admin role at his accounting firm and received dozens of applications, all from over-qualified migrants from Asian backgrounds who held at least a bachelor degree in accounting. Eric contrasted these examples with a working-class family of his intimate acquaintance:

While at the same time there are other migrants that really cannot assimilate and are having a tough time, people with hardly any English at all. My landlord is like this. He is a welder from north east China who works fly-in fly-out, and his wife works in a tofu factory. They don't know anything about Australia, and they don't try to learn anything. They don't try to assimilate<sup>3</sup> – this cannot be a good thing for Australia.

When asked if he thought that younger migrants might adapt more readily to the new environment than their middle-aged parents, he was sceptical:

No, not necessarily. Take their son, for example. He is nineteen years old and came here seven years ago when he was twelve, so when he came he was young enough to assimilate. I have read that any time under fifteen is good for assimilation. But he spends all day gaming and chatting online and when I do hear him speak English – when he needs to contact someone on behalf of his parents, sort out something with the house – his English is no better than mine is after just two and a half years here.

His parents asked me to help him find a job and I had to tell them that if he can't find a job it's just because you're not looking hard enough. Yes, good jobs

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<sup>3</sup> I spoke with Eric in English. 'Assimilate' was his choice of word. The Mandarin word most commonly used in a similar context is *rongru* which can be translated as 'assimilate', 'integrate' or, literally, 'blend in'.

are hard to find, but if you just want a normal job then it's easy. I decided I wanted to get a job when I came here, not because I really needed one but because everyone else had one. I went around Northbridge giving out my phone number and had more than one offer within two or three days. It's not hard! And it should be easier for him because he's under twenty so they can pay him a bit less. But his parents don't know this. They really know nothing about Australia.

Eric is perhaps angrier than most about this perceived injustice in the migration program. Later in our conversation we turned to the topic of dialects in both English and Chinese. Proficiency in Mandarin is one means of demonstrating educational attainment and *suzhi*. Strong regional dialects are still common, particularly among older Chinese, but in Eric's eyes this renders such linguistically gauche individuals unsuitable for elevation to community leadership:

Everyone is born into a level and there's nothing you can do to change it. I see people at events trying to be better than they are, and it just seems ridiculous. Plus, some people think a great deal of themselves. You see the heads of organisations – I won't name specifics – and they speak such bad Mandarin and bad English that there's no way for me to understand them! Yet they make themselves so important.

The tenor of Eric's prejudice was echoed by many others from educated family backgrounds. Time and again, tertiary qualified and professional migrants expressed discomfort and embarrassment when discussing the "different habits" or "incivility" of some of their co-nationals, while some expressed concerns that their behaviour would be noted by local Australians and reflect badly on the Chinese community as a whole. These concerns about the potentially embarrassing actions of co-nationals in Australia reflects contemporary civilising discourses in China (Schack 2018) and echoes popular and official condemnation of some Chinese tourists overseas and attempts to discipline their behaviour through the "civilised tourism" campaign (Chen 2013).

When I discussed the focus of my research project with middle-class Chinese, I was often told that less well-educated migrants lacked the capacity to understand and engage with my research. Sometimes this disregard for the capabilities of lower-class migrants went so far as to deny them the agency to offer informed consent to participating in the research. For example, one day Cherry, a middle-class migrant from one of the most developed cities in China, accompanied me to the home of a welder and his wife who lived in a street near her house and with whom she had already spoken about my research. The welder was out at work, as expected, while his wife was at home caring for their young child. We stayed there chatting with her for much of the afternoon. At one point during the conversation another woman of a similar educational and occupational background, also married a welder, who lived in the neighbourhood called by. Our host introduced me and explained about my research, upon which Cherry urged the new arrival to also arrange to meet with me and share her migrant experience. She seemed a bit taciturn, suspicious even, but we exchanged phone numbers, and when I called her, she agreed to meet for an interview the following week. I happened to speak to Cherry before the appointed day and mentioned my concern that this woman did not seem entirely at ease. “No, don’t worry about that,” responded Cherry, “She doesn’t understand, she’s from the countryside. You can ask her any questions that you want.” Suffice to say, when I met the new participant, I clearly explained my project and her involvement. She understood very well and was happy to contribute, not only telling me her own story, but also exactly what problems and policy recommendations she thought I ought to include in my research report. I went on to see her and other members of her family again, and they contributed a great deal to the shape of my research.

Working-class migrants are well aware of how middle-class migrants discuss them. Sam is comparatively uneducated, having worked in a factory since he was eighteen. But, since he arrived in Perth in 2007 and enjoyed full employment throughout the boom years, his trade skills have served him well. When I met him in 2015, he was still working as a welder and had a lucrative FIFO role with a resources company. He was very dismissive of the sense of superiority so common among more highly educated migrants. Sam argued that different economic conditions and occupational opportunities in Australia challenge the class relations that previously structured their interactions in China:

The difference between us and the white collar migrants and the foreign students is that they think they are better – but we are in the better situation. A foreign student comes here and has to spend so much on fees, and then they have their living costs on top of that. They can only work 20 hours a week and then only in low paying jobs like cleaning. In four years they spend the same amount that we earn! And during that time we pay tax, so we are a big help to

Australia too. The Australian government is very clever. They work out exactly what they need in terms of skilled labour and that's what they allow in visas every year. The students - they spend all that money and then at the end they still aren't able to get a visa!

We also have a higher status here (*diwei*). In China a worker has a comparatively low status, but in Australia a worker is a good thing to be. A plumber or welder or mechanic is a good job and can make money. They think they are better because they are well educated and speak good English, but who has the good job? Who has bought a house and a good car, maybe a boat?

Feng, another welder from north China, agrees that white collar migrants find life in Australia more difficult than blue collar workers and are generally paid less. He told me that as a migrant it is best to have a trade, so it is easier to find an appropriate job. Feng argues that the process of migration has broken down some of the barriers between classes, or at least led to more interactions between Chinese of different backgrounds in Australia, interactions that would not have occurred in China.

I was introduced to Feng by Sally, a fellow postgraduate student. Sally is very much a member of China's intellectual elite; she is the child of an academic and married to an academic. She has spent most of her life on Chinese university campuses and is now enrolled as a PhD student at a university in Australia. Sally met Feng because she rents her room in a shared house from one of his friends, another welder who lives interstate. Feng owns a house a few streets away and looks after the property on behalf of his friend, performing maintenance work and minor repairs, and managing relationships with his tenants. Sally arranged for me to interview Feng at her home one Sunday afternoon when he was coming to do some garden maintenance. No other house mates were home that day, so Feng and I sat at the dining table in the main room drinking tea during the interview. After a little over an hour, Sally came out from her room where she had been reading and joined us in conversation at the table. She mentioned the university where she and her husband live in China and Feng, smiling, observed, "In China we wouldn't speak, wouldn't know each other." Visibly stiffening and seemingly discomfited, Sally asked what he meant. Feng responded:

I mean that in China you would have your circle and I would have my circle. Each knows his own circle. You are in the university and you know students and teachers and professors, and I know people who work in similar places to me. There isn't really the chance to meet other people. It's not like here where you have a house and so you need to sort things out and get things fixed. In China you buy a new apartment and there's nothing needs doing. Perhaps you might call an electrician to fit something, but you wouldn't talk to them. Here it's different, we ask questions like "When did you come over?" and "Where are you from?"

Eric told me that “people of different backgrounds keep to their own circle” yet the reality is that migration has brought diverse individuals who in China would have had nothing to do with one another into regular, even daily, contact. The ethnic rental market is a key site of interaction. Eric may be the son of wealthy Cantonese, but he rents his room from a Dongbei factory worker. Cherry first met her welder neighbours when she rented a room in a shared house (again, owned by another welder) during her first couple of months in Perth.

Despite such close interaction, indeed, more likely because of it, educated migrants routinely draw upon the same language of “quality” and “civility” established in China to discursively construct and maintain class boundaries in the Australian context (Hsu 2007; Ao 2014; Chen 2013).

### 8.2.2 Sites of contestation (II): Rural backgrounds vs urban backgrounds

The way you feel about migration, about Australia, depends a lot on where you come from in China. I’m from Shenyang. It’s a big city. You’ve been to Dalian, you know what that’s like. Well, Shenyang is the provincial capital, like Perth.<sup>4</sup> Many migrants are from the countryside, from Shandong or Sichuan. They were farmers and then they came to the cities as rural migrant labour. So they think differently.

The second point of class difference frequently identified and invoked was between migrants from urban centres and those from rural areas. The quotation with which I have begun this section comes from an interview with Zhang, a 50-year-old welder from a developed, industrial city in North China. Zhang observed that place of origin plays an important role in how someone experiences their migration to Australia, particularly their rural or urban background. Both he and his wife were skilled manual workers in China, each trained in technical specialisations. They were born and raised in a first-tier northern city and after leaving high school were assigned jobs in large state-owned manufacturing facilities.

Zhang explained that he tries to keep social distance from welders from rural backgrounds, even to the extent of not buying a house in a suburb popular with migrants from China. He argued that the socio-spatial dimensions of Chinese homeland class frames shape how a person experiences migration.

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<sup>4</sup> Dalian and Shenyang can both be described as ‘first tier’ cities in the north eastern province of Liaoning. This participant’s implied meaning was that Shenyang is even more ‘developed’ than Dalian, invoking the comparison because of my personal familiarity with the pretty but somewhat smaller port city had been established earlier in our conversation.

Zhang first arrived as a 457 holder and since coming to Perth has had welding jobs in workshops alongside both urban migrants with work histories similar to his own, and welders from rural backgrounds in China. After his wife and child came out to join him, they moved to a suburb with a predominantly local Australian population in an outlying area of Perth. This was partly to take advantage of cheaper house prices in less central suburbs, but also, he said, because he wants to keep himself and his family apart from some of the other migrants from China whom he has encountered:

I didn't want to buy in an area where lots of Chinese live. This is because they [meaning working class migrants from rural areas] think differently and so behave differently. Take our parents, for example. I go to see my parents because I want to visit them. My father has a pension, he has plenty of money. He would have no use for any money I sent them. But their parents have nothing, they need the money.

They are from the village and have no education, they haven't even completed junior middle school and they've been at work in the fields since they were fifteen. It's not really about their *suzhi*, but your environment influences your thinking. But it doesn't affect their children in the same way – because they are growing up in a different environment, so it's just the parents. It's like spitting. You could spend years in China and think spitting is fine, but then you come here and stop spitting. A good environment can make a bad person good, while a bad environment can make a good person bad.

Zhang here implicitly deploys *suzhi* as a site of differentiation but deflects the judgement it entails by pointing to structural (rather than individual) reasons for the *suzhi* deficiency he perceives in welder migrants from rural backgrounds (Kipnis 2011; Jacka 2009).

I found that among welders, place of origin, and hence original rural or urban status in China, was typically a recurring point of differentiation and of social distance. Some welders employed in Australian workshops claimed that having a rural or urban background was a factor that even affected the quality of their work. Urban workers who had been trained in large SOEs in China were proud of their work history, arguing that the standard of work and technical specialisation far exceeded those of smaller workshops in both China and Australia. One welder who had spent his early years at a large work unit in a first-tier city in North China told me, “There are lots of welders who come from the country. They work ok, but their quality is not as good. They worked for small private companies in China. It's not the same.”

Jasmine, the wife of a welder originally from a first-tier city, explained that in her job as a vegetable packer, she too works alongside women from very different backgrounds in China. She told me that she felt social distance at work, and when pressed to explain why she illustrated the gulf between her upbringing and those of her colleagues:



Everyone has a different story. I talk with my colleagues and they have very different stories to me. [Once when talking with them] I complained that when I was a child I had to drink milk every day. My parents made me and I didn't like it, having to drink it every day. Back then it wasn't easy to get milk. There wasn't much and the government controlled its distribution but my parents found a way to get it. So I said that I didn't like it and they [my colleagues] asked "Why not? Milk is so good for you!" This is because they have a very different background and couldn't get milk as children. They are from Sichuan, Shandong, Jiangxi, Hunan, all over. But their story is so different to mine. You know, there are only three people from my [first tier global city] hometown working at the factory.

She further argued that their behaviour at work was sharply differentiated on the basis of their homeland class backgrounds, previous occupations, and embodied dispositions or *suzhi*. She and her colleagues were paid piecework rates on top of a low basic wage. Sarah told me this led to assertive, pushy and inconsiderate behaviour with her lower-class colleagues rushing to get work done quickly, even if this made a mess. By contrast, she likes to work slowly, cleanly and carefully because this reflects her high level of training in the large SOE where she was employed prior to emigration.

Sarah, like Jasmine, had enjoyed a comparatively comfortable childhood and early working life in a northern provincial capital before she and Alan first came overseas for work. She told me that for urban Chinese like her, migration was a difficult choice to make, a painful sacrifice which they had made to improve life for the next generation. After recalling at length the hardships that she had endured in leaving her natal family behind and transitioning to life and work in a new place, she proposed that for rural Chinese, migration to Australia entails no such struggle:

But for people from the country it is better here. From their teenage years they have to leave their homes and go to work in the developed cities like Shenzhen and Shanghai. They work as *nongmingong* and they are used to physical work. They used to have to work here and work there, one year in one place and another year in another place, so when they come here [Australia] they think they have found Paradise. The work is the same for them. People who have been rushed all over from pillar to post (*sichu benbo*) for work will feel better when they are here [and can stay in the one place].

When I spoke with working class migrants from rural backgrounds, many of them did indeed relish the change in status that accompanied joining the Australian workforce. The life of a rural migrant worker was tough, I was told, but the hardest part was the discrimination they faced in the cities, discrimination borne out of the socio-spatial class structures and *suzhi* discourses of contemporary China.

Yang, who had first gone overseas for work after his divorce, was born in the 1960s in a village in north China. His region is famous for being 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’an<sup>5</sup> 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, he had gone to work as a welder in an eastern seaboard city. He lived there as a peasant worker for several years, leaving his wife and children in the country with his mother, before becoming an international labour migrant in 2004, first in Korea, and then later in Australia.

For Yang, migration to Australia 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 realised after returning from Korea that fixed-term labour migration to Asian countries with tightly regulated policies of compulsory return (Xiang 2013b; Chok 2013) could improve the financial position of his family, but not their status in China’s socio-spatial hierarchies. Unlike most of the welders I spoke with, Yang had done plenty of research with the help of a more highly educated relative, and chose to invest in an Australian visa fully aware of the fact that, unlike in most Asian countries, the Australian immigration system offers 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 (*nongmingong*) 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 just a rural migrant 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.

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<sup>5</sup> In 1927, following the Guomindang purge of Chinese Communist Party members, Mao Zedong and a small army of perhaps 1,000 troops took shelter in the isolated Jinggang Mountains (Jinggangshan) in borderlands between Hunan Province and Jiangxi Province in the south of China. It was here, and in the nearby Jiangxi Soviet, that Mao conducted extensive research on rural class relations and first experimented with land reform. Yan’an is in a particularly dry and desperate part of the north Chinese plain in Shaanxi Province. It was the headquarters of the CCP from 1936 to 1948 during the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance and the civil war with the Guomindang, which resumed after the surrender of the Japanese at the end of the Pacific War. Both Jinggangshan and Yan’an are remembered in revolutionary history as places where the impoverished peasantry supported the Party prior to the ‘Liberation’ of all China (Spence 1999).

## 8.3 Analysis and Conclusion

There is a small body of research in which social class is recognised as a site of intra-ethnic difference and conflict for migrants leaving their home countries for Australia at different points in history, but in these cases class is an expression of vintage or migrant generation, alongside other points of difference such as sub-national region of origin or political orientation (Colic-Peisker 2002; Baldassar, Pyke and Ben Moshe 2017; Khorana 2014). For contemporary Chinese migrants, however, people newly arriving in Perth are entering social spaces where homeland national class frames are recognised and negotiated.

Migration to Australia has created more opportunities for middle-class and working-class, rural and urban Chinese to interact in their intimate daily lives. While in China, people from such different educational and occupational backgrounds may have had little reason to interact as they worked in different spaces, lived in different compounds and sent their children to different schools (Tang 2013; Huang 2005). In Australia they are thrown together by ethnic concentrations in certain suburbs, through the ethnic rental market and commonality of a shared language in a strange land. The differences in structure and economy that Chinese migrants encountered in Perth, particularly during the resources boom, serve to challenge and even reverse much of the economic dimensions of class privilege found in the Chinese setting. Urban factory workers, and even some rural labourers who once lived in dirty, cramped accommodation, struggling to earn a living wage while in the big cities of China, now own Australian investment properties and lease rooms to the educated, professionals who might have barely glanced their way back home.

Yet among those more educated migrants, disparaging assumptions about the working-class migrants among whom they now live still prevail. Cherry, who had shown such disdain for the cognitive powers of her neighbour, also introduced me to another welder and his family who lived in her suburb. I interviewed him, gathering useful information and receiving an invitation to his home on a later date. When I sent her a WeChat message thanking her for the introduction she responded:

As long as it was helpful then that's good. He is one of the first of the migrants from that village in Shandong to have come to Australia. He doesn't have much education but he's very interesting - quite different to most welders ☺

As already noted, Forsey's (2015, 359) ethnography of Karratha unpacks the failing "modernist myth of education-based meritocracy" in the same geographic and historical context of the Western Australian mining boom. His local Australian research subjects experience disruption to established occupational hierarchies through the elevated social status of the "tradie" and the changing economic class and material success of workers during these exceptional times. In keeping with the new class analyses foregrounded in Chapter 3 (Savage et al. 2013; Sheppard and Biddle 2017), older tripartite class schemes no longer seem to apply as different combinations of economic, social and cultural capitals produce not just class fractions but new interstitial classes. These shifts in Western Australia led to defensive class discourses that sought to maintain the social and cultural distinctions of a traditional educated middle class (Pini, McDonald and Mayes 2012).

Migrants from China to Perth encountered the same disruptive and exceptional economic circumstances. However, Australian migration policies serve to exacerbate these points of difference and class contestation for new arrivals. Migrants from China have internalised and reproduce the neoliberal logic of the (un)deserving migrant that is evident in Australian selective migration programs. Yet this is unsurprising since the culturalist dimensions of homeland national class frames and the language used to articulate them that migrants bring with them from China is laden with the same logics of embodied, individualised value that explicitly link class and mobility.

Mobility as a key component of the modern global Chinese subject has been integrated with *suzhi* discourse. For the international student going to school overseas or the investor migrant securing residency rights in a desirable destination, travel and the ability to travel is an expression of their higher quality and a form of class-based consumption. Vanessa Fong (2011) has shown that for young educational migrants from north China, including those from working-class (but urban) families, international migration is framed as a quest for developed world citizenship. By this she means not only, or perhaps not even, the legal citizenship status achieved through naturalisation practices, but rather the freedoms, capabilities and flexibilities that her young participants imagine necessarily accompany social and cultural citizenship in the developed world. International study is therefore framed as a transformative project, one which is hard won and highly individual, both reflective and productive of a person's value and embodied quality.

At the same time, certain forms of domestic mobility are seen as threatening to the national quality, in particular rural migrant workers and the framing of the floating population as a hinderance to urban modernity (Coates 2018, 173). When the figure of the rural migrant worker is discursively constructed as naturally and irrevocably lacking *suzhi*, as a category of person beyond and below the urban citizen and particularly the middle-class urban citizen, the successful acquisition by some of their number of the trappings of developed world citizenship in the form of Australian employment, Australian residency, Australian home-ownership, even an Australian passport, is transgressive and threatening. This is all the more true when tertiary educated and “high quality” Chinese migrants find they cannot attain the same status and instead must endure visa churn and protracted temporariness.

Despite evident tensions between migrants from different backgrounds, particularly those who consider themselves to be middle- or working-class, it is less clear at this stage if this will translate into meaningful distinctions for the second- and later-generations. Participants from all backgrounds tend to engage in similar educational choices parenting practices, such as paying for additional classes or encouraging children to work hard in order to enter the competitively selective gifted and talented streams in WA public high schools. Even families with very low incomes, including those with trade-skilled fathers unable to find reliable, suitable work following the downturn and unskilled mothers working at or below minimum wage, often told me that they spent what little money they had on after-school tutoring and other extra-curricular activities. This could be explained with reference to high investment parenting practices that are common throughout China, partly as a result of the shift to low fertility following the one-child policy (Fong 2006). Alternatively, it may be that in their parenting practices working-class migrants are adopting the “success frames” and “ethnic cultural scripts” that have been developed in Perth by earlier groups of hyper-selected ethnic Chinese migrants (Lee and Zhou 2016; Tran 2016). There is not space here to explore questions of later generations in more detail, rather it remains a possible focus of further research.

## Chapter 9      Temporal disjuncture and precarity: temporary jobs, permanent visas and circular dreams<sup>1</sup>

This chapter continues to engage the experiences of participants from diverse backgrounds, here using the lens of migrant temporalities to explore differences and similarities. I argue that for Chinese migrants from both working- and middle-class backgrounds there exist clear disjunctures between the temporalities of legal status and those of migrants' lived experiences. While individuals may hold temporary or permanent visas, their migration objectives and settlement processes do not necessarily accord with their formal status.

While the circumstances of migrants from different backgrounds and cohorts do vary, common themes emerge in the accounts of migrants who are engaging with changing Australian migration policies and the rapidly expanding emphasis on new categories of market-driven temporary visas. Participants tell both of temporary jobs that have turned unexpectedly to permanent relocations and of established, locally embedded lives rendered uncertain by the ever-present fear of a revoked visa. Furthermore, the layered temporalities of cohorts that engage with changing structures of migration legislation at different points in time result in individual migrants experiencing similar migration pathways in qualitatively different ways.

As outlined in Chapter 2, legislative changes over the last two decades have worked to accommodate new migration policy objectives that include increasing volumes of demand-driven and temporary migration. This resulted in a consequent rise in “two step” or temporary-to-permanent visa pathways (Cully 2011; Hawthorne 2005, 2010; Hugo 2006) and increasing numbers of people experiencing “protracted temporariness” over many years of living in Australia (Robertson 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this chapter has been published as:  
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Despite such deep changes to Australian migration policy, indeed because the economic contribution of migrants is now so valorised, Australian visa regimes continue to make a clear legislative distinction between permanent and temporary visa classes. In terms of migrant experiences, this distinction translates into differentiated access to information, support and public services, and differentiated inclusion in society, even as the individuals that hold different classes of visa live their lives side by side, in the same cities, streets, schools, homes and workplaces.

Hugo (2006) noted that there was a lag in scholarly appreciation of the significance of these changes since both researchers and government agencies responsible for collecting data relating to workforce participation and impacts on labour markets continued to privilege permanent visa holders. However, in recent years new research has explored the ways in which temporary visa holders experience life in Australia. This research has considered many different categories of temporary residents including temporary workers, seasonal contractors, international students and graduates, and working holiday makers. There is often considerable overlap between these categories, as individuals may move between multiple visa classes over a protracted period of temporary residence in Australia, not so much “two-step” migration but instead in many cases almost a full flight of stairs (Baas 2010; Birrell and Healy 2012; Hawthorne 2011; Robertson 2013, 2014; Velayutham 2013). Temporary migrants frequently experience anxiety over their protracted migration process and may be occupationally and financially disadvantaged by their uncertain and precarious legal status (Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2014). However, the lived experiences of permanent and temporary visa holders are not so easily differentiated. Permanent visa holders enjoy a settled legal status but do not necessarily experience subjective settlement, while the occupational precarity that defined their time with insecure temporary legal status frequently continues to characterise their working lives even after becoming permanent residents or citizens (Goldring and Landolt, 2011). Unsurprisingly, English language ability affects employment opportunities, but also has a significant impact on the migration literacy of individuals. Individuals who demonstrate high migration literacy have greater capacity to navigate legislative and policy changes, while others are made vulnerable by their dependency on agents and employers to interpret their rights and options (Baas 2006; Robertson 2013; Velayutham 2013).

This chapter contributes to this new and growing body of research that addresses the experiences of temporary migrants and the ways in which “being temporary” can have far-reaching effects, even for Australian residents with permanent legal status. Such experiences are not restricted to working-class labour migrants, but rather may affect middle-class migrants in equal or even greater measure.

While recent migrants from China may hold temporary or permanent visas, their migration objectives and settlement processes do not necessarily accord with their formal status. Rather, there are evident disjunctures between the temporalities of their legal statuses and the temporalities of their daily lives. This chapter considers two ways in which the experiences of migrants from China working in trade skilled and unskilled employment reveal such disjunctures of status and experience.

Firstly, as has been discussed throughout this dissertation, many people who first arrived in Australia as self-imagined sojourners with clear, fixed-term plans, determined to return to their lives in China when their contracts ended, have since, quite unexpectedly, become permanent residents of Australia; homeowners, tax-payers and parents to new Australians growing up in Australian schools. Yet others, who may have intended or wanted to remain in Australia for the long term, find they must continue to struggle with the precarity of a temporary visa status and the consequent negative impacts upon job opportunities, family life and processes of belonging in the Australian setting. Such prolonged temporariness affects not only labour migrants in unskilled and semi-skilled roles, but also migrants with higher educational attainment who share the insecurity that accompanies an employer-sponsored temporary work visa.

Secondly, the longer-term life plans articulated by participants undermine assumptions about a linear progression from temporary visa to permanent status to citizenship. Even after many years of permanent status, many migrants still experience a limited sense of belonging and imagine futures that entail circular patterns of on-migration. This disrupts ideas about permanence that are implied in secure legal statuses and provides evidence of the lasting impact of precarious temporalities. Some participants, particularly those from the trade skilled cohort, express a strong desire to return to China when they are older to enjoy their autumn years in a familiar setting surrounded by friends and family. As such, they are unwilling to renounce Chinese citizenship and risk the possible exclusion from China that they fear this might entail. Not taking Australian citizenship offers a more flexible future where return to China or ongoing circular migrations are possibilities. This perspective is further extended in the next chapter.



An important point here is that prolonged temporary statuses and challenging struggles with shifting landscapes of migration governance are not only experienced by those working-class migrants with low educational attainment, but rather are endured by Chinese migrants from a range of class backgrounds. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the uncertainty of a temporary status, and the challenges qualified, educated migrants face in finding a pathway to permanence informs the ways that class is invoked, discussed and contested among migrants living in Perth. This chapter offers more insights into the ways that experiences of engaging with ever-changing selective migration policies create the conditions that give rise to the debates about “(un)deserving migrants” (Anderson 2013) featured in the last chapter.

## 9.1 New temporalities of migration and mobilities

As discussed in Chapter 2, contemporary migrations differ radically from the neoclassical models, push-pull explanations and settler paradigms that dominated Australian thinking on the subject for much of the twentieth century. Examples of mono-directional migration and assimilation are now rare. People increasingly live their lives simultaneously engaged in multiple places across borders, transnational families disperse their members around the world, while temporary, flexible and circular migrant trajectories have become the norm for people of almost all backgrounds and nationalities (Castles 2002; Castles, Vasta and Ozkul 2014; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Yeoh, Huang and Lam 2005). Transience and temporal disjuncture increasingly characterise the movements of people around the world. Transients have emerged as a new migrant subject whose diverse motivations and experiences extend beyond older notions of guestworkers and seasonal labour to encompass international students, domestic carers, professional global knowledge workers, as well as those engaged in forced migrations. Their experiences, though varied, are characterised by “temporariness, transitoriness, impermanence, ephemerality, mutability and volatility” (Yeoh, 2017, 143; Gomes, Leong and Yang 2017; Xiang 2017b).

The mobilities lens further disrupts the traditional binaries of here/there, temporary/permanent, home/host by introducing new, temporally aware ways of conceptualising life in motion (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007). Time and speed are intrinsic to a consideration of the movement and/or stillness of matter, including people, through and within the infrastructures of transport, regulation and commercial activity that both enable and constrain such movement. Alongside this focus on (im)mobility, scholars have introduced many new theoretical and methodological approaches for “bringing time in” to our understandings of migration as a time-space phenomenon (Griffiths, Rogers and Anderson 2013; King et al. 2006, 259). Following Cwerner’s (2001) influential call to consider a more systematic framework of the “times of migration”, there have been substantive moves towards a reconceptualisation of migration as “transtemporal” (Coe 2014) and a view of (im)mobility that reveals time as inextricably imbricated with space (Conlon 2011).

Rapidly changing migration regulations play an active role in shaping the lived temporalities of diverse migrants. The times of the state, made manifest through the processing speeds of visa applications, though mandatory periods of (un)employment, exclusion, residency and restricted mobility, and even through detention, act forcibly upon individuals’ daily emotional and social lives. Irregular migrants experience the “usurption of time” through repeated expulsion and retention (Andersson 2014), while those awaiting decisions about their status suffer the psychological toll of “temporal ruptures” as they shift unexpectedly from the “sticky” or “suspended” time of waiting to the “frenzied” time that follows rushed deportation orders (Griffiths 2014). Such temporal insecurity is not limited to the most vulnerable migrant groups, however. Highly skilled professionals likewise face the often unwelcome temporal consequences of their interactions with legal frameworks and administering government agencies. Far from seamless or linear, their border crossings and pathways to permanence may be interrupted and delayed as they wait “in limbo” for decisions they cannot control (Axelsson 2017). Similarly, “middling” migrants in Australia, such as students, graduates and (usually middle class) working holiday makers, struggle with uncertain statuses and interrupted life trajectories as they navigate the “contingent boundaries between temporariness, extended temporariness and permanence” (Robertson 2014, 1927; Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2014). This “heteronomous” time (Cwerner 2001) whereby migrants’ lives and family plans are shaped through interaction with the temporal regulatory regimes of visas and waiting, status and suspension is central to my arguments in this chapter.

The longer-term implications of “heteronomous” time (Cwerner 2001) merit further consideration. Precarious employment combined with a precarious legal status often results in an inability to feel established in the new setting. This can have far-reaching impact, as the same feelings are shared by many co-ethnic colleagues and neighbours, even after several years with permanent status. There are two points to consider here. Firstly, employment patterns and social networks established while “temporary” have long tail consequences. As Goldring and Landolt (2011, 325) demonstrated in their Toronto-based research, “precarious legal status has a long-lasting, negative effect on job precarity”. Likewise in Perth, there are tangible long term consequences caused by the precarity and vulnerability of a temporary status for individuals that later become permanent residents and citizens. Secondly, while temporary labour migrants in many settings live a life in “suspension” (Xiang 2017b), prevented by regulations, employers and forms of spatial and social segregation from engaging fully with their host society, this is not the case in Australia. Here, the transition from a classical immigration country to a hybrid approach, which incorporates neoliberal and flexible technologies of migration management (Castles, Vasta and Ozkul 2014) has created a grey zone where partial integration can and does occur. In Perth, temporary labour migrants are not truly “suspended” apart from the “settled” population. Rather, they live alongside other working-class Chinese migrants with similar backgrounds who do have permanent status, all inhabiting a shared social field, as will be demonstrated through the central case study of this chapter. This proximity and consequent shared experience means that the insecurity and precarity of the still temporary is a daily feature in the lives of the nominally permanent.

The examples I present in this chapter are nationally and regionally specific, yet bear some striking similarities to accounts of diverse migrants in many different settings (see, for example, Axelsson 2017; Axelsson, Malmberg and Zhang 2017; Baas 2010, 2017; Coe 2016; Griffiths 2013; Goldring and Landolt, 2011; Kalir 2013; Robertson, 2014; Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2014). Borders in the contemporary world are spatial, they are places of migration control and lines on the map. Yet they also have temporal dimensions that materially shape the lives of those who seek to cross them.

## 9.2 Temporariness and permanence: disjunctures of status/experience and the varied temporalities of migrant cohorts

While individuals living in Australia may hold different visa statuses, this is not necessarily clearly mirrored in their occupational opportunities, processes of settlement, nor long-term orientation. Permanent residents often did not first migrate with the intention of remaining in Australia, and even after many years of legal settlement may be employed in insecure, unskilled work, have poor English and experience a limited sense of belonging. Meanwhile, others may enact many signs of settlement in the new context, such as home ownership, making Anglophone friends, and bringing children to Australia, despite the lack of legal settlement resulting from their temporary visa status. More often, however, precarious employment combined with a precarious legal status seems to result in an inability to feel established in Australia. This can have far-reaching impact, as those same feelings are frequently shared by co-ethnic colleagues and neighbours, even after several years with permanent status.

In Chapter 7 I presented the experiences of the ‘reluctant settlers’ whose plans to return to China did not eventuate, and who now have legally “settled” lives in Australia. Although their long-term migration to Australia was far from intentional, many of this cohort are satisfied with their new lives in Perth, certain that the move was good for them and their families. A significant proportion however are at best ambivalent about the path their lives have taken as they struggle with language barriers and unsatisfactory employment options. Living and working alongside these almost accidental permanent residents, there are also a great many people who continue to experience the daily precarity arising from the combination of both a temporary visa status and insecure, poorly paid work.

This section begins with a case study that illustrates clearly how this daily engagement between “settlers” and “sojourners” or, to use the language of contemporary migration policy, permanent and temporary visa holders, works to blur the distinctions between these people. I then present more emic perspectives on what it means to live as a transient in Perth, and the consequences for forming healthy relationships, maintaining family life and developing a sense of belonging. The participants whose experiences are presented here are all working in precarious, low-paid employment, yet when their family backgrounds and educational histories are taken into consideration, they evidently belong to both working- and middle-class cohorts of migrants. This demonstrates that the insecurities borne of protracted temporary status can affect people with different national, occupational and educational backgrounds.

### 9.2.1 A case study: Temporal disjuncture, status and long-term occupational precarity

When I first met Liu Jing and Lili, they were living together in a shared house in one of the many new suburbs that have grown up around the outskirts of the Perth metropolitan area over the last twenty years. They are both women from villages in north China, both married to welders, both in their mid- to late-30s, and were both previously employed in clothing factories in China before they had children. Liu Jing and her husband lived in one room in the four-bedroom home with shared bathroom, kitchen and living space, while Lili’s family rented two of the other bedrooms, one for her, her husband and their infant son, and the other for their older school-age daughter. In many respects these two women had similar stories to tell, of poorly paid work in China, of the expense of supporting dependent parents in China who could not access any state welfare because of their rural backgrounds, and of ambitions to make enough money through a few years working in Australia to significantly better their family circumstances. Following the downturn in the resources sector and the consequent reduced work opportunities at steel fabrication suppliers, by late 2015 both of their husbands were only able to find temporary work, and the families shared similarly straitened circumstances. However, arriving at different points in the economic cycle and in the evolution of the migration legislative framework resulted in the two women experiencing this precarity in qualitatively different ways.

Lili and her husband first arrived in Australia in 2006 when welding jobs were plentiful and Australian employers still broadly keen to employ and sponsor labourers from overseas for both temporary and permanent visas. They left their baby in China in the care of grandparents, which Lili found very difficult, particularly since at the time there was no internet in the village so they could not even watch him grow and maintain a relationship by video call. However, after just two years of employment in Australia, the bare minimum period required to transition from their original 457 to a permanent visa, her husband's employer offered to sponsor their application. When the visa was granted a few months later, Lili was reunited with her daughter in Australia. Life was still hard; she initially had to take her young child along with her to irregular cleaning jobs until she eventually found a steady job in a factory, a position which paid a bit more but required long hours of day care that taxed her daughter's health. Nonetheless, she was happy to have her child living with her again. Her resolve to care for her much younger, Australia-born child herself, even though this means the family are less well-off and must continue to rent in a busy shared house, was borne out of this difficult and painful period of separation.

Liu Jing, however, despite leaving China less than a decade after Lili, belongs to a slightly later migrant vintage and faces a different economic and legislative climate than those migrants who belong to what they both term "the first lot" (*di yi pi*). Sitting around the dining table as Lili clattered in the kitchen making some rice porridge for her son, Liu Jing and I discussed the challenges of her temporary status and the strains this has placed on her own young family. Her own child, not much older than the toddler running around the room, was far away, living with her parents in her home village in China. She hadn't seen him for two years and had no idea when she might next. Liu Jing and her husband first arrived in Perth in late 2012, missing the peak of the mining boom. Like Lili, they had borrowed a lot of money in China to pay the migration agent fees which included an introduction to an Australian employer, skills assessment, and the processing of their 457 visa application. However, as I have already described in Chapter 6, on arrival in Australia, they were told that there was in fact no work for him with the company that had sponsored the visa, and that he should find casual employment in the grey economy. Liu Jing's husband intermittently found short term welding contracts and otherwise hired himself out as a labourer in construction. She worked as a dishwasher and vegetable packer, often working ten- or eleven-hour days, sometimes split shifts, for just 10 dollars an hour, well below minimum wage. For one painful and not-to-be-repeated week she even tried labouring on a building site herself, "pushing wheelbarrows and moving sand", before coming to the conclusion, as she massaged the knots from her aching calves that weekend, that this was definitely "work for men".

Like almost all the Chinese trade skilled migrants that I interviewed, Liu Jing and her husband had paid exorbitant fees to the migration agent in China. The money had been borrowed through informal loans and needed to be paid back even though the promised job failed to materialise. Because of the changes in the exchange rate the value of the loan increased during their time in Perth; she estimated that they had borrowed around AUD 60,000 at 2015 rates of exchange, the largest debt that any participant reported owing. Between their expanded debt, the cost of supporting his old and ailing parents, and their living costs in Perth, she felt they were unlikely to have accumulated any savings at all by the end of their four-year temporary work visa.

Liu Jing and her husband initially arrived in Australia with hopes of permanence; they had heard about the opportunities through their social networks and knew of people from their home region who had attained PR easily during the boom years. However, Liu Jing said that while still on a temporary visa, she doesn't see the need to improve her English, as she can find casual work through co-ethnic Chinese businesses. She will learn, she told me, once she can envisage a long-term future in Australia. Like transient migrants in many settings, Liu Jing lives a life in "suspension" where her engagement with the local world of her host country is largely curtailed (Xiang 2017b).

Lili meanwhile has learned some English during her time in Australia, having attended the classes that are offered free of charge to new permanent residents. Yet beyond brief interactions at the school gate, she lives in a largely Sinophone environment and on a daily basis encounters friends, like her housemate, who perform casual unskilled work, often in the informal economy. Once her youngest child is a bit older, she plans to return to work, probably working as a vegetable packer like Liu Jing. Despite many years in Australia, a permanent status, and hundreds of hours of English classes, she still considers her only and best option to be casual manual labour. Her experience was shared by many of the "settled" migrants I have interviewed and supports Goldring and Landolt's findings (2011) that long term precarity is common even among established migrants who continue to find only precarious employment long after securing a permanent visa status.

Liu Jing, however, remains caught in the nexus of low-income, precarious work and an insecure legal status in Australia. Although her husband was working in contravention of his visa conditions, meaning that their visa could be subject to cancellation at any time, she said that she did not consider this a major problem. Instead, she saw the four year limit of the visa as the key event horizon, a date by which they would have to find more secure employment and permanent sponsorship, or else return to China. She was not hopeful. In the meanwhile, she could only wait from week to week, her parenting and family life interrupted, and long-term planning impossible.

## 9.2.2 The lived experience of temporary status: life course disruption and family separation.

The case study of Lili and Liu Jing is drawn from the working-class cohort of trade skilled migrants and their wives. However, middle-class migrants staying in Australia on a variety of different categories of temporary visa similarly complained of their lives being frozen, plans necessarily put on hold until they can enjoy the security of permanent status, together with the administrative advantages that status provides, such as tax subsidies for families and access to free education and healthcare. As the case studies below show, such “lives in limbo” cause daily stress and uncertainty (Robertson and Runganaikaloo 2014), with harmful implications for healthy relationships and workforce participation.

Xiaopei, a qualified nurse with many years experience working in a Chinese hospital, would like to use her skills in Australia. She knows her English is far below the standard required for accreditation as a medical practitioner, but thinks that retraining to work in aged care might still enable her to apply some of her knowledge and experience in an in-demand occupation. However, while she still holds a temporary partner visa, the fees she would need to pay for an English language course and entry-level vocational training are prohibitive. She is slowly saving what little she can from her casual massage job, where her average hourly earnings fall well below the minimum wage. She deeply regrets “wasting time” during her best working years as she feels that “until I have PR and get a proper job, I can only work in shops run by Chinese people”.

Luanchan, whose Australian graduate degree has not resulted in her hoped-for sponsored employment or a permanent visa, fears her relationship of over two years may fail as a result of her temporary status. Her partner is also a foreign national with a temporary work visa. For now, they can continue to cohabit in Perth, but, as neither of them have permanent status she lives in constant fear of the day one of them may be forced to return to their home country. Their insecure status is a source of ongoing conflict in their relationship because, she says, she worries about it far more than he does. She told me that she knows of many other couples who had been together for years and were ultimately forced to break up because of a revoked visa status and consequent repatriation. Luanchan dreads the same fate for her own love life, and longs for “a relationship where visas are not a problem.”



Dandan meanwhile has determined that she will not allow her temporary status to dictate the terms of her personal life any longer. Her husband, Michael, a graduate from an Australian university, is sponsored on a 457 by an accounting firm, with no clear timeline to securing a permanent visa. Despite working for the company for over four years, Michael cannot get any commitment from his employer regarding sponsorship for permanent residency, yet he is unwilling to seek employment elsewhere. He and Dandan reason that, firstly, few companies are willing to take on new employees who do not have PR and secondly, even if he could find a new employer, the move would effectively “reset the clock” on their temporary status, moving permanence still further from their grasp.

One of the reasons for Michael and Dandan’s prolonged temporary status is that after Michael had been with his employer for almost two years, the company changed their trading name and reemployed him under a different job title. To apply for a subclass 186 permanent visa under the Temporary Residence Transition stream of the Employer Nomination Scheme, visa applicants must have been employed for at least two years in the same occupation with the nominating employer. The change of trading name effectively disrupted the continuity of occupation required to satisfy the subclass 186 application criteria; Dandan suspects this may have been a deliberate move to extend Michael’s tenure as a “captive” temporary visa holder. Their experiences exemplify the precarious circumstances that can be engendered through a policy emphasis on employer-sponsored temporary-to-permanent skilled migration, whereby vulnerable migrants constitute “captive labour”, bound to sometimes unfair or even exploitative employers by their hopes of securing permanent status (Birrell and Healy 2012, 11).

Dandan came to join Michael in Perth while their child was still a baby. For two years she and her husband rented one room in a shared house while their young daughter remained in China with her paternal grandparents. Dandan hated this separation, greatly envying the close relationship she could see her daughter developing with her grandparents when they communicated through online video chat. She recounted how she spent several weeks crying in their room at home before finally finding work in a Chinese-run massage shop in a shopping mall. Despite having completed a degree in China, her temporary status and limited English meant that this was the best she could find. The work was dull; long hours spent with colleagues who annoyed her while waiting for clients that rarely came. It was also poorly remunerated, paid on a per-massage piecework basis with no base hourly rate. Nonetheless, she was glad it put an end to her unhappy days alone at home. Despite these hardships however, at the time she still told me that she liked being in Australia and she displayed many signs of settling and building a life. She worked hard to improve her English, and she and Michael decided to buy a house. They have chosen one near a better public school so their daughter can come to join them. They know the risks this entails, risks that Dandan says cause her great stress, leaving her always feeling as though “a hundred claws are scratching at my heart”. If their visa is cancelled they will have to sell the house quickly, possibly at a loss, and take their child back to China for her education. Since their daughter arrived, Dandan has also been forced to reduce the hours she works because temporary visa holders may not access the subsidies that make childcare affordable for lower income families. Her mother-in-law travels to Australia to support them, but her own visitor visa conditions limit the time she can spend in Perth. And much as they would like a second child, a sibling for their daughter, they do not feel sufficiently secure to make this decision while their legal status is temporary and they still face the very real threat of a compelled return to China. In the meanwhile, Dandan and Michael, like Liu Jing, remain uncertain about their family’s future; Dandan described frequent arguments between them as they are constantly stressed and agitated, “like ants on a hot wok.” Like many other transient migrants, the temporalities of their personal lives are conditioned by the migration regimes with which they must engage.

### 9.2.3 Permanent visas and circular dreams: disjunctures of status and future imaginaries

Temporary migrants with settled, if disrupted, lives illuminate the temporal disjunctures between lived experience and legal status. Similarly, those who do have permanent legal status do not necessarily have permanent plans. Quite the opposite; retiring in China or living across borders in old age is a popular dream for some migrants, particularly among trade skilled labour migrants and their wives in their middle years. As explained in Chapter 7, some participants consider life in Australia to be lonely, tiring and dull. Poor English, social isolation in Perth's sprawling suburbs, even from other Chinese, and different lifestyles to the mainstream make daily life less satisfying than that they remember enjoying in China. However, various barriers to return, including the educational and pastoral needs of children, home ownership in Australia, or reduced work opportunities in China, mean that many feel obliged to remain in Australia, at least for the medium term. Children growing up, getting married and moving on is often seen as a future trigger point after which other alternatives may be possible. Kevin, a welder in his mid-forties and father of two children in primary school, still many years away from his retirement, feels China may offer a better lifestyle than Australia when he is old:

Perhaps we'll go back when we're older and the kids have grown up. Perhaps we can go to China after I retire – because our thinking is different [to that of local Australians]. Or spend some time here and some time there. China's biggest problems are the environment, pollution and food safety. It's more developed than here, so if they can fix those problems it will be a good place. Pollution can be fixed easily, this could be just a couple of years, but the environment is not so easy. Ten years, twenty years, I don't think it can be fixed so quickly. But I grew up there so I have no language barrier, and there are lots of good places to go visit.

Such dreams of return inform decisions regarding legal status. China does not permit its nationals to hold dual citizenship. Thus, the decision to apply for Australian citizenship is not to be taken lightly as it necessarily entails the renunciation of Chinese citizenship. For some, patriotism prevents them taking this step. For the majority however, practical considerations hold most sway. By practicing “flexible non-citizenship” they can keep their options open and envisage open-ended and mobile futures; retaining Chinese citizenship is described by many as “a kind of insurance” that permits return in later life. However, balancing this perspective are the instrumental advantages of Australian citizenship, not least of which is the security of always being able to remain without fear of future visa cancellation. In the next chapter I explore in more detail the various ways that participants engage with this “citizenship dilemma” (Ho 2011a).

This approach to retirement migration, very common among trade skilled migrants from large Chinese cities, is interesting because it runs counter to attitudes reported among other groups of Chinese migrants. Circular migration and mobility through the life cycle are now common experiences, but the retirement plans of these working-class migrants are different to those often reported among more privileged Chinese. Wealthier, more educated and globally mobile ethnic Chinese also plan retirement migration as part of the life course, but the literature suggests this is generally in the opposite direction. Both working-class and more privileged migrants consider traditional migrant-receiving countries like Australia, New Zealand and Canada good places to raise children, but professionals may prefer to expand their careers in Asia, sometimes as astronauting fathers who work away from the main family home, and then retire to a quieter setting (Ho 2019, 33-34; Ley and Kobayashi 2005; L Liu 2011, 2014, 2018; Mak, 2006; Pe-pua et al. 1998). White collar skilled migrants in Vancouver may feel that they have better employment opportunities in China and so go back there for work after serving the time in “immigration prison” needed to secure the Canadian permanent status or citizenship (Teo 2007) that will allow them to return there when they retire. In contrast, trade skilled workers and their wives who are living in Perth can earn more in an Australian workplace, but often say that they want to retire to the familiarity and active social life that China offers. Despite the opposing directions of these life course migrations, both scenarios problematize the permanence of permanent residency and highlight another temporal disjuncture, here between legal statuses and future imaginaries.

### 9.3 Analysis and Conclusion

The case studies presented in this chapter demonstrate that the ways individuals choose to imagine their lives in Australia do not always accord with their legal status. Temporary visa holders go through many settlement processes; they make friends, establish relationships, buy houses, raise children. Yet doing so without the security of a permanent status can be stressful and leaves many in vulnerable and precarious circumstances, both at work and in their personal lives. Many permanent visa holders meanwhile often struggle to develop a sense of settled belonging in Australia and instead imagine mobile futures. Deskillling and ongoing occupational precarity contribute, for some, to a feeling of general dissatisfaction with life in Perth.

Following traditional settler paradigms, many in Australia continue to see permanent migrants and temporary transients as distinct and discrete categories. The experiences of my research participants problematize this binary and illustrate the flexible, contingent, unequal and often circular nature of contemporary human mobility. The distinctions between individuals that hold “temporary” and “permanent” legal statuses are not clear cut. There is considerable bleed between these categories in terms of migration objectives, occupational opportunities and, of course, daily social interactions. Temporary and permanent visa holders live and work together and the experiences of each influence the other.

Temporary visa holders often experience great stress as a result of their legal status. Family separation, life course disruption and limited employment opportunities all take their toll. Even where primary applicants for subclass 457 temporary work visas have reliable employment, secondary visa holders (usually wives) may face great challenges and bear the brunt of “lives in limbo”, what Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2014) have described as “the interstitial position of being legally resident but not legally considered to be migrants”. The authors here refer to student migrants, and yet these same experiences of long term precarity and increasing mistrust towards the state are also valid for other categories of migrant too. Liu Jing and Dandan, both the spouses of 457 primary applicants, share the gendered impacts of a temporary status despite their husband’s different occupations. They are both employed in low paid, precarious employment and have both experienced the pain of family separation and transnational parenting. Michael’s white-collar employment and Australian tertiary education may perhaps support a greater degree of settlement, yet both families remain similarly exposed to the uncertainties bound up with “being temporary”.

For temporary visa holders like Liu Jing, this can result in limited, even intentionally curtailed engagement with mainstream Australia, as they are suspended between home and host by regulatory structures that figuratively hold them up in the air, preventing them from settling (Xiang 2017b). However, unlike other regional destinations for Chinese technical labour, such as Japan, Korea or Singapore, where structures of migration governance demand the repatriation of workers on completion of their contract (Chok 2013; Xiang 2013c), Australia has provided in the past and does still offer pathways to permanent status for trade-skilled temporary labour migrants and their families, albeit now under far more restrictive conditions. For this reason, even ostensibly unskilled transient migrants like Liu Jing, do in fact form what Xiang (2017) has called “horizontal home-host relations”, in this case with other co-nationals from similar backgrounds who do have legal belonging in Australia. Such interactions and attachments contribute to the complicated and often contradictory relationship between the temporalities of legal status and subjective belonging.

However, while Australian migration legislation includes pathways to permanence, these paths are not always easy to find, and some vanish altogether as migration policy changes with the economic and political winds. Migrant vintage, that is, when people arrived in Australia, has a significant impact on migration outcomes, family decisions and life course choices. The ever more complex, and rapidly changing, regulatory dimensions of migration infrastructures produce their own temporalities, which act forcibly upon migrants as “heteronomous” time (Cwerner 2001). The temporal order imposed by immigration regimes of the state disrupts the temporal processes of family life and intergenerational care (Coe 2016), illustrated in this chapter through the delayed fertility and indefinite long-term parenting at a distance necessitated by a “temporary” status. Robertson (2019a) builds on Meeus’ (2012) description of the “timescales” of migration, typifying the different temporalities migrants encounter as they move not only through space, but also through time(s). Such interactions of the “meso” timescales of migration governance with the “micro” timescales of individual life courses are complex and unpredictable.

As shown in Chapter 6, trade skilled migrants from China, like labour migrants in other settings (see, for example, Axelsson et al. 2014; Baey and Yeoh 2015; Goh, Wee and Yeoh 2016; Kalir 2013) must pay substantial fees to the formal and informal brokers who secure their work placements in Australia. The debt-financed migration that arises from their reliance on these commercial dimensions of new migration infrastructures (Xiang and Lindquist 2014) brings with it its own temporal implications; shifting time-values of exchange rates make debts unexpectedly burdensome, as Liu Jing discovered to her cost, while differing work opportunities through economic cycles can result in extended repayment periods.

Finally, the preference expressed by many migrants for a retirement in China or an old age lived across borders further disrupts the permanent temporalities that are implied by secure legal statuses. That migrants miss their families and dream of returning “home” is nothing new; the “myth of return” has longed played a part in migrants’ reimaginings of themselves in their new settings (Anwar 1979). But as Teo (2011) has observed, the transnational engagement in both here and there of contemporary migrations complicates our understanding of return. More and more people envisage circulatory plans and future trajectories that are open-ended and contingent.

Imaginariness fuel and sustain movements across the life course. Dissatisfaction with current circumstances can be mitigated by reference to imagined futures when such unsatisfactory “staging posts” are in the past and the migrant has attained an objective, whether the security of a permanent status or the opportunity to return “home”.

Waiting and the acceptance of sub-optimal circumstances can thus be imaginatively reconfigured as agential practices that have the potential to move one a step closer to actualising imagined futures (Axelsson, Malmberg and Zhang 2017; Baas 2010, 2017). For migrants employed in trade and unskilled roles in Perth, however, a retirement in China is not the “return to the future” of elite and middling knowledge professionals flocking to work in new growth economies in their Asian homelands (Xiang 2013b, 2), but rather a lifestyle choice, albeit one that may only be realised once their working days are done. That China is increasingly perceived by some migrants to offer not only family and familiarity, but a better lifestyle and a more developed living environment than Australia, is another example of change in the region, with implications for future migration flows.

The examples presented here demonstrate that migrants with temporary plans may become permanent settlers and yet their “permanence” is tempered by both future imaginaries of return and/or circular migration in retirement, and by the long-term impact of uncertainty and precarious employment of periods spent with a temporary visa status. At the same time, others find their attempts to settle thwarted by changing economic conditions, unethical intermediaries or obdurate employers, despite sometimes having strong feelings of belonging and making a life in Perth. Different generational cohorts of migrants, even those whose arrival is only separated by a few short years, experience different outcomes as they engage with ever-changing structures of migration governance. While some of these experiences are common to migrants from different social classes, there are also differences, particularly where labour migrants have incurred substantial debt to facilitate their moves.

In Australia, where migration policy is currently in transition from traditional settler models to resemble the flexibilised neoliberal migration regimes more common in regional developed economies, it is not surprising that such disparities of status, opportunity, ambition and outcome should be found between people whose migration trajectories are differentiated mainly by the time at which they began their journey. The categorisation of migrants living in one city, one neighbourhood or one house into temporary or permanent residents can result in temporal disjunctures and barriers to belonging for people on both sides of the status divide.



## Chapter 10      Flexible non-citizens? Class, strategic citizenship and the citizenship dilemma<sup>1</sup>

This final chapter addresses the “citizenship dilemma” (Ho 2011a) faced by most migrants from China living in Australia. It explores the primarily instrumental ways that participants evaluate the benefits of Chinese versus Australian citizenship and considers the strategies individuals and families employ in order to accomplish varied, sometimes contradictory, objectives over the course of their migrations. I further argue that 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.

Dual nationality has been possible under Australian law since 2002, however China does not permit dual nationality. If a Chinese citizen acquires the citizenship of another country, they are deemed to have relinquished their Chinese 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 represent main point of interface between a Chinese citizen and public bureaucracy. *Hukou* affects access to welfare, education and healthcare, residency and family planning permits, work rights and employment insurance schemes, and vests significant discretionary administrative power with local governments (Wang 2005a; Fan 2008; Woodman 2018).

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For those with ongoing ties in China, whether remaining relatives, or personal financial affairs, 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). While programs to support the repatriation of naturalised former Chinese citizens are targeted at highly educated and prized “talents”, entrepreneurs, international students and investors (Xiang 2011; Zhang 2018; Ho and Lim 2017), working-class economic migrants and “middling” migrants who are valued less highly by the state may face barriers to return (Ho 2011a, 2013, 2019; Ho and Ley 2014; Gao 2006; Liu 2008).

My participants provide an exemplary case study through which to explore what Joppke (2019) has called the “instrumental turn” in citizenship studies. While Ong’s (1999) influential arguments about flexibilised approaches to national membership focussed on East Asian elites escaping the localising discipline of nation states, such strategic calculations of instrumental value are now common among people of various nationalities and backgrounds (Kim 2019; Harpaz and Mateos 2019).

This chapter contributes to broader discussions of the citizenship dilemma by demonstrating how social class can affect naturalisation decisions. Chinese citizenship is not universalistic. Since the founding of the PRC, the rights accorded to citizens have been unevenly applied (Yu 2002). The “internal citizenship institution” (Vortherms 2015) that is the *hukou* system produces experiences of “differential citizenship” manifested as deep structural and hereditary inequalities (Wu 2010). For Chinese nationals, citizenship may be experienced as bounded and exclusionary, unlike the inclusivity and universality assumed in many Western contexts (Bosniak 2008, 119; Chung 2018, 433). Since naturalisation in Australia entails the loss of Chinese national citizenship, by extension this includes differential subnational (local) citizenship rights afforded through the *hukou* system of household registration.

Bauböck (2010) has argued that to understand the differing citizenship choices and claims made in today’s more complexly mobile world, citizenship is best understood as “constellations” of multiple nested and/or overlapping memberships. A citizenship-constellation perspective works to make sense of the varied, contingent responses to structural opportunities facing migrants from different backgrounds and national or subnational origins. This chapter engages Bauböck’s constellations approach in order to “better understand individual interests in relation to alternative citizenship statuses” (Bauböck 2010, 849) by taking class as a lens of analysis and linking this to socio-spatial hierarchies and the differential local citizenships afforded to participants in China.

Many participants have determined that their best course of action is either flexible non-citizenship or forming a *split nationality household*. Those choosing not to naturalise argue that the combination of Chinese citizenship with Australian permanent resident denizen status offers, on balance, the greatest accumulation of rights across the two jurisdictions. Others create split nationality households where one or more members take Australian citizenship, while others remain Chinese nationals. This extends the constellations approach beyond a consideration of the individual as the unit of analysis to include a more complex network of family memberships.

## 10.1 Bringing differential local citizenship 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 where the nation state continues to define and police mobility regimes, citizenship, understood as the status of legal belonging to a nation, including the right to enter and remain within national borders, emerges as a site of global inequality and a valuable component of mobility capital (Shachar 2009; Mau et al. 2015; Kim 2019). 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).

### 10.1.1 Citizens, denizens and dual nationals: strategic responses for (would-be) mobile people

Dual nationality, formerly antithetical to the established international order has become remarkably prevalent. States began to liberalise citizenship laws in the 1990s. By 2010, almost 80 per cent of countries across Western, Central and Eastern Europe and North and Latin America permitted dual citizenship (Harpaz and Mateos 2019, 5).

Such dual status was once unthinkable. While early formulations of citizenship as membership of a political community date back to Ancient Greece and Rome (Brubaker 1992), the Westphalian model of modern citizenship as a sacred and, most importantly, exclusive bond between nation-state and individual prevailed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Under unitary models of citizenship, both stateless persons and those with affiliations and responsibilities to more than one nation were constructed as deviant problems to be overcome (Brubaker 1989; Harpaz and Mateos 2019). Loyalty to the nation was understood as only being possible for individuals with exclusive relationships to one single state, while citizens of two countries might evade the duties of citizenship, such as taxation or military service (Faist, Gerdes and Rieple 2004). The nineteenth century American politician, George Bancroft, famously argued that one might “as soon tolerate a man with two wives as a man with two countries”; late-twentieth century Australian debates about liberalising citizenship laws reflected such fears of “political bigamy” (Koslowski 2000, 26; Brown 2002).

International migration and transnational engagement across borders pose a challenge to citizenship as an exclusive status. Greater human mobility has resulted in ethnic diversity within nation states. Diversity prompts questions of liberalising citizenship laws, and more liberal citizenship laws lead irresistibly to the issue of dual nationality.

During the second half of the twentieth century, most Western European countries experienced an influx of migrants and guest workers. These new populations, particularly the presence of second-generation migrants, together with the post-war shift towards international normative values that discredited racial theory and institutionalized universalistic human rights, demanded widespread changes to legal national membership (Joppke 2007). Citizenship laws permitting dual nationality may be seen as inevitable in liberal democratic states with significant flows of long-term settled immigration, ensuring congruence between the population of a state and its political membership (Weil 2001; Faist, Gerdes and Rieple 2004). In practice, this has entailed a convergence between nation states in how citizenship may be acquired and conferred (Brubaker 1992, 179). Most Western states now employ a combination of *ius soli* and *ius sanguinis* approaches in determining who may be considered a legal member of the nation, while a further principle has particular relevance for migrants to Australia; *ius domicili*, where legal residence may trigger entitlement to citizenship.

These changes in the ways that citizenship may be acquired 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 2019). This in part results from increasingly commercialised migration programs with demand-driven, points-based skilled and investor visa streams, often the first step towards acquiring national citizenships. In the global race for talent, states award membership through what Shachar (2018; also 2006, 2011) calls the “talent-for-citizenship exchange” and, more baldly still, “citizenship for sale”. Such shifts away from unitary, exclusive and life-long national belonging result in the “desacralization of membership” and a decline in the affective value of citizenship (Harpaz and Mateos 2019; Joppke 2010; Brubaker 1989, 4).

The “inevitable lightening of citizenship” which accompanies these processes of liberalisation and commodification has resulted in the “dissociation of citizenship from nationhood” (Joppke 2010, 9). The affective value of citizenship has declined and the objective, practical value of citizenship as a form of mobility capital has increased, leading to what Joppke (2019) terms the “instrumental turn” in citizenship. 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).

Bauböck (2019, 2) meanwhile is more hesitant to assign affective citizenship and national belonging to the meagre and diminished status proposed by Joppke (2019), 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 (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 and supra-national levels.

While from a long *durée* perspective such patchworks of simultaneously operating statuses are the historical norm from which the unitary model of the twentieth century deviated (Maas 2018), in a contemporary context where dual membership is both increasingly common and increasingly sought, a constellations approach offers fresh insights. For one, it can balance the receiving country bias common to citizenship studies in Western contexts; Bauböck critiques Bosniak's (2008) work for failing to recognise the impact of external citizenship(s) on the rights and legal status of migrants. It also 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).

From an Australian policy perspective, seemingly irredeemingly guilty of a receiving country myopia, a constellations of membership approach can explain variances in naturalisation rates, with reference to the balance of entitlements and obligations, affective and instrumental ties that inform citizenship decisions. It also allows for a re-evaluation of denizen statuses, in this case Australian permanent residency. Both denizens and naturalised citizens with multiple memberships are positioned within those same constellations, but with differentiated rights in countries of origin, destination country, and in relation to third-party nations (Maas 2018, 848).

This chapter uses this lens to provide fresh insights into the citizenship dilemma faced by Chinese migrants in Australia. Introducing an analysis of homeland class demonstrates that people from different backgrounds and, importantly, from different *places*, value their Chinese legal status differently, which in turn affects how they calculate both the instrumental and the affective worth of competing citizenship statuses.

### 10.1.2 Chinese citizenship: single nationality and differential local citizenship within China

For Chinese nationals there are two particular factors to consider when evaluating the citizenship constellations within which Australian residents make naturalisation decisions. Firstly, China does not permit dual nationality. Despite criticism from scholars who argue that liberalised citizenship laws would halt “brain drain” and encourage the return of talented Chinese professionals (Liu 2008; Yang 2009; Ren 2009), this is unlikely to change. Secondly, few of the social rights of Chinese citizens are afforded at the national level. Instead, PRC nationals experience “differential citizenship” (Wu 2010), meaning contingent and unequal access to benefits and social inclusion, predicated particularly on the basis of their *hukou* status and place of formal residence.

Despite having experienced high and growing rates of international migration over the last two decades, initially outward flows but more recently also rising immigration (Pieke 2012; Liu and Ahl 2018), China is not yet showing signs of the shift towards liberalised citizenship laws seen in European, North American and post-colonial contexts. China’s restrictive and exclusive approach is not unusual among East Asian nations. Countries that were not fully colonised, including Korea, Japan and China, have high degrees of ethnic homogeneity and maintain discourses of pseudo-biological unity that equate national membership with kinship (Castles and Davidson 2000, 193-4; Kim 2019). In China, the *ius sanguinis* principle has shaped citizenship formulations since the 1909 Qing Nationality Law. Imperial-era legislation denied Chinese any right to expatriation, preventing dual nationality in order to maintain sovereignty over subjects and resist the extraterritorial practices of the semi-colonial European presence in China (Low 2016), although later Republican lawmakers accommodated dual nationals in order to mitigate the outflow of resources and people during the turbulent years of the early twentieth century (Fitzgerald 1970).

The PRC first established its policy of single nationality through the *Treaty of China and Indonesia on the Issue of Dual Nationality*, ratified in 1958, that sought to stabilise regional relations in the early days of the Cold War (Liu 2008). Chinese overseas could choose to naturalise in their country of residence, but in doing so would lose PRC citizenship. This effectively marked the end of the Chinese state's claims on ethnic Chinese worldwide, while simultaneously curtailing the right to return for *huaqiao* naturalised elsewhere (Liu 2008; Wang 2000; Zhuang 1998). The policy remains in place today. It has since been codified under the *Law of Nationality (1980)*, and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council continues to maintain that PRC non-recognition of dual nationality is an "irreversible historical trend" (OCAO, 2015). Conditions prompting the liberalisation of citizenship laws in other contexts, such as a large settled migrant population that requires incorporation into the democratic body of the nation (Weil 2001) do not apply in contemporary China.

Some states have introduced dual citizenship to secure the political and economic engagement of emigrants and wider diasporas (Joppke 2007; Faist, Gerdes and Rieple 2004). China actively engages its diaspora but, rather than following this path, has instead created exceptional policies and new immigration regimes that facilitate the return of elites (Ho and Lim 2017; Ho 2011b; Xiang 2011; Luo, Guo and Ping 2003; Liu and Ahl 2018), those who are deemed by the state to possess sufficient useful "transnational capital" (Rosen and Zweig 2005). Meanwhile, individuals deemed, by virtue of their class background, to be of limited cultural or economic value to China have been discouraged or even blocked from returning (Liu 2008). In this context, any formal recognition of dual rights remains unlikely for the foreseeable future.

Chinese citizenship may be unitary and exclusive, clearly delineating who may not belong, yet within China it lacks the universality of inclusion, the characteristic "hard on the outside but soft on the inside" assumed in Western models (Bosniak 2008). China has developed its own approaches to citizenship, which combine Imperial and Republican traditions with Soviet models of government, and which differ in important respects from those formulated with reference to European liberal democracies (Guo 2015; Janoski 2016). 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; Guo and Woodman 2017).



Since the founding of the PRC, Chinese citizenship has not been universalistic but rather differential; the first 1954 Constitution codified the ideological distinction between the rights of the citizens (*gongmin*), meaning all residents of China, and the rights of the people (*renmin*), a category that specifically excluded class enemies and other undesirable elements (Yu 2002). The post-reform era may have abandoned unequal citizenship based on hereditary political class status, however this has been replaced by other forms and practices of “differential citizenship” (Wu 2010), some exacerbated by the policies underpinning China’s economic growth. To adapt Bosniak’s (2008) phrase, citizenship in contemporary China may be hard on the inside, as well as on the outside. Chinese nationals enjoy unequal rights as a result of ethnicity (Yi 2006), gender (Woo 2002; Gaetano 2010) and, perhaps most importantly, registered place of residence and administrative status (*hukou*). Here, a further word that could be translated as “citizen”, *shimin* - literally “citizen of the city” - is relevant, as an expression of geographically differentiated citizenship (Ho 2011a).

Vortherms (2015) describes *hukou* as a “local citizenship institution”, illustrating the extent to which municipal membership affords benefits and belonging far beyond that provided at the national level. Although some municipalities now provide expanded, if still differential, urban services to migrant populations through points-systems allocation and the gradual decoupling of social rights from *hukou* (Guo and Liang 2017), for migrants in Australia who left China over a decade ago, their lived experiences of in/exclusion and discrimination precede more recent reforms and inform their naturalisation decisions.

## 10.2 The citizenship dilemma in practice

The citizenship dilemma was a recurring topic of conversation among participants living in Perth. Everyone I spoke with had an opinion; for most it was an ongoing debate with real effect in their lives and the lives of their friends and relatives.

Migrants from China living in Australia make decisions regarding their legal status in an environment where they are conditioned by Australian and Chinese migration and citizenship law and policy, by their own (often imperfect) understandings of those systems, and by the ways in which they experienced being a Chinese citizen prior to going overseas. Migration literacy is a factor that influences naturalisation, another important process of migration and settlement.

As noted in Chapter 6, migration law in Australia is open and transparent, but also complex and subject to frequent change. Migration literacy influences the decision of Chinese migrants living in Perth even after they have achieved permanent status. However, in comparison with the dizzying range of temporary visas and possible pathways to permanence faced by migrants without a settled status, the regulations relating those who already have PR are comparatively straightforward.

Australian permanent resident status allows a person to remain in Australia indefinitely. However, a visa is still required to enter Australia from overseas, as only Australian citizens have an automatic right of entry. When PR is first granted applicants are issued with a five-year visa that permits unlimited travel, after which they must apply for a new Return Resident visa if they wish to travel overseas. This is a straightforward process for permanent residents domiciled in Australia who fulfil residency requirements. While regulations relating to other visas change regularly, Return Resident visa criteria have remained remarkably stable since its introduction in 1994.

There is a clear path to citizenship for migrants with permanent status. Under the Citizenship Act 2007, a non-citizen may be eligible for citizenship by conferral if they meet residency requirements and can demonstrate they are “of good character”. Applicants are further required to demonstrate a knowledge of Australia and basic English language ability by sitting a citizenship test, from which applicants may be exempted on grounds of age or incapacity. While the test is controversial (Fozdar and Spittles 2009), for most applicants it is not onerous, and those who do fail may receive targeted training prior to re-examination.

Turning to China, PRC lawmakers recently implemented extensive reform in the administration of migration. The Entry and Exit Administration Law 2012 superseded previous legislation, coming into force July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013. While this delivered significant changes and improved transparency (Liu and Liu 2013), earlier migration legislation and administration is more relevant to the emic perspectives of my participants. I commenced fieldwork just sixteen months after the new laws were first implemented, and so my participants’ impressions of Chinese migration law were largely formed through their earlier interactions with officials working under the old system.

Prior to the new legislation, Chinese migration law was complicated, piecemeal and opaque. The cross-border movement of non-citizens was administered under the Law of the Control of Entry and Exit of Aliens 1985 (PRC) and the Law of Nationality (1980), together with at least twenty-four other significant rules and regulations. The contents of these laws were generalized and ambiguous, and were supplemented by hundreds of interpretive rules, regulations and guidelines. These collectively constituted a “bureaucratic barrier to migration” because there was no unified approach to the legislative process and many key documents were unpublished (Liu 2008, 317). These laws, regulations and policies were jointly administered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security through a network of offices at central, provincial and local levels of government. Most migration regulations and policies were confidential, not available for public scrutiny, so difficult to access that even specialist legal scholars struggled to gain a holistic understanding (G Liu 2011).

Under these regulations and policies, many government departments had the power to make decisions relating to individuals’ residency statuses. Legal inconsistencies across jurisdictions and poor communication between departments, sometimes even deliberate obfuscation as they jockeyed for turf, resulted in limited central government overview of the state of immigration and foreign residency and, most importantly, significant uncertainty for individuals regarding their own rights and interests (Liu 2008; Pieke 2012).

Under these conditions in the two national contexts, participants evaluate the relative instrumental value of Chinese versus Australian citizenship, and devise strategies to ensure the maximum benefit across borders for themselves and their families within the possible citizenship constellations available to them (Joppke 2019; Bauböck 2010).

## 10.2.1 Calculating the instrumental value of Chinese citizenship

Among trade skilled migrants from China to Perth, three core concerns arise as justifications for choosing to retain a Chinese passport and not naturalise in Australia. First there are the practicalities of returning to China for short visits, longer stays or possible retirement migration. Applying for a Chinese visa is viewed as an inconvenience; it requires two visits to the Consulate, it costs money and takes time. Furthermore, Chinese visa regulations are perceived to be opaque, open to subjective interpretation and possibly subject to unpredictable changes in the future, potentially resulting in permanent exclusion. The second concern is closely connected and revolves around *hukou* as the point of interface with the various agencies of the Chinese state. This is a factor not only for people considering return or circular migration in the future, but also for many migrants who plan to remain living overseas but have ongoing financial or familial attachments to China. Finally, some migrants are concerned about how their citizenship as legal status reflects their identity, loyalty to and pride in the Chinese nation.

Of these three concerns, the last seemed least significant among participants with whom I discussed citizenship. Some, particularly younger people, emphasised the strength of their identification as a Chinese. “No, I haven’t [taken citizenship], I love China!” exclaimed Zhang Hui, the wife of a welder and stay-at-home mother of two in her mid-thirties. She went on say she had seriously considered naturalisation, even studying in preparation for the test, but in the end decided against it. Zhang Hui here points to the “identification component of formal membership” which Pogonyi (2019, 3, see also Bauböck [2019]) argues remains salient today despite shifts towards the instrumentalisation and commodification of citizenship.

However, while most participants echoed her patriotic tone and expressed a deep affection for China, discussions of citizenship and legal status were overwhelmingly instrumental and pragmatic in tone. This practical approach was exemplified by Sarah, also a full-time parent not much older than Zhang Hui, who said, “China is developing and there are lots of opportunities there, so it’s better to keep the Chinese passport.” Paul agrees with this view. He enjoys going back to his homeland whenever his work and the children’s schooling permit, and will not risk limiting his right to return:

I have feelings for China. It’s where I grew up. I like being able to go back there when I want to. If we take Australian citizenship and then China makes changes [to immigration and entry-exit policies] then maybe it would be difficult to go back... Later on, when we retire, maybe we’ll spend more time there, perhaps 18 months in China and 18 months here, something like that.

The loss of *hukou* status which necessarily follows a renunciation of Chinese citizenship is also a strong reason for not becoming an Australian citizen, not only for people hoping to return, but also for migrants continuing to live overseas. Most trade-skilled migrants were in their thirties, even early forties, when they came to Australia. Departing China in the middle years of their working lives, they had generally already made significant contributions to Chinese employee insurance schemes and may look forward to drawing pensions upon reaching retirement age, usually sixty or, for women and some men employed in specialist roles, fifty-five. Pensions can be claimed from overseas, but only by citizens who continue to have a local *hukou* registration; surrendering citizenship thus also means giving up a hard-earned pension.

Chen has continued to make pension contributions while working outside of China. He was nearly forty when he first went overseas, having already worked in a large 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 as a temporary labour migrant, first in Singapore and later in Australia, where he unexpectedly became an “accidental” permanent resident. Because he worked in a specialised occupation, his pensionable age is fifty-five, only two years away at the time of interview. He does not yet plan to retire in Australia, but looks forward to being able to claim his Chinese pension. He and his wife have retained their 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.

Finally, Australian citizenship is not highly valued when compared to the denizen rights accorded permanent residents. Despite her strong patriotic sentiments, Zhang Hui feels that Chinese citizenship has too great an instrumental value to be given up lightly, certainly not for the benefits of Australian citizenship, which she perceives to be no better those of PR:

Keeping Chinese citizenship means we can always go back after they have grown up. It's a kind of insurance... It only costs \$200 to become an Australian citizen. But if you wanted to become a Chinese citizen you could spend any amount of money and you still probably wouldn't get it. Three years ago, I prepared for the citizenship test, learning about the history and stuff. But in the end I decided not to apply. We have a citizen in the family [meaning her youngest child, two years old at the time of the conversation] so we will be able to stay here forever. If we could have dual citizenship like you [meaning the author, a citizen of Britain and Australia] then it wouldn't be a question. Both Australian and Chinese citizenship have advantages... But having Australian citizenship and PR are pretty much the same. A citizen can vote, but what's that got to do with me? Everything else is the same. Same access to education and everything.

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 social membership it entails, are at the heart of their concerns. This illuminates a further classed dimension of citizenship strategies. Trade skilled migrants who told me they were worried about the loss of their *hukou* status were all from large urban centres. Despite the pressures increasingly faced by the urban working class, they still value the local citizenship of their home city, membership that affords social and affective belonging, and, more importantly, tangible instrumental benefits. As I will show later in this chapter, the same cannot be said for Australian residents ostensibly of the same occupational class who are from places less advantageous in China’s socio-spatial hierarchies and resultant differential tiers of national membership.

### 10.2.2 Calculating the instrumental value of Australian citizenship

Despite the widely recognised benefits of keeping Chinese citizenship, for many participants this is still a major dilemma. Balancing the advantages of remaining a Chinese national, there are compelling, pragmatic reasons for taking up Australian citizenship. Student loans is one. Since 2005, Australian permanent residents may not access government loans for higher education, which are restricted to Australian citizens, humanitarian migrants, and certain temporary visa holders, such as New Zealand citizens living in Australia since childhood. Some parents take citizenship with their teenage children to access these loans or encourage their children to naturalise independently. Harry a father of two, thinks this is better than parents paying the fees, which makes young people lazy and too reliant on their families. He told me, “I won’t give them money or pay their fees though. When my son goes to university, I will make him take citizenship and then he can get a government loan. He can get a job and earn enough money for his daily expenses.”

Other parents think Australian citizenship makes it easier to find work. Chen needs to retain Chinese citizenship to claim his pension but has encouraged his son to naturalise in Australia. Chen, whose son is completing his undergraduate degree and will soon enter the workforce, told me he thinks employers discriminate against Chinese names, but if his son can list his nationality as Australian on his CV then this may count in his favour.

Other factors, particularly recent reforms to Australian migration legislation, are leading some migrants to consider applying for citizenship. Although the denizen rights afforded migrants with PR closely approximate those of naturalised Australians, permanent residents are still non-citizens under the Migration Act, whose visas may be cancelled.

In December 2014, while I was conducting fieldwork, the *Migration Amendment (Character and General Visa Cancellation) Bill 2014* came into effect. One result of this amendment is that visa holders who fail the “character test”<sup>2</sup> become subject to mandatory rather than discretionary visa cancellation. News of this change and fear of detention and deportation caused some disquiet, even among law-abiding migrants.

Participants reported taking up Australian citizenship because it is “safer” since, as David explained, “If you have PR then it’s just a visa. If you do something wrong, then it’s easy to cancel it. If you are Australian then you might get a fine, or possibly go to jail, but you still have your passport.”

Zhao, a small workshop owner, has taken citizenship partly because he feels dealing with government agencies is easier with an Australian passport, rather than foreign identity documents. He also feels safer as a citizen, fearing that if you do something wrong, for example, when employing sponsored migrants, “there can be serious consequences for a permanent resident while a citizen will just get a fine”. His interpretation of the law is flawed, as a minor offence incurring a fine would not result in visa cancellation. However, whether correct or not, his (mis)understanding of the possible legal consequences form part of the rationale for his decision. Here migration literacy again affects processes of migration, through the choices and decisions which people are able to make. Strategic approaches to citizenship calculations depend not only on highly individualised matrices of opportunity but also individualised capacity to act upon those opportunities.

Rose, a stay-at-home mother who has chosen Australian citizenship for herself and her children, articulated the tension between fearing disruption to life in Australia through lost legal status, and the practical problems of giving up a Chinese passport:

My husband still has PR. But he thinks maybe he should become a citizen since Immigration have tightened controls over PR. Before you could only lose your PR if you did a serious crime like kill someone. Now you can lose it even for things like illegal driving. But if he takes citizenship then that means every time

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<sup>2</sup> A non-citizen who has been convicted of a crime for which they have been sentenced to twelve months imprisonment or multiple crimes resulting in cumulative sentences exceeding twelve months cannot pass the character test, meaning even relatively minor offenses could result in a cancelled visa.

he goes back he has to apply for a visa. His parents are there so he goes back frequently.

Many participants also fear that there may be future changes to Australian migration legislation limiting their long-term right to remain. Although the current application process for a Return Resident visa is quick and straightforward, Australian migration policy is perceived to be unpredictable and constantly changing. This is not surprising; most have experienced grappling with revised English language criteria and frequent amendments to skilled occupations lists while applying for their initial temporary and permanent visas. Tales abound of would-be migrants who have fallen foul of the shifting legislative landscape. As shown in the last chapter, even migrants with a permanent legal status for many years usually know other, more recent, arrivals who still struggle with changing visa criteria and an insecure temporary status.

It is highly unlikely that Australia will revoke the right to visa renewal for locally domiciled permanent residents. Nonetheless, participants feel insecure in their non-citizen status, partly because of low migration literacy. Perceptions of Australian migration law inform migrants' decisions, no matter whether they are based on reliable sources or on hearsay and rumours. If visa regulations change so rapidly, so the thinking goes, then who can say the right to renew a permanent status will not also change?

Some participants expressed concern that deteriorating diplomatic relations between Australia and China could affect their right to remain. At the time of my fieldwork, China was engaged in a "passive assertive" program of island building to bolster its territorial claims in the South China Sea (SCS) (Townshend and Medcalf 2016). This activity caused consternation among ASEAN member states, including other territorial claimants to the hydrocarbon- and fisheries-rich region. In late 2015 the United States determined to conduct freedom of navigation exercises in order to demonstrate support for ASEAN objections and a rules-based order in maritime Asia. In early 2016, media reports suggested Australia would conduct similar exercises in the SCS. China meanwhile rejected external intervention, consistently framing its territorial claims with reference to historical fisheries and the "nine-dash line" (Townshend and Medcalf 2016; International Crisis Group 2015; Chubb 2015).



Until late 2015, official Chinese media tended to promote more conciliatory, less militaristic solutions to maritime conflict than those endorsed by popular discussions in Chinese social media (Chubb 2014; Denmark and Chubb 2016). Following the US announcement, however, the question of Chinese sovereignty in the SCS was endorsed in state-run media as a topic of national concern (CCTV 2015). There followed a domestic and international Chinese media storm seeking to prove that international arbitration is invalid, to demonstrate that Chinese island building is not expansionist, and to portray international naval activity as neo-colonial, likening it to the “Eight Nation Army” of 1901<sup>3</sup>. Such reports were widely reproduced in the Chinese-language media in Australia (see, for example, AC Times 2015; AC Times 2016<sup>4</sup>).

Every participant who raised this topic was supportive of China’s actions and agreed that Australian policymakers should not oppose China’s claims in the SCS. One day over lunch I was with two welders who were discussing the maintenance work one had performed servicing Australian navy vessels. They light-heartedly debated the ethics of maintaining ships that might one day be used in combat against China. “You should have left a screw loose!” laughed one of the men. They were speaking in jest, but their views of the political conflict were clear.

Somewhat paradoxically, several people told me that escalating diplomatic tensions constituted an excellent reason for taking citizenship. If relations sour between Australia and China, some fear international politics could impact them personally, as Sarah explained:

Having citizenship is safer because if the two countries are no longer friendly (*tuanjie*) then Australia could cancel the visas and make the Chinese people go back. But I think if you have become an Australian citizen then they will protect you.

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<sup>3</sup> In the winter of 1899-1900 a peasant uprising swept across the North China plain. The Boxers, as these militia of armed peasants became known, were determined to restore the beleaguered Qing dynasty and to expel foreigners by force from a China that had experienced encroaching semi-colonialism since the Opium Wars half a century before. Foreign forces responded by mounting the first ever multinational armed expedition. A joint force invaded China at the port of Tianjin and marched all the way to Beijing, forcing the Imperial court to flee to Xi’an. This ‘Eight Nation United Army’ (*baguo lianjun*) was made up of troops from Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Japan, Russia, the United States, Italy and Germany. This was a watershed for Chinese intellectuals adapting the new European concept of nationalism to the Chinese context. The Boxer Rebellion was later mythologised as one of China’s first nationalist movements and as a forerunner of socialist revolution. Just as the Boxers became a vehicle for the anti-Imperialist message of China’s new nationalists, so the Eight Nation United Army became a symbol of foreign colonial oppression. This symbolism is today deeply embedded in popular historical consciousness in China (Cohen 1997, Mitter 2004, Schoppa 2002).

<sup>4</sup> These articles have since been removed from this Australian news site. As they were syndicated from PRC publications, the same articles may still be read on Chinese domestic news sites (Wenxue City 2015; Xinhua Online 2016).

This is a reasonable fear. It is only a few decades since 15,000 civilians were interned in wartime Australian camps because of their country of birth (Neumann 2006). The response, to take Australian citizenship while simultaneously expressing patriotic support for China, is further evidence of instrumental choices and the dissociation of citizenship from nationhood (Joppke 2010).

### 10.2.3 Citizenship strategies of families in Perth

Given the insecurities inherent in non-citizen status in either country, for many families the preferred strategy is to arrange for some family members to take Australian citizenship while others retain their Chinese identity documents. *Split nationality households* are seen to offer the best protection in both jurisdictions.

Sarah explained how she and Alan have adapted their family citizenship strategies over time to respond to changing objectives. Like many other trade skilled migrants, they departed China as sojourners, with fixed, short-term plans. They have since settled, grown accustomed to life in Perth, and bought a house. They and their eldest child are permanent residents, while their youngest is an Australia-born citizen. Yet Sarah is not entirely sure she will live in Australia forever. For the foreseeable future it seems the best option, perhaps the only practical one for her youngest child. “If we go back now,” she mused, “then I don’t know how they will go to school. My eldest will be fine as she has her *hukou*, but this one, perhaps she could go to a privately-run school, but then when she grows up, if she doesn’t have a *hukou*...” She trailed off, uncertain of how a life might be managed outside of the Chinese systems of identity and administration.

Alan worries that deteriorating diplomatic relations may prevent them renewing their permanent visas. He wanted to naturalise when they returned from their maternity holiday to China, but their six month visit home meant they did not fulfil the residency requirements. This delayed their application, but their long-term plan remains that Alan and the children will be Australian while Sarah remains Chinese. Sarah is not looking forward to the additional visa fees each time they visit China but thinks a split nationality household is the safest option because, “that way we will be OK on both sides.”

Having a spouse in both camps is a common strategy to hedge the decision to remain in Australia. Jasmine and Mark's story is similar to that of Sarah and Alan. Like Sarah and Alan, they began their Australian journey with 457s working in a regional town. They left their school age child behind with grandparents so that his Chinese education would not be interrupted while they went overseas for a few years. Over time, however, they came to prefer life in Australia. Once they had moved to Perth and acquired permanent status, they brought their child to Australia where he attends a local high school. They have another younger child, born an Australian, for whom Jasmine says "there is no point having Chinese citizenship because he doesn't get a *hukou* because he was born outside of China." Both parents and their eldest child are still permanent residents. When their first five-year visa was due to expire, they considered taking citizenship rather than applying for a Return Resident visa. Yet when the time came, they decided to keep their Chinese passports. They are sure they will remain in Australia, as they see no future in China for their youngest; he doesn't speak Mandarin, only their family dialect, and is not learning to write Chinese. Jasmine recognises that losing their *hukou* matters little if they plan to remain, and yet is still loath to renounce her Chinese citizenship. She says that a split nationality household is the best option for their circumstances but is still choosing to delay for another few years. Their new Return Resident visas allow them to defer the decision a little longer and although they regret losing Chinese citizenship they are now sure that the best strategy will be for one of them to naturalise. However, when I asked Sarah which of them would become an Australian, she laughed, "Ha! I don't know. Neither of us wants to. I tell him he should become a citizen and he tells me I should become a citizen!"

Another approach for those migrants unwilling to surrender their home city membership is to rely on the Australian citizenship of a dependent child to protect the parents' right to remain in Australia as permanent residents. This is Zhang Hui's approach, the strategy that she says will allow her and her husband to "stay here forever":

We will probably stay here. We feel safe here as both our children are citizens. No one is going to make us leave. We'll see after they turn eighteen. Maybe we'll be [permanent] migrants, maybe we'll go back to China.

Zhang Hui's understanding of migration law is flawed. There have been cases in recent years where one or both parents of dependent child Australian citizens have faced detention or deportation (Mares 2016; Ashton 2017; Blakkarly 2018). However, Zhang Hui, like other participants who said they did not need to naturalise because they have an Australian-born child, will in all likelihood succeed in her objectives with this strategy. Her PR is unlikely to be revoked, while she keeps all future options through the "insurance" that is her Chinese citizenship.

### 10.3 A contented Australian: Social class, *hukou* and strategic responses to the citizenship dilemma

Homeland social class is an important factor that affects naturalisation decisions in Australia. However, this factor operates not simply through a distinction between working class and middle class migrants, but rather in more complex ways that encompass both educational and occupational dimensions of class *and* the differential effects of Chinese spatial hierarchies.

Zhang Hui, Sarah and Alan, Paul, Chen, Jasmine and Mark: all the participants presented in this chapter who prefer the instrumental value of their Chinese citizenship are working class trade skilled migrants and their wives from provincial capitals in China. Despite the declining class position of urban workers, residency rights and the benefits they afford in their respective home cities are still valued by members of this group.

I found middle class participants were far less likely to value their Chinese citizenship over an Australian passport, despite sharing the urban *hukou* status of these trade skilled workers. Many were quick to explain that the visa waivers and global mobility afforded to Australian citizens made the choice a simple one, as this was something they valued for both business travel and private tourism. Some, particularly those with professional technical skills and strong work experience in China, discussed the possibility of China expanding the “green card” system (*lü ka*) that would enable them to live and work there should they ever decide they wanted to do so. This is in line with the most recent developments in China’s management of skilled immigration (Liu and Ahl 2018). New measures to compete in the global race to secure the best and brightest “talents” include the introduction of selective migration policies that may both attract foreigners and support the return of former nationals deemed to possess the appropriate, desirable forms of cultural capital.

Differential local citizenship within China was evident in the responses to the citizenship dilemma. In contrast with the urban residents who came to Australia as skilled tradesmen, migrants from rural backgrounds who share this occupational background still have less to lose in renouncing their Chinese citizenship status. It is significant, I think, that of all the people I spoke with about their citizenship choices, the man most emphatically and enthusiastically satisfied with his decision to become Australian was someone who in China had been disadvantaged by his own poor, rural background.

As shown in Chapter 8, Yang had suffered discrimination when he migrated from his country hometown to work in a seaboard city. He felt that the hereditary status of a rural *hukou* meant that his children might fare little better in life than him, constrained as they were by China's socio-spatial hierarchies. When I asked him if he had taken citizenship, he explained clearly 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.

My father fought in the Anti-American Korean War; he was a soldier. When he died my mother should have been given a pension. He didn't die in the war, he worked for a government department later in life, but he still served the country and she should have received a pension. Other people got a pension, but she didn't. When we went to every department, going here and there asking, we were told that we couldn't get it. Someone had assumed her name and taken the money (*maoming lingqian*). This [kind of corruption] is too common in the countryside. On top of that, the house we lived in was provided by the government through his work, so we just paid a little rent. But then when my father died, we had to leave the house, with no compensation, nothing. I was about thirty years old at the time and it was really tough.

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 (*bopi 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.

At the time of this interview, Yang was living in Perth with both of his adult children. They were doing casual manual work; having come to Australia just before the end of high school, they do not have very good English, a problem he thought was common among the children of older 457 migrants. He would like his daughter to do tertiary vocational education, but she fears her English is not good enough. Still, he is satisfied with the move to Australia and his decision to take citizenship. He also is politically engaged; "Yes, of course I vote!" he told me enthusiastically, as he shared his opinions on a range of topical issues. He feels personally invested in the destiny of "our country - for I'm an Australian now".

For Yang, naturalisation has strategic value since the rights afforded him as a citizen of China are limited and constrained by the “differential citizenship” (Wu 2010) he has experienced because of his *hukou* status and the consequent exclusion from urban citizenship this entails. Yet the instrumental value he finds in Australian citizenship does not preclude non-instrumental, affective value. The two are in fact complementary (Kymlicka and Norman 1994; Bauböck 2010; Pogonyi 2019), as he works to construct his identity as a new Australian.

## 10.4 Analysis and Conclusion

It is now thirty years since Ong (1999) proposed flexible citizenship as a means of understanding mobile elites’ responses to the disciplining power of nation states. She argued 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 be far more grounded. However, the “instrumental turn” (Joppke 2019) in citizenship indicates that such flexible national affiliation is now commonly intended, not just among East Asian elites, but most internationally mobile people, including those with aspirations to mobility. Citizenship has become another commodified resource, or form of capital (Harpaz 2019). This case study presented here, like that of Kim (2018), extends our understanding of flexible citizenship practices among those with fewer resources at their disposal than members of the jet-setting managerial class.

Studies of dual nationality often focus on the acquisition of “compensatory citizenship” by those disadvantaged in the global hierarchy of citizenship strategically seeking additional membership(s) that may or may not be used for actual emigration (Harpaz 2019; Liu-Farrer 2016). This chapter re-frames those same instrumental processes in terms of the dilemma facing Chinese migrants – to naturalise or to *not* naturalise in Australia? Where one country does not permit dual nationality, strategies of flexible accumulation may involve choosing to not take citizenship in another, especially where the rights and benefits afforded citizens and permanent resident non-citizens are comparable.

The chapter further expands upon previous scholarship about the citizenship dilemma and the strategies employed by transnational Chinese families to overcome the limitations and maximise the benefits they perceive in various constellations of citizen and denizen statuses. Ho's (2011a, 2013, 2019) writing on the "citizenship dilemma" focusses on "middling" migrants from the PRC, middle-class professionals who migrate under skilled migration programs but encounter barriers to employment in their usual occupation. Teo (2007) similarly highlights middle-class Chinese serving time in "immigration prison" in Vancouver or Toronto until they have completed the residency requirement to secure the instrumental Canadian citizenship that triggers their return to China.

By bringing class into this analysis, I demonstrate that differential citizenship within China has a material role to play in instrumental calculations of value. Since *hukou* functions as a "local citizenship institution" (Vortherms 2015), the differential benefits, both material and symbolic, of urban membership in the large cities of China forms a critical part of these calculations, over and above the national level membership within which local *hukou* citizenship is nested. This case study operationalises Bauböck's (2010) constellations approach, demonstrating the complexities of balancing the relative value of overlapping memberships acquired through migration and nested membership resulting from local citizenship with China.

For migrants disadvantaged by their class position 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", divorced from his wife, and having already mourned both his parents, he 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. At the other end of the social scale, professionals and those with in-demand skills in China may also choose Australian citizenship, but in this case with a confident expectation that they will be able to return and secure many dimensions of social and legal belonging through new Chinese selective migration programs.

Yet 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 professional *huaqiao* naturalised overseas may possibly plan to return, the citizenship dilemma is real. For these migrants, unwilling to lose their valued home city *hukou*, naturalisation in Australia presents a significant dilemma.

Under these circumstances, families may employ the strategy of *split nationality households* to optimise benefits and limit risk across all jurisdictions. Adequately theorising the complex family calculations of who should naturalise and who should not, calculations that encompass the demands of intergenerational transnational care arrangements, of employment requirements and perceived risks of deportation or restricted return, and of relative feelings of settlement and belonging at home or abroad that may differ between spouses, requires a further modification of a constellations approach. Rather than viewing citizenship constellations as opportunity structures in which migrants “differ with regard to their placement within the structure and their *individual* interests and orientation” and exercise “*individual* choice between alternative citizenship statuses” (Bauböck 2010, 855, my emphasis), the case studies presented here demonstrate the household may be a more appropriate unit of analysis than the atomised migrant. This expanded analysis of how webs of complementary and/or competing rights and obligations act on individuals *within* their family relations may increase our understanding of how migrants interpret local, state, national and supranational memberships and various global contexts.



## Chapter 11 Conclusion. Bringing class (back) into migration: migration literacy and national class frames in motion

During the years from 2006-2012, a most unusual cohort of migrants came from China to Australia to work and, eventually, to settle. They are unusual because their social class, their occupations and their educational backgrounds set them apart from most Chinese Australians, who are middle-class and hyper selected (Lee and Zhou 2015; Zhao 2000; Lui 2006; Shao 2014), typically more highly educated than most in both their home countries and in Australia.

This class difference is brought into sharp relief through the exceptional circumstances under which these migrants came to Perth. The resources boom in Western Australia produced “blue collar affluence” that subverted traditional class hierarchies based on educational attainment and professional work (Forsey 2015). Their presence complicates the class landscape of Chinese Australia, particularly when so many of them both enjoyed material success during the mining boom, and successfully, if unexpectedly, secured permanent residency when that same status has eluded many educated middle-class co-nationals. Such subversion of homeland class hierarchies leads to contested class positions in the receiving country context. However, this image of the successful trade-skilled settler must also be balanced by how the class backgrounds of these labour migrants and their constrained migration-facilitating capital has produced particular experiences, opportunities and risks, with positive, negative and ambivalent effects in their lives.

This dissertation follows from Van Hear’s (2014, S.113) claim that the forms and outcomes of migrations are determined by the resources or capitals that may be deployed and operationalised by migrants, and that the possession of these various forms of resources are largely the result of social class (alongside nationality, ethnicity, and gender). This unusual cohort of working-class migrants, so unlike most Chinese nationals and former nationals living in Australia, provide an excellent case study through which to interrogate class as an analytical lens, assess its validity and test its limits. The critical role that class plays is evident from long before the start of their migrations, during their daily lives and intra-ethnic relations in present-day Perth, and is even projected forwards into the future, as their long-term plans, their life course imaginaries, and their consequent citizenship strategies are framed by their classed experiences and the various capitals at their disposal.

In this conclusion, I review the contributions this dissertation makes towards theorising the relationship between class and migration, building on the call to bring class back into migration, and suggest directions for future research that may further develop these ideas.

## 11.1 Contributions to the literature

This dissertation is concerned with two related core themes. One is the contemporary shift towards highly selective migration policies, changes that can be observed at multiple scales – globally, regionally (across Asia) and, most importantly, nationally (within Australia) (Hawthorne 2005; 2011; Walsh 2011; Cully 2011; Kim 2018). The other is social class and migration, specifically the ways in which social class fundamentally shapes processes of migration and settlement, how class intersects with ethnicity and race, language and nationality, and how class relations are expressed, contested and changed in new national contexts.

Bringing social class (back) into the analysis of migration to Australia is a significant contribution to the literature. While some early Australian migration scholars addressed social class and migration, this was usually understood as a dimension of majority charter group – minority ethnic relations. Following the Marxist tradition, ethnic disadvantage and racialised class fractions (Phizacklea and Miles 1980) were understood as an expression of Anglo-Celtic domination of the means of production and economic, political and cultural hegemony (de Lepervanche 1980; Jakubowicz, Morrisey and Palser 1984; Jakubowicz 1984; Collins 1984). More recent scholarship has explored class as a point of difference between migrants of the same ethno-national background, however, this has typically been with reference to different vintages of migrants arriving under different historical conditions (Colic-Peisker 2002, 2008; Khorana 2014; Baldassar, Pyke and Ben-Moshe 2017).

By considering and comparing the classed dimensions of migration for people of different class backgrounds but a shared nationality, language and migrant generation (or vintage), this dissertation takes a new approach to analysing class and migration in Australia. Moreover, a study of class and migration has particular purchase when examined in reference to China precisely because of the ways that Chinese national class frames have become so deeply imbricated with spatial mobility and the framing of movement within and beyond borders as either desirable and something to be emulated or transgressive and something to be controlled (Jacka 2009; Nyíri 2010; Fong 2011; Liu-Farrer 2016; Coates 2018; Sun 2019).

This dissertation contributes to the literature on class and migration by, firstly, providing a detailed case study of class-situated patterns of capital accumulation and conversion in processes of migration. Kim (2018, 263) contends that multiple actors, including states, brokers and, of course, migrants themselves, “dynamically interact over the contested production, valorisation, conversion and legitimization of... economic, cultural, social and other resources that enable migrants to access multiple forms of authorized and unauthorized passages into their desired destinations”. These politically and culturally situated processes of credentialing certain capitals produce the figures of (il)legal and (un)deserving migrants (Anderson 2013; Pieke and Xiang 2010; Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018). While the state is by no means the only agent in these processes, the power of the state to confer symbolic capital cannot be understated.

The findings presented in Chapters 5 to 7 illustrate how capital-constrained trade skilled migrants strategically operationalise various species of capital to achieve migration objectives. The impacts of limited mobility capital and the trails of capital validation, conversion and accumulation are evident through their migration trajectories. They must frequently make significant, life-changing decisions on the basis of incomplete and incorrect information, while the complex regulatory regimes, manifested through selective migration policies that they must navigate, make them heavily reliant on the commercial actors who facilitate labour migration in the region (Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh 2012; Lin et al. 2017).

This dissertation introduces *migration literacy*, an adaptation of the concept of ‘legal literacy’ (Freudenberg 2017), as a new term to express how the lack of particular informational capital in relation to complex and ever-changing migration legislation is a particular site of disadvantage, one that affects different migrants to differing degrees. Migration literacy is a key component of mobility capital that comprises a person’s capacity to read and interpret migration legislation and related documentation, and to autonomously execute administrative processes required by regulatory mechanisms of migration governance. Migration literacy in relation to Australian legislation and policy is determined by English language skills and educational background, which are in turn expressions of social class and nationality. Low migration literacy may be mitigated through the support of well-informed and well-intentioned agents, but the capacity to secure the support of agents and evaluate the advice given is again unevenly distributed, and shaped by economic, social and cultural capitals, that is to say class.

Both China and Australia feature complex migration industries (Xiang 2012a; 2013a; 2017a; Khan 2019). The reliance of this cohort of trade skilled migrants with low migration literacy on brokers, skills assessors and other commercial agents necessitated other capital conversions as they mobilised those forms of mobility capital (Sheller 2010; Kim 2018) as their disposal. The fees paid to their brokers, exceedingly high by Australian industry standards, were raised through savings accumulated during earlier step-wise fixed-term labour migration in the region (Paul 2015; 2017) or, more commonly, were borrowed through personal contacts, a conversion of hometown social capital to more readily transferred economic resources.

However, an analysis based on the individualised capitals of migrants and their engagement with selective migration policies and the infrastructures of migration governance is not quite enough to understand the varied and complex ways that class features in the lives of first-generation migrants. I propose *national class frames in motion* as a conceptual lens that goes some way towards bringing class into migration and migration into class, one that illustrates the diverse ways that first generation migrants interpret their own intra-ethnic classed positions, as well as the positions of others, through the lens of homeland class maps and class discourses, while simultaneously contesting and changing the meanings of those nationally bounded class frames as they move with them through new transnational contexts.

The increasingly simultaneous engagement of transnational migrants across borders has undoubtedly disrupted the once-unquestioned logics of nationally bound analyses (Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002). Even concepts like citizenship that might once have reasonably been ontologically wedded to the sedentary stability of the nation state may now be seen to move, to have differential or contingent meaning or value that may be linked to both space and time. Yet attending to transnational experiences and transformations does not preclude an engagement with national manifestations of social class. On the contrary, national class frames in motion are an important component of a transnational perspective.

Much theorising of class has been conducted with reference to nationally bounded populations, but this does not mean it is not applicable or useful in migration studies. National class frames are naturalised in both social theory *and*, more importantly, in migrants' own constructions of their social worlds. The experiences of the participants in my study suggest that national class frames have meaning for migrants before they move. These same frames continue to have meaning, though that meaning is often transformed, during and after their movements across borders; national class frames are transported, reformed and reinterpreted by transnational migrants in their new context(s).

Definitions and meanings of class in any complex society are situationally constructed, like other social phenomena, and are as much a product of changing emphases of analysis as objective shifts in the organisation of societies (Giddens 1973, 99). This is where a translocational perspective (Anthias 2013, 130) has particular merit as it permits analysis of “positions and outcomes produced through the intersections of different social structures and processes, including transnational ones, giving importance to the broader social context and to temporality.” However, the focus on social locations rather than groups that this approach entails does not mean that categories like “class” are not important in and of themselves. Rather, “social categories and their ontological realms are boundary-making forces which assume particular historical and spatial forms” (ibid., 130) and it is their salience in particular contexts, the meanings with which they are invested, and the ways they are instrumentally deployed, that produce concrete positions of dis/advantage.

First generation migrants are socialised into class frames that are formed and forged in homeland national contexts. This entails both class as identity and group consciousness and class as structural position and variable life changes, since, following the logics of new class analysis, the material and symbolic dimensions of class are mutually constitutive (Bourdieu 1984; Savage 2000; Crompton, Devine, Savage and Scott 2000; Anthias 2001a; Crompton and Scott 2005). In the Chinese context this encompasses structural institutionalised expressions of class in administrative *hukou* categories that restrict access to urban residency and employment (Wang 2005a; Fan 2008; Vortherms 2015; Woodman and Guo 2017), through to constructions of individualised embodied *suzhi* that may be deemed lacking (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006; 2007; 2011; Fong 2007; Hsu 2007; Yan 2008). Homeland discourses juxtapose these socio-economic and moral-cultural dimensions of class (Sun 2019, 49) and these arguments are carried with migrants to new contexts. National class frames in motion are therefore an important component of a transnational perspective because these frames have meaning for migrants before they move and continue to have meaning, howsoever transformed, during and after their movements across borders.

Reinserting the national into manifestations of class in transnational contexts provides new insights into intra-ethnic class contestations, particularly when in China mobility is so deeply imbricated with culturalist dimensions of class (Nyíri 2010; Chu 2010; Coates 2018; Sun 2019). Yang's story, recounted in the introduction and revisited in Chapters 8 and 10, is transgressive. Born in the village, Yang experienced firsthand how his presence in a major port city was resisted and resented. That he has now taken Australian citizenship, bought a house and established his family in Perth, that he and others like him have material success beyond that of many deskilled tertiary graduates, challenges homeland national class frames.

Paying attention to national class frames also provides new insights into theories of strategic or flexible citizenship. There has been an "instrumental turn" (Joppke 2019) in citizenship in response to recent shifts in migration policies within various national frames and the commodification of both migrants and migration. Homeland class, and particularly the localised, "differential citizenship" (Wu 2010; Vortherms 2015; Woodman 2018) afforded individuals through highly devolved systems of governance, has an important bearing on the naturalisation decisions of Chinese migrants living in Perth. Calculations regarding the "citizenship dilemma" (Ho 2011) must account for national-level citizenship laws but also entail complex "constellations" of membership (Bauböck 2010) that include positions arising from homeland class.

Social class may therefore be seen to intersect with and inform many different dimensions of the migrant experience, as reflected in the thematic progression of the chapters in this dissertation. Much as I learned during my time in the field that my "power strategically to design and prepare for [my] fieldwork" (Kalir 2006, 224) was circumscribed by the interests and objectives of my participants, so I have found that the knowledge we co-created has its own power to inform my theory and to generate new connections and insights. Participants spoke of their temporary plans and thwarted returns, of their expensive agent fees and burdensome debts, of their citizenship dilemmas, of the challenges of settlement and of navigating a life between two worlds. The complexity of the material I faced as I began the iterative process of analysis was messy, confusing, and often seemingly unconnected. Yet it was only through engaging these seemingly disparate dimensions that the significance of social class, national class frames, and migration literacy came into focus. My attempts to bring class (back) into an analysis of migration represent only a beginning and raise many further questions that are as yet unanswered. However, the relevance of class to each of the dimensions featured in this dissertation demonstrates, I believe, its potential as an analytical lens that is worthy of further development.

## 11.2 Directions for future research

This dissertation has presented a fresh perspective on Chinese Australia that has not previously been addressed. However, more research is needed to address aspects of class missing from this analysis of Chinese migration to Australia, and, more importantly, to extend the approach proposed here by exploring the intersections of social class and migration among other ethno-national groups of migrants in Australia and in other national contexts. These limitations and suggestions for future research are not exhaustive, as there are surely many other avenues I have not considered.

Arguments presented in this dissertation have leant heavily on the new class analyses that firstly propose that multiple combinations of different resources – social and cultural, as well as economic – determine class position, and secondly, position relational class as primarily a site of individual identity within nationally- and locally-particular hierarchical struggles. However, what may be missing from this analysis is the extent to which class-based solidarities form a site of collective identity (class in itself) or collective action (class for itself) among Chinese migrants to Australia. I did not find a strong sense of *collective* class consciousness among participants. The language that participants used, particularly pronouns, validated or claimed classed identities and class-based social distance, as illustrated in Sam’s observation in Chapter 8 that, “they think they are better, but we are in the better position”. Yet although trade skilled migrants paid lip service to the status of the “ordinary worker”, their parenting practices and educational choices usually approximated those of their middle-class co-nationals. The meritocratic myth of education (Forsey 2015) is alive and kicking among new migrants from China to Australia, regardless of their own attainment while at school.

To extend the implications of national class frames in motion, future research could explore collective class identity and the potential for class-based action among co-ethnic employers and employees, as Wu and Liu (2014) suggest, bringing class back into analyses of co-ethnic relations of production (Li 2017). Future research might also explore the classed identities of 1.25, 1.5 and 2nd generation children of trade skilled migrants. To what extent will the classed identities of their parents manifest in their working lives, their social lives, their habitus, and to what extent might they assimilate into the Australian multicultural middle class?

Further research could also address more extensively the extent to which national class frames of the destination country affect the classed experiences of migrants. There is an important set of actors conspicuously absent from the findings presented in this dissertation. Local Australians are clearly part of the social fields inhabited by Chinese migrants, encountered daily in the street, at the shops, through schools, public administration and many workplaces. And yet, when discussing stratification and class-based distinctions, the frames of reference presented by both Chinese trade skilled migrants and more highly educated co-nationals were, without exception, intra-ethnic. Welders spoke of trade employment as being well regarded in Australia, occupying a higher (social) position than in China, and certainly better remunerated. But this was invariably invoked to demonstrate their new relative positioning in social and economic hierarchies vis-à-vis other Chinese migrants. This points to the ways that homeland national class frames are reinterpreted in the light of receiving context class frames, but more research is needed to explore how destination class frames are understood and refracted through the migrant lens. A related research trajectory, and one that links to the previous section, would be to query the involvement of working-class migrants in destination context class organisations, particularly trade unions, considering whether and how organisers engage foreign-born (potential) members, and what social, cultural, linguistic or other barriers to participation migrant workers face.

Finally, future research could consider how social class is manifested among other ethno-national groups of migrants to Australia. Class maps and class discourses vary between national and regional contexts, meaning that any analysis of the relationship between social class and migration demands careful consideration of the particular class frames and their changing relevance to migrants from different places at different times (Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki 2017, 873). This dissertation has demonstrated that PRC class maps and class discourses inform relational hierarchies for migrants from China within the vastly different economic and social conditions of Western Australia.



China is consistently in the top two source countries of new migrants to Australia. Other source countries supplying large numbers of new migrants include India, the UK, the Philippines, Pakistan, Vietnam and Ireland (DIAC 2011; 2012; DIBP 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; DHA 2018b). British migrants include large numbers destined for trade skilled and vocational roles, yet Abel (2014, 240) observes that the stories of these cohorts are largely missing from the literature. While conducting my research, I learned anecdotally that many Filipino electricians and their families migrated to Perth during the same boomtime period as the Chinese welders and mechanics featured in this dissertation. The class-based experiences of British, Filipino, or other migrants to Australia, and particularly how this relates to the positions of tradespeople within their respective national class maps, would expand upon the findings in this dissertation.

The findings of this dissertation are also doubtless particular to Perth and the exceptional conditions of Western Australian industries during the first two decades of the twenty first century. Although participants in this project include some who first arrived to take jobs in Queensland or Victoria, and some who have since left Western Australia to live in the Eastern States, having a single field site and conducting research at this point in history fundamentally informed my findings. More research could consider the impact of social class under different economic conditions, and among migrants from China in other parts of Australia, particularly major ethnoburbs like Box Hill, Victoria or Campsie, New South Wales, where there are far higher concentrations of China-born residents than anywhere in Perth.

### 11.3 Concluding remarks

Van Hear (2014, S101) begins his paper with the simple observation that “patterns and outcomes of migration are shaped by the resources migrants can mobilise, and those resources are largely determined by socio-economic background.” Highly individualised and differentially distributed endowments of various species of capital may be strategically deployed in engaging with structures of migration regulation, mediated by commercial actors, to determine when and how people may move. This is clearly true, and the trails of capital accumulation, validation, conversion and exchange may be traced throughout the migration processes of the case studies presented in this dissertation.

Yet there is more to it than this, as timing also comes into the equation when one considers the role of the state in credentialing and validating forms, measures and volumes of capital (Kim 2018). Those same differentially endowed individuals must demonstrate different state-validated forms of symbolic or cultural capital, depending on when they lodge their visa applications. The period from 2006-2011 was exceptional, characterised, firstly, by exceptional economic conditions in Western Australia, secondly, by a particular moment when trade skilled occupations were deemed in demand under selective Australian migration policies (as they still are), but English language criteria had not yet been adjusted to restrict entry to people with less education from non-English speaking countries, and, lastly, by an era of labour emigration from China that featured burgeoning networks of brokers facilitating the placement of labour migrants with employers throughout the region.

This dissertation has come full circle. My initial observations of people in Perth rested on their habitus, seemingly at odds with my expectations of the middle-class Chinese migrant I understood were encouraged under Australian selective migration policies. An investigation that began with an interest into what seemed a peculiarity of the Australian migration regime, eventually became framed around a cohort defined by their occupations – welders, mechanics and other tradesmen - but then the findings led back irresistibly to more individualised analyses linked to cultural capital, *suzhi*, judgements of distinction, contested class identities, and the significance of homeland national class frames to social worlds and settlement in the receiving context. I did not set out in 2014 to research for a dissertation framed by the analytical lens of social class and am truly surprised that this is where I have ended up. This must be abduction (Tavory and Timmermans 2014) in action.

Returning to the words of the migration agent reported at the start of this dissertation, “People like them will never come to Australia again, they couldn’t get in now.” Certainly, people with the same technical skills but poor English of these particular trade skilled migrants would today struggle to secure even a temporary work visa, and certainly would not find a pathway to permanence under current regulations. And yet, these most unlikely settlers did become Australian permanent residents and citizens during these exceptional years; their experiences are unique and so offer compelling insights into class and migration under selective policy regimes.



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# Appendix A Glossary of Chinese terms

These are terms that appear in *pinyin* in the text of this dissertation. They are alphabeticised by *pinyin* spelling.

**aodaliya shibao** 澳大利亚时报: Australia Chinese Times (a Perth local newspaper)

**baguo lianjun** 八国联军: Eight Nation Alliance of 1900

**bopi wulai** 拨皮无赖: abusive, shameless scoundrels

**bu jiang daoli** 不讲道理: to have no morals

**bu shui** 补税: to make up a tax payment (that is overdue or underpaid)

**chuguore** 出国热: fever for going overseas

**dazhong lian chong pangzi** 打肿脸充胖子: (*fig.*) to hit one's own face so that it swells up to look round and attractive; to cause oneself harm in order to impress others

**dangdi de aozhouren** 当地的澳洲人: local Australian (of European appearance)

**diwei** 地位: (social) position

**dongbeiren** 东北人: person from the Northeast of China

**dongfang youbao** 东方邮报: Oriental Post (a Perth local newspaper)

**duixiang** 对象: girlfriend / boyfriend

**duoyuan wenhua shehui** 多元文化社会: multicultural society

**eryuanjiegou** 二元结构: dualistic structure

**feinong** 非农: rural, non-agricultural

**fenpei gongzuo** 分配工作: allocation of jobs

**gai fangxiang** 改方向: to change direction; to find a different job

**guanxi** 关系: connection, contact

**gongmin** 公民: citizen

**guilao** 鬼佬: foreigner; mildly derogatory term for a person of European appearance

**huaren** 华人: ethnic Chinese

**huayu shangye zhinan** 华语商业指南: Chinese language local business directory

**heiliu** 黑留: to remain illegally; to overstay beyond the expiry date of a visa

**hongbao** 红包: red envelope, gift of cash

**hukou** 户口: PRC system of household registration

**huaqiao** 华侨: overseas Chinese

**jieceng** 阶层: social strata

**jieji** 阶级: social class

**jingying yimin** 精英移民: elite migrants / migration  
**jishu rencai** 技术人才: skilled personnel  
**kao ziji** 靠自己: to rely on oneself  
**laobaixing** 老百姓: ordinary people; 'the common folk'  
**laowai** 老外: foreigner; non-Chinese person of European appearance  
**liu ka** 绿卡: 'green card' permanent residency  
**luopo** 落魄: in dire straits; poor and in a bad way  
**ma ni** 骂你: to curse, swear at  
**maoming lingqian** 冒名领钱: to collect a payment in a false name  
**nong** 农: rural / agricultural  
**nongmingong** 农民工: peasant worker; rural-urban domestic labour migrant  
**pinyin** 拼音: system of Romanisation for Mandarin Chinese  
**pao** 跑: to run; to overstay a visa and escape the attentions of the Immigration Department  
**putong gongren** 普通工人: ordinary worker  
**qishi** 歧视: discrimination; to discriminate  
**qunti** 群体: (social) group  
**renmin** 人民: the People (of socialist republic)  
**renminbi** 人民币: Renminbi; Chinese yuan  
**renmin suzhi** 人民素质: quality of population  
**rongru(le)** 融入 (了): to integrate (integrated)  
**ruxiang suisu** 入乡随俗: (*fig.*) to enter the village and follow local customs; when in Rome do as the Romans do  
**shangxing xiaxiao** 上行下效: (*fig.*) subordinates follow the example set by their superiors  
**shimin** 市民: city resident  
**shuitubufu de wenti** 水土不服的问题: problems caused by not acclimatising  
**sichubenbo** 四处奔波: rush all over; rush from pillar to post  
**si wu qi** 四五七: 457 visa  
**songli** 送礼: to give a gift, especially in order to fulfil social obligation or curry favour  
**suzhi** 素质: (human) quality; distinction  
**tai huai le** 太坏了: very bad  
**tizhi bu yiyang** 体制不一样: different physical constitution  
**tinghua** 听话: obedient

**tousu** 投诉: to lodge a complaint  
**tuanjie** 团结: friendly, harmonious (of relations)  
**tuhao** 土豪: (*coll.*) cashed-up bogan; vulgar nouveau riche  
**tuzhuren** 土著人: Aboriginal Australian  
**waiguoren** 外国人: foreigner (usually of European appearance)  
**wailao** (外劳 abbr. 外国劳工): foreign labour  
**wan** 万: 10,000, in context with reference to a sum of money in Chinese yuan  
**xi'ao huayu guangbo diantai** 西澳华语广播电台: Perth Chinese Radio  
**xianfulun** 先富论: 'get rich first' development theory  
**xifaji** 洗发剂: shampoo  
**xinfu** 新富: the new rich  
**xinku** 辛苦: tough, difficult, arduous  
**xinli yali** 心理压力: psychological pressure  
**xiutao** 袖套: sleeve covers  
**yazhouren** 亚洲人: Asian (person)  
**yimin** 移民: migrant / migration  
**yingchou** 应酬: social gathering  
**zhishifenzi** 知识分子: intellectual  
**zhongguoren** 中国人: Chinese national  
**Zhou Man** 周满: Moon Chow, the first Chinese to live in Perth  
**zuo shengyi** 做生意: to do business

## Appendix B Fieldwork: list of research participants and participant information sheet

This appendix provides demographic information relating to the 55 research participants whose personal narratives are central to the material on which my findings in this dissertation are based.

A table detailing this demographic information can be found over the next two pages. Note in relation to 'Occupation at time of last conversation' field that male participants who belong the trade skilled cohort are all primary visa applicants. Where their occupation listed here is not a trade, this indicates that they have 'changed direction' and found different employment since first arriving in Australia as an employer-sponsored trade skilled worker.

This appendix also includes the bilingual information sheet I carried with me throughout the period of my fieldwork, copies of which I provided to research participants.

Participant	Sex	Age group	Arrival year	Trade skilled cohort (Y/N)	Visa type on arrival	Visa type at time of last conversation	Occupation at time of last conversation	Place of origin
1	Female	30-40	2006	Trade (spouse)	457	PR - skilled	Vegetable packer	Shanghai
2	Male	40-50	2007	Non-trade	PR - skilled	Citizen	Engineer	Hunan
3	Female	30-40	2008	Non-trade	Spouse	PR - spouse	Nurse	Anhui
4	Male	30-40	2007	Trade	457	PR - skilled	Welder	Henan
5	Female	30-40	2006	Trade (spouse)	457	PR - skilled	Vegetable packer	Fujian
6	Female	40-50	2007	Non-trade	PR - skilled	PR - skilled	Graduate student	Anhui
7	Male	50-60	2014	Non-trade	Visitor	Visitor	Massage shop staff	Liaoning
8	Female	40-50	2015	Non-trade	Visitor	Spouse	Massage shop staff	Hubei
9	Female	30-40	2008	Non-trade	PR - skilled	PR - skilled	Full time parent	Shandong
10	Male	50-60	Before 2000	Non-trade	Student	Citizen	Business owner	Fujian
11	Male	40-50	2006	Trade	457	PR - skilled	Welder	Shandong
12	Male	20-30	2012	Non-trade	Student	Student	Graduate student	Guangdong
13	Female	30-40	2001	Non-trade	Student	Citizen	Full time parent	Shandong
14	Male	50-60	2008	Trade	457	Citizen	Welder	Shandong
15	Female	40-50	2011	Non-trade	Spouse	PR - spouse	Massage shop owner	Sichuan
16	Male	40-50	2007	Trade	457	457	Plasterer	Henan
17	Male	40-50	2007	Trade	457	Citizen	Welder	Liaoning
18	Male	40-50	2008	Trade	457	Citizen	Welder	Jilin
19	Male	50-60	Before 2000	Non-trade	Student	Citizen	Business owner	Shanghai
20	Female	20-30	2010	Non-trade	Student	457	Office worker	Guangdong
21	Female	50-60	2012	Non-trade	Visitor	PR - parent	Massage shop owner	Liaoning
22	Male	40-50	2008	Trade	457	Citizen	Mechanic	Jilin
23	Male	20-30	2015	Non-trade	Working holiday	Working holiday	Delivery driver	Taiwan
24	Female	30-40	2008	Trade (spouse)	457	PR - skilled	Shop assistant	Liaoning
25	Female	60-70	Unknown	Trade (parent)	Visitor	Visitor	Retired	Liaoning
26	Male	30-40	2007	Trade	457	PR - skilled	Welder	Liaoning
27	Male	40-50	Before 2000	Non-trade	Student	PR - skilled	Migration agent	Henan



28	Female	40-50	2009	Non-trade	Visitor	Spouse	Massage shop staff	Hong Kong
29	Male	50-60	2007	Trade	457	PR - skilled	Welder	Liaoning
30	Female	30-40	2008	Trade (spouse)	457	Unassigned	Massage shop owner	Xinjiang
31	Male	30-40	Unknown	Non-trade	Spouse	Citizen	Massage shop owner	Liaoning
32	Male	40-50	2008	Trade	457	PR - skilled	Small restaurant owner	Heilongjiang
33	Male	30-40	2006	Trade	PR - skilled	PR - skilled	Mechanic	Shandong
34	Female	40-50	Before 2000	Non-trade	Student	PR - spouse	Migration agent	Unknown
35	Female	60-70	Before 2000	Non-trade	Student	Citizen	Business owner	Beijing
36	Male	40-50	2012	Trade	PR - skilled	PR - skilled	Mechanic	Shandong
37	Female	40-50	2008	Non-trade	PR - skilled	Citizen	Full time parent	Shanghai
38	Male	40-50	2001	Non-trade	Student	Citizen	Business owner	Jiangxi
39	Female	30-40	2006	Trade (spouse)	PR - skilled	PR - skilled	Full time parent	Shandong
40	Female	30-40	2007	Trade (spouse)	457	Citizen	Full time parent	Henan
41	Male	30-40	2007	Non-trade	Spouse	PR - spouse	Massage shop owner	Shandong
42	Female	40-50	2013	Non-trade	PR - skilled	PR - skilled	Full time parent	Shenzhen
43	Female	30-40	2012	Trade (spouse)	457	457	Vegetable packer	Shandong
44	Male	30-40	Unknown	Trade	457	PR - skilled	Chef	Guangxi
45	Female	50-60	2010	Trade (spouse)	457	PR - skilled	Aged care staff	Liaoning
46	Female	30-40	2013	Non-trade	457	457	Massage shop staff	Shaanxi
47	Male	30-40	Unknown	Non-trade	Student	PR - skilled	Delivery driver	Guangdong
48	Male	40-50	2007	Trade	457	PR - skilled	Boiler maker	Henan
49	Male	30-40	Unknown	Non-trade	Student	Citizen	Lawyer	Unknown
50	Female	30-40	2006	Trade (spouse)	457	PR - skilled	Vegetable packer	Shandong
51	Male	40-50	2007	Trade	457	Citizen	Massage shop owner	Shanxi
52	Female	30-40	2007	Trade (spouse)	457	PR - skilled	Full time parent	Henan
53	Male	50-60	Before 2000	Non-trade	Student	PR - skilled	Migration agent	Unknown
54	Female	50-60	2016	Non-trade	Visitor	Visitor	Nanny	Sichuan
55	Female	40-50	2015	Non-trade	Student	Student	Graduate student	Liaoning

Mrs. Catriona Stevens

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## Information Sheet

### Research Project

My name is Catriona Stevens and I am a PhD researcher at the University of Western Australia.

My research project focuses on new Chinese migrants living in Perth. This project asks how new migrants experience the process of migration and how their lives in Australia match the expectations they had before they migrated. Specifically my research considers employment, education, citizenship, identity and belonging as important parts of the migration experience.

### Method

This project uses the anthropological method of participant observation. I will take part in community life and attend community events where appropriate. I will also be interviewing people who are willing about the issues raised in this research project. These issues include employment, education, citizenship and identity.

### Potential Benefits and Risks

This project aims to raise awareness about the challenges faced by new Chinese migrants settling living in Perth. It will provide a forum for new migrants to voice their concerns and could have the potential to influence policies that address difficulties faced. This research will also be able highlight the successes and strengths of the new Chinese migrant community.

I do not foresee any risks to you from participating in this project. No names will be used and all data from interviews and observations will be kept in a secure and confidential manner. I will provide copies of thesis drafts and other publications resulting from this research to interested participants.

### Participation

Your participation in my research is greatly appreciated, your time and knowledge are important to the successful completion of this project. I am happy to answer any questions you may have about this research at any time. You are completely free to choose not to participate in this research. Feel free to notify me that you no longer wish to participate, for whatever reason, and I will ensure that no more notes or other data concerning you will be recorded. Unless you agree otherwise, I will also remove any prior material involving your participation from my records.

Should you have any complaint about the way in which this research is carried out contact me or alternatively:

The Secretary,  
Human Research Ethics Committee  
Registrar's Office, University of Western Australia  
35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, WA 6009, Australia  
Ph: +61 8 6488-3703

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## 研究项目信息表

### 研究项目

我叫 Catriona Stevens，中文名为邱池。我是西澳大利亚大学的博士生。

我的研究项目的主要研究对象是住在珀斯的中国新移民。本项目调查中国新移民的移民经验，并探讨其在澳大利亚的生活是否符合出国前的预期。我的研究主要考察移民经验的一些重要方面，包括就业、教育、公民身份与个人身份等。

### 方式

本项目将采用参与式观察的人类学研究方法。在可能的前提下，我打算参与新移民的社区生活和参加他们的各种社会活动。我将就就业、教育、国籍和身份等主题采访愿意参与本研究的新移民。

### 潜在的利益和风险

本项目旨在进一步了解居住在珀斯的新移民所面临的各种挑战。本项目将为新移民提供一个表达看法和问题的平台，并有可能对移民反馈的问题有关的政策产生影响。这个研究项目也是展示中国新移民的成功和优势所在的一个良好平台。

您参与本研究项目不会面临任何风险。我保证在与本研究相关的所有出版物中不会使用任何真实的名字，并且对所有的个人信息、访谈资料和观察记录做好严格妥善的保密工作。本项目的参与者对我的论文草稿和其他出版物都有查看的优先权。

### 您的参与

非常感谢您参与此项目。非常感谢您在百忙之中跟我分享您的移民经历。如果您对本研究有任何问题和疑问，欢迎您随时跟我联系。另外，您可以在任何时间做出不继续参与这一研究项目的决定，并且不需要给出任何理由。我保证不会再记录跟您有关的任何访谈笔记和数据信息。另外，根据您的意愿，我也可以删除关于您先前参与此项目的所有记录。

如果您对本项目有任何不满或投诉，请联系到我本人或以下西澳大学代表：

The Secretary,  
Human Research Ethics Committee  
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